Job & Family

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Additional Tags: Demons, Angels, Love, Angst, Sexual Content, Nephilim, Hurt Sam Winchester, Hurt Dean Winchester, Protective Sam Winchester, Pregnancy, Parent Sam, Knight(s) of Hell, Sam Winchester's Demonic Powers, Adult Content, Slow Build, Recreational Drug Use, Witchcraft, Witches, Politics of Hell, Politics of Heaven, Fights, Apocalypse, Moral Dilemmas, Dubious Morality, good!ruby, Good Ruby, THE TAGS BELOW THIS CONTAIN SPOILERS, Seriously don't read below if you want to avoid spoilers, Parent Dean Winchester, Alternate Universe - Croatoan/Endverse (Supernatural), Endverse, Boy King of Hell Sam Winchester, Ruler of Hell Sam Winchester, Time Travel, Alternate Timelines, Lucifer Possessing Sam Winchester, Minor Gabriel/Kali (Supernatural), Kali gets to fight, Torture, Maiming, Closetsed Dean Winchester, Dean Winchester explores his sexuality, John Winchester's A+ Parenting, Sudden character deaths, Sam and Dean stop lying to each other and actually work together, Homophobia, Child Abuse, Depression, Suicide Attempt, If you're a crier you better get a box of tissues ready

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by TigerLilyNoh

Summary

After Dean's death (at the end of season 3), Sam and Ruby begin hunting down Lilith. Without Dean by his side, Sam finds the world of hunting to not be as black and white as he once thought. He just wants to get closure and move on with life, but outside forces aren't making that so easy. By the time the brothers reunite, Sam is a very different person than he used to be.

The battle for Hell, Heaven, and the Apocalypse begins. In these crazy times, the boys find themselves with new enemies, allies, and bedfellows.
------ A quick note ------

This story consists of three acts with significant plot twists separating each act. The above summary only covers the first 100,000 words of Job & Family. If you don't mind spoilers and want a more in depth summary feel free to message me on Tumblr (@TigerLilyNoh).

Notes

I really liked Ruby (and was very disappointed by her betrayal), so in this story she won’t be working for Lilith and Lucifer.

If you are reading this for Dean, please be patient. He does not show up for the first ~40,000 words, but he is a main character in the story.

Also, this fic is currently in the process of being retroactively beta'ed. Please, forgive the inconsistent grammar/syntax/etc as it transitions.
After Dean’s death at Lilith’s hands it only took a few days for Sam to find himself completely lost and alone. He’d convinced Bobby to bury Dean instead of performing the traditional hunter’s pyre. It was a dishonor to his brother, but the finality of a pyre’s embers was too much for him to take. Some small part of his mind whispered that maybe he could make a deal or find a way to bring his brother back, yet an attempt to deal with a Crossroads demon yielded nothing but a dead meatsuit and hurt feelings.

Without a better idea of how to save Dean, Sam quickly threw himself into drinking and his own despair. The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming. He needed to act, to lash out somehow at whatever he could. Yet in Bobby’s house everything was stuck in a haunting routine. Unable to do anything for Dean, the old hunter resumed working the phones. Cases that Dean would never investigate kept trickling into various voicemail boxes. The wallpaper that Dean used to pick at as a child continued to peel from the walls. Everything around Sam dragged on in its sysphian sort of way, all the while taking care to not fill the hole that Dean’s absence had created.

On some level Sam knew that Bobby loved him, but Bobby’s all-too-easy acceptance of Dean’s death had felt like a betrayal. Dean’s death had only made Sam want to fight reapers, demons, fate, and any other creature or force in this cruel existence. But Bobby had seen enough death that what once were flames of rage were just the smoldering embers of an old hunter’s familiar loss. Sam had been too hurt to see Bobby’s sadness as anything more than resignation.

Lying awake in bed on the fifth night, he finally decided that he couldn’t take it anymore. He needed to get away, to do something drastic. Sam quietly packed up his few belongs and descended the stairs, deftly avoiding the step that squeaked. As he walked toward the back door he stopped, debating whether to say goodbye to the man who’d been there for him when his own father hadn’t. Part of him hated to leave the only family he had left in the world, but he couldn’t stay and he didn’t want Bobby to try talking him out of going.

Two weeks later he was in a rural little town he hadn’t bothered to learn the name of, eager to find trouble just as much as demons. He’d barely slept or eaten in the past three days, too preoccupied chasing demonic omens, trying to find a fight. When he had finally located a promising contender, he didn’t even bother to case the location and ran in without a strategic thought in his head.

Sam was drunkenly fighting—or more accurately being beaten by—two demons when Ruby swooped in and saved him. His nose, a rib, and his right pinky had been broken in the brawl, but he was too numb to feel it. When she offered him a hand up off the ground, he’d rolled away from
her, pushing himself upright and further injuring his finger in the process. But he didn’t care about the damage. He hadn’t wanted her interference. He barely acknowledged her presence, let alone her help. After she tried to walk with him back to the Impala, he lashed out at her in anger.

It wasn’t just the fact that she was wearing some innocent human; it was more that she had somehow managed to crawl out of Hell and Dean had not. She had proven it possible, no matter how difficult, and the fact that Dean hadn’t done so himself made Sam’s heart sink. That was the moment Sam began to wonder how far Dean’s self-loathing reached. He wasn’t sure if it was possible to save someone who was lost on that level. It was just another manifestation of Sam’s inability to effect positive change.

Sam didn’t bother voicing his fears about Dean to Ruby. Instead he decided to verbally attack her over the meatsuit. He’d never given much thought to the long-dead blonde woman she’d been riding the whole year prior. In all honesty, at that point he almost didn’t care about the woman she was in at that moment. He hadn’t been hunting since Dean’s death and other people’s problems just couldn’t compete with his own pain for his attention. That didn’t stop him from yelling at Ruby for it though. It was low-hanging fruit and he was too drunk and defeated to take any better shots at her. Ruby said nothing before she blinked away.

Two days later Ruby knocked on the door of the abandoned house where Sam had been squatting. Her new meatsuit had been brain-dead when she set up residence and Sam was too thrown by the gesture to stop her from entering the house. He wasn’t mentally prepared to deal with people, let alone someone who was clearly acting with purpose—a characteristic that he’d somehow lost in his anger and depression. Once inside she began her pitch of how she could help him get revenge against Lilith. Sam was so confused by a mixture of loss, intoxication, and surprise that he couldn’t bring himself to fight her. He resigned himself to accept her help, even if it meant her company. In exchange for sobriety and something resembling respect she would teach him how to hone his psychic powers and help with the hunt for Lilith.

It took some time for them to learn each other’s boundaries. She had initially pushed him too hard, once invoking and promptly disrespecting Dean’s memory at the wrong time. He had tried to punch her in the face, but she’d blinked out of the way before sweeping his legs. Ruby was kneeling on his neck before he’d had time to react, though she released him before he’d passed out and apologized before he could settle on his counterattack.

In general, Sam understood that she was trying to help him, so he made an effort to begrudgingly get along with her, but it was a challenge most of the time. It seemed like Sam’s mood changed every couple minutes during the first few days as he tried to cope with his new sobriety-induced lucidity. He was mostly caught between sorrow and rage, quietly half-listening to instructions one moment only to be shouting the next.

Ruby tried to be patient, but occasionally she’d snap back at him or stop one of his fits by physically overpowering him. She tried to give Sam his space, hoping that he’d find a way to pull himself out of his grief, but on their fifth day together she realized how big a mistake that had been.

Trigger Warning: Suicide attempt. You can skip down to the end of this section to bypass it.
She had found Sam lying on the bathroom floor, two rough slits and at least one hesitation cut down the each arm. His shirt and boxers had absorbed much of the blood, preventing a puddle from forming. Ruby was just a fuzzy image rushing toward him, emitting muffled yells as he lost consciousness.

Sam woke up slowly. His vision took too long to adjust to the afternoon light coming in through the large grime-coated windows. His bandaged forearms itched and tingled. When he attempted to lift his arms into view he felt a pressure on his biceps and across his chest. After a moment of flexing he discovered that he was tied to a bed. Large straps crossed his chest, waist, and legs. Looking around he realized he was in one of the house’s bedrooms. There was an IV pole supporting two bags of blood, which fed into his right elbow. To his left he saw Ruby sitting in a chair reading a celebrity magazine, looking bored beyond measure. The sound of Sam’s tiny movements were enough to catch her attention.

“If you’re gonna go wasting your blood you should really let me know your type. It took me almost five minutes to find some O Negative for you.” Her words may have been a slight tease, but her expression was anything but smiling.

Sam didn’t know how to respond. He hadn’t asked to be saved, but having even a moment or two of a second chance made his attempt scare him a little. What if he had succeeded? It’d be done, and while that had held appeal a few hours ago, right then his conviction faltered. His perceived escape would’ve likely led him to join his brother, undoing Dean’s sacrifice. It wouldn’t have ended the pain; it just would’ve changed the scenery. He didn’t know what he wanted, really.

“Anyway, I’m not letting you kill yourself—” she began, but Sam cut her off.

“Why?” he asked weakly. He didn’t look at her, instead opting to examine the paint peeling off the ceiling above him.

“I have worked too long and hard to save your stupid ass and I am not about to let you throw yourself into the pit because you’re too consumed with your own self-pity to lift a single finger for your own wellbeing.” Ruby’s tone grew livid. “I am not going to stay to watch you die—and we both know I came back the last time I said that. So if you are so committed to offing yourself, then you’re gonna need to get your shit together enough to kill me first. At least then you won’t be such a sorry excuse—”

“Oh,” Sam said, turning to finally look at her. He should’ve been insulted, but he couldn’t feel anything beyond overwhelming sadness. It took him by surprise to recognize not just the pain itself, but also what it was doing to him. He was helpless to it in a way that scared him. “What do I do now?”

The vulnerability in his voice surprised Ruby. She’d been expecting him to hurl insults or whine, not to simply concede. Her posture had unwittingly become hostile. She exhaled, consciously relaxing her upper body.

“You’re not thinking clearly,” she answered in a more gentle tone. “Until you do, if you want to start recovering, you need to really listen to me. You need to start reengaging with the world and I can’t drag you back into it if you’re fighting me. Try to focus yourself on something other than your own suffering, hone your powers, and then we can start going after Lilith—but I am not helping you hunt down Lilith if there’s even a sliver of a chance you’re just looking to off yourself!”

Sam nodded silently.
“Also, you might be calm and seeking redemption now, but I don’t trust you not to try again. You lost your autonomy privileges. I’m following you everywhere until I think you’re ready.”

Sam frowned and furrowed his brow slightly. “I’m human. I still need to use the bathroom.” It was more of a question than a statement.

“I’ll turn my back,” she replied.

One corner of his mouth couldn’t help but curl up, until it dawned on him that she wasn’t joking.

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**End of suicide trigger. Recap: Ruby is helping Sam prepare to hunt Lilith after Dean’s death.**

After a week under Ruby’s watchful eye, Sam’s strength had returned and his mood had mostly stabilized. He was far from happy, but at least he was self-aware enough now to avoid random bouts of rage. He was also crying less frequently, but he wasn’t sure if that was because he was improving or simply because he hated crying while Ruby just stood across the room staring at him. He didn’t find joy in things the way he had before Dean died, but in general doing the training Ruby offered left him feeling something slightly resembling accomplishment.

One morning while Sam was finishing a quick breakfast consisting solely of a single, flavorless nutritional bar he spotted Ruby holding their jackets. It was still too warm and humid for any reasonable person to actually want to wear an extra layer of clothing, unless of course there was rain. He checked out a window at the dark grey sky, then reflexively glanced up to see if the ceiling was leaking.

“No training today,” she told him when she saw his confused expression. “We’re going out. There’s an errand I need to run in the city.” She left unsaid that she still didn’t want to leave him alone for the better part of a day.

“What kind of errand?” Sam asked skeptically.

“I need some components to work a locator spell on Lilith’s minions. We’re nowhere near ready for a fight, but we should be monitoring their movements, doing our homework.”

“I don’t suppose we’re going to stop at a grocery store for some chicken feet or anything? I could go for some real food.”

Ruby smiled a bit at his comment. It was the first time since his suicide attempt that Sam had expressed a desire for anything. She hoped that meant he was returning to his old, assertive self.

“I only need a few items from a hoodoo shop, but after that we can get whatever you want.”

“We’re just going to walk into a hoodoo shop?” he asked, unconsciously showing his hunter upbringing. Ruby’s smile grew.

“Oh course Sam. I’m a witch.”

The drive to Lafayette took three hours. Sam refused to let Ruby drive Dean’s—his—car and Ruby refused to let Sam drive at all, so they stole a maroon ’69 Pontiac GTO. Sam didn’t express a preference about what kind of car they took, but Ruby explained that it was important to enjoy the little things when possible. Turning down an alley in what was clearly the poorer and more dangerous part of the city, Sam wondered whether it would have been wiser to pick a more subtle
car. Ruby parked in the alley and turned to Sam before they got out.

“There’s an etiquette to this whole sort of thing,” she warned him. “I don’t want you going in there thinking and acting like a hunter because that’ll be a huge pain in the ass at the very least.”

“Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? I don’t know the secret handshake.”

“If anyone asks, you’re my apprentice. Just follow my lead—I doubt anyone’ll even talk to you. Just don’t start picking up random objects. It’ll make you look like an idiot,” she explained, causing Sam to frown briefly while rolling his eyes.

They exited the car and walked about a block before reaching a dingy cafe. There was a name painted above the front door, but the text was illegibly faded. Every piece of wood had paint peeling off of it and there was so much rusted metal around that Sam began wondering when he had last gotten a tetanus shot.

An elderly black man sat in a bright yellow, flimsy, molded-plastic chair on the sidewalk in front of the cafe’s entrance. He eyed them as they approached. Sam wondered just how unusual it was for that neighborhood to get a pair like them: a tiny, white brunette in leather pants and jacket, and a 6’5” white guy in plaid with shaggy hair. Sam tried to slouch, making himself as small and non-threatening as possible, but Ruby marched forward with visible purpose.

“Can I help you?” the man asked while sitting up in his chair. He had a thick accent that Sam couldn’t place.

Ruby stopped a few paces from the man, and Sam stopped behind her, unsure of what else to do. She replied to the man in a language that Sam did not recognize, making his eyebrows rise slightly in surprise. He quickly changed his expression to something more neutral, hoping that the old man wouldn’t realize just how out of his element Sam really was. Luckily, the older man seemed to be distracted enough trying to recover from his own shock.

After Ruby said a sentence or two, the old man started smiling. He responded in the same language, which was almost certainly his native tongue. The speed and confidence of speaking a more comfortable language made the man seem warmer and a few years younger.

After politely listening to them chatting for several minutes, Sam gave up trying to understand what they were saying. He began looking around the cafe and neighborhood in more detail. There was very little English writing anywhere. He recognized some French, but he didn’t know enough to gain any great insight. Most of the text was neither English nor French, but some non-romantic language. The products in the cafe were foreign brands.

The man began pointing down the street. Sam realized that he was giving Ruby directions. She expressed some sort of appreciation and then waved for Sam to follow her as she started down the street.

“Sorry about that,” Ruby apologized. “Everyone thinks you’re a narc or a hunter until you show ‘em you’re one of them. That was actually easier than I thought it’d be.”

“What language was that?”

“Dagbani. It’s from northern Ghana.”

"You speak Ghanan?"

"It’s not 'Ghanan.' I speak Dagbani and Akan—there are several distinct languages in Ghana,”
Ruby replied, but realized that that didn't lessen Sam's confusion at all. "I was born around there."

Sam was so shocked by her statement that he nearly tripped over some uneven pavement. Abstractly he knew that demons used to be humans, but it had never crossed his mind where any given demon may have been born or lived. The realization created a wave of new questions, which overwhelmed him. Before he could voice any of them a thought came to the forefront and his stomach ached slightly.

He knew nothing about Ruby. She had entered his life over a year ago, saved him countless times, put up with all sorts of bullshit from him lately, and the only things he knew about her were her name, that she was a witch, and now that she was born near Ghana…. It occurred to him that Ruby probably wasn't her real name. He felt guilty for knowing so little about her. At this point she was the closest thing he had to a friend and he didn't even think of her as a person. Sam's mood darkened as they stopped in front of an unmarked door.

Ruby knocked five times and waited. After a few seconds there was the sound of a heavy bolt sliding. The door opened inward to reveal a little girl looking up at them. Spotting Sam's towering form she let out a mousey squeak and retreated through the shop.

The store was dark, dusty, and tiny. It only had two five-foot-long aisles before reaching the small counter. The walls were lined with shelves containing books, trinkets, and spell components. There was no natural light, only oil lamps and candles. Sam wondered how all these probably rare goods hadn't been destroyed in a fire long ago.

Behind the counter were two teenage girls and the little girl who had opened the door. The three of them had dark complexions and looked confused by their customers who were clearly not from around there. Ruby stepped forward and began speaking in Dagbani again, but one of the teenagers shook her head and replied in something that sounded an awful lot like French to Sam. Ruby nodded and replied in the same not-quite-French. After a few more minutes of chatting with the girls, they'd established a sort of rapport. Sam could've even sworn that Ruby whispered something before the girls looked at him and started giggling.

By the time Ruby had actually given the list of needed items to one of the teens, Sam's eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting. He began looking around the shop only to realize that this whole time there had been an elderly woman sitting in a lumpy cloth chair in the corner of the room behind them. Her frizzy hair was white and loose, hanging around eyes that were visibly clouded over with cataracts. She had been staring in Ruby's direction, listening to the interaction at the counter, but then she turned to look straight at Sam's face.

For what seemed like the millionth time that day Sam found himself surprised and confused. He was pretty sure that he hadn't made any noise that would have drawn her attention. But more than that, she was looking him in the eyes, which on him were half a foot higher than a man of average height. If she was in fact blind, Sam had no doubt that she was a witch using some sort of alternate sense.

The girl and teen returned from the back store room with about a dozen items. Ruby inspected several of them carefully before giving her approval. The total came to just over $9,000 and Sam only briefly dwelled on what Ruby might have done to get the massive roll of cash she drew from of her purse. One of the teens double-counted the money. Meanwhile, the other teen put everything in individual plastic-Sealed bags, wrapped them in a nice cushion of paper, and put them in two plastic grocery bags. Ruby thanked them, grabbed the bags, and turned to leave the store.

"Your kind," the old woman said as she turned back to face Ruby. She spoke with a French accent and her voice had a quiet rattle to it. "They kill. They steal. Never seen one pay. Not démon."
The girls behind the counter looked suddenly terrified. Ruby stopped walking and turned to face the woman.

"I kill and I steal," Ruby corrected the woman’s misconception. "Where do you think that kind of money comes from—"

"But you don’t here," the woman interjected. Ruby looked a little confused with where this conversation was going. Sam was also unsure, but unlike most of the last hour or so at least they were speaking English and he could begin to understand the interaction. "Démon, you are a special one. No shame for that."

The old woman turned to look at Sam. "And this one, oh you! Boy who dreams of tomorrow."

Sam's stomach lurchet. He didn't know if he could convince himself that that was some idiom for optimist—he certainly didn't feel optimistic—or if she was a psychic, able to read him like Missouri had years ago. "You poor thing. You can't see. Your dreams too clouded by pain. You only dream of the past, loss, and death." The expression of pity on her face mixed with some emotion that Sam couldn't place before she continued. "All that grief, you can't see through it, you can’t see the future. Can’t see what you need to know."

"And what's that?" Sam asked hesitantly.

"You will be happy again." She smiled, creasing her face with dozens of wrinkles. Sam’s lips quivered slightly and his heart pounded anxiously. He wasn’t sure he believed her. It felt like happiness was too much to hope for and he was almost pained by the prospect. He wanted to be happy, but each time he started to make progress he was taken back by a flash of guilt. How could he ever be happy knowing that Dean was in Hell for him?

But maybe this woman could really see his future. Sam couldn’t think of a reason for her to lie to him, but he knew nothing about her motivations or allegiances. She was a witch after all... though Ruby was also a witch and seemed to be sincere in trying to help him.

The woman also knew that he wasn’t having visions anymore. He hadn’t told anyone that he had visions of Dean being torn apart by the hellhounds for a week leading up to his death. Sam had hoped that it was just his fear and imagination. Before those he hadn’t had a vision since Azazel was killed. He had assumed that it was over. But then every detail of his visions matched Dean’s death perfectly. It had crushed Sam to think that he ignored the warnings again, just as he had before Jessica’s death. And now his dreams were only nightmares fueled by grief, forcing him to relive Dean’s death, just like Jessica.

The old woman said something to one of the girls, who nodded and rushed into the back room. Sam watched the slightly tense scene, unaware of exactly what was happening. Ruby waited for a few moments, then gave up, stepping closer to the old woman. It looked like she was about to say something when the girl returned. The girl ducked around the counter and handed a small wooden case to the old woman, who in turn extended it in offering to Ruby.

"You take this, from me. You will need help. This is the best I can give."

Ruby slowly took the case, sliding back the lid to reveal several long thick needle-like tools made of bone, a tiny knife, and four vials of dark liquid. Her eyes widened visibly, but she seemed satisfied with the contents.

The old woman said something in that almost-French language to Ruby, who nodded back to her.

"It will rain soon," the old woman said as she tilted her head toward the door. "And you have a
long walk back to your car."

With that serving as their instruction to leave, Sam and Ruby walked back out into the overcast daylight. Ruby handed the grocery bags off to Sam, but held the case to her chest. When they were half a block away from the shop Sam felt comfortable enough to talk.

"What is it?" He indicated the case by poking his elbow toward it.

"It's a perme set. It can be used for very powerful, long-term spells or wards." Her fingers unconsciously traced the edges on the case. "This is a really nice set, maybe a few hundred years old. The bone looked like it was treated incredibly well. I'd have to look at the inks—"

"Inks?"

"It's primarily for magical tattooing."

Sam raised an eyebrow and thought of the anti-possession tattoo on his chest. That hadn't required any sort of special tool made of bone. He didn't know what made him more uncomfortable, the idea that his tattoo might be comparatively weak magic or that Ruby might just like the giant bone needles for tradition's sake. He turned his thoughts to other things.

"What language was that?" Sam asked.

"French Creole."

"Let me guess. This is your old neighborhood?"

"Yeah, sorta. I spent a lot of time in parts of the Caribbean and the Gulf Coast over the years. Some parts more than others, and some decades more than others."

"Anywhere really stand out as your stomping ground?"

"Haiti and Louisiana." Ruby didn't elaborate and Sam wasn't sure if he wanted to follow that line of questioning just yet.

"What did she say to you, right at the end?" he asked curiously.

Ruby hesitated slightly. "She told me that I need to protect you, no matter what."

Sam and Ruby stared uncertainly at each other for a moment as the first few drops of a coming storm fell around them.
During the drive back to the abandoned house, Sam watched the rain pound relentlessly on the marshland around the highway. The sky had darkened early due to the cloud cover and they were going through an area with almost no towns around to provide light pollution. He had decided to head south after leaving Bobby’s to seek out some isolation and an ample supply of bourbon, but he now regretted his poor timing as hurricane season was beginning. The cracks in the roof where they were squatting had helped vent the heat on warmer days, but now things were getting rough and he hoped that the few belongings he had back at the house weren’t being ruined by his lack of foresight.

After a lengthy search, Ruby had managed to find the one radio station in rural Louisiana that carried punk rock. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel along to Social Distortion's cover of "Ring Of Fire", occasionally singing along to the chorus. She seemed to not even notice Sam was there. He was learning that when she wasn’t trying to get something from another person she had no shame, for all the good and bad that carried with it. He admired how comfortable she was in her own skin—well, not her skin exactly.

The real problem was that she sometimes didn’t notice what her behavior was doing to him. Case in point, that goddamn song. Before Dean had sold his soul, Sam would have happily listened to it, but after he found out about the deal metal, rock, and punk became much harder to listen to. It shouldn’t have surprised him how many songs revolve around Hell and death, but on the drive down to Louisiana he realized that he couldn’t listen to any of the music in the glovebox without crying. He tried to endure the music during their drive back from the magic shop, but it was hard after the comparatively long day. Reaching the end of his limits, Sam turned the radio off.

"I just can't—not right now," he managed, unwilling or unable to explain himself.

Sam didn't want to sound like he was apologizing because he wasn't really, but he did feel a little sad when Ruby stopped doing the car equivalent of dancing. Generally, her carefree moments comforted him by making her seem more human or at least they provided something to break up the monotony. He didn’t want to discourage it.

"Okay…" she said, more confused and curious than offended. “Just that song or do you want a break from music altogether?"

She was trying to gauge his emotional state. He'd been mostly silent since she had told him that the old witch thought it was vital to keep him safe. Ruby couldn't tell if he was depressed or just made uncomfortable by the witch's unexplained interest in his safety. It was probably both. As much as Sam seemed to be improving recently, he still had an air of indifference about him that indicated a moderate depression even when he was at his best. She had hoped that stopping to get some food that wasn’t from a can would help him be more assertive or indulgent, but the interaction with the witch had really thrown him for a loop.

She decided to test the waters. "Something on your mind?"
Sam tapped his foot absentmindedly in an almost nervous fashion. Something was clearly bothering him. The silence stretched and Ruby began to question whether the remaining hour of the drive was going to be that uncomfortable.

“She thought I was important,” he muttered, then subtly shook his head. “I don’t want to be important. I just want to kill Lilith and... I don’t know. Maybe I’m done hunting.”

“You serious? A hunter who wants to stop saving people. Now I’ve seen everything.”

“It’s not—I mean... I don’t want to be singled out like that. She has to have something in mind, something I do. I just want to avenge Dean and get out. No more saving the day. I don’t want that kind of responsibility. I want to be normal.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you got singled out a long time ago. You don’t get to be normal. I mean first of all you’re a hunter, which means you’re just a few degrees off from survivalist or UFO-chaser-crazy, but you’re also one of Azazel’s kids, which puts you in a league all by yourself... literally, I guess.”

He scowled at the thought. “You’re not helping.”

“Yes, I am. You’re just too caught up in feeling sorry for yourself to notice what I’m getting at. You might be a freak and maybe life is gonna drop a lot of shit at your feet, but you aren’t alone. I’m trying to fucking help you.” Her patience wore thin quickly when it was obvious that Sam had no appreciation of how big a gesture it was for her to be there at all.

For most of the first year helping them, Sam and Dean had been under the delusion that they were using her like she was disposable. They never bothered to think that she might just be knowingly cooperating apart from some manipulation or reluctant alliance. Sam’s current in-it-alone mentality had annoyed the hell out of her. She wanted to turn the radio back on in order to piss him off, but he spoke before she could reach for the dial.

"Why are you helping me?" Sam's voice was more suspicious than self-pitying. He’d asked her that early on. She had given him some bullshit line about liking tall guys before stealing his french fries and changing the subject.

"You know me, I have a thing for tall—"

"I'm serious, Ruby. Why did you even find me in the first place?" He tensed and glared at her frustration. It seemed like she had just been trying to cheer him up and maybe he’d be able to coax more out of her, but she had just reverted to her defensive, snarky self.

"I was curious." Ruby didn’t elaborate.

"You were curious. Fine." Sam was done with the whole conversation if she was going to be that way. They could both act like children. He turned to look out the side window and ran his fingertips over the glass. As he moved, his long sleeve fell down a few inches revealing the thin bandage on his wrist.

Ruby glanced at him and saw the bandage in the window’s reflection. The sight made her stomach turn sour with guilt. For two weeks Sam had been completely vulnerable to her. She’d literally taken the door off the bathroom at one point and he had just endured the humiliation. She had known so much about him even before they had met. But she had barely given him any insight into herself, let alone made a real showing of trust in him. Every time he asked about her she’d shut him down. It wasn't fair and she knew it. Normally that wouldn't bother her, but this was Sam and she
was inclined to give him an unreasonable amount of accommodation. Anyway, she couldn't just let their borderline friendship wither to death because she always took without giving in return. She let out a slow sigh of resignation.

"After becoming a demon, I managed to get up to Earth for a few good runs. I'd usually get to be topside for a few decades at a time. Then my pass would run out, I'd piss off a higher up, or there'd be some emergency, and I'd be dragged back down." Ruby's face didn't reveal any emotions, but that didn't stop Sam from staring with undivided attention. She continued.

"When you're down there, all you want to do is find a way back up. It's incredibly rare that you can sneak out, so most of the time you need to be under some contract or given orders by a superior that authorizes your way out. So, when I heard that there was a massive recruiting drive for Azazel's army I figured it'd be an easy ticket out."

"You were part of Azazel's army?"

"Yeah. I came out of the Devil’s Gate with the rest of them. The army is actually where I heard about you. We were all poised, ready to rush Earth, waiting, and what else are you going to do but gossip? There was this rumor about a special human with demon blood, chosen to lead the armies of Hell in conquest of Earth. He or she would be waiting for us on the other side.

"A lot of demons were pretty pissed by the idea of following a human, even if you did have some demon blood in your veins. Granted, it did kind of beg the question of why. Why is it so important to have a human lead? We have some of the best military minds in history who're still halfway sane in the Pit, but we were going to follow some kid. It didn't really make sense."

It hadn’t occurred to Sam how little sense Azazel’s plan made until she mentioned it. There was no clear reason why he would have made a good commander. Even with the psychic visions and his experience as a hunter, what made anyone think that he could be a leader or control an army? Maybe Azazel had planned to make him a puppet, but then why did he need Sam at all? The demons already saw Azazel as a leader. But Sam’s musings were cut off by Ruby continuing her story.

"And when we got out you never came for us. So many of the others hated you for it. They cursed your name and rallied behind Lilith. They were so angry that they got fucked by the little shit who they were supposed to obey, who helped kill Azazel and close the Devil’s Gate.

“But I wasn't mad. I never even wanted to fight in a war to begin with. It was just my ticket out of the fire for a few months or years. Instead of being upset, I was curious about the guy chosen by Hell or destiny or whatever, who knocked all the pieces off the board. You rebelled against the will of Hell itself and it hasn't even hit you how big a deal that is. I wanted to help you because that thing—that—” She struggled to find the right word “—that spark in you is worth protecting.”

An uncomfortable silence grew between them, so she said, “Okay, now that that is over with I’m turning the radio back on. And if it bothers you, you can ride in the trunk for a while.”

Sam didn't know how to respond. This was the first time that they'd had a meaningful conversation, even if it was a little one-sided. It was a lot to take in, both factually and as a new step in their budding friendship. He hadn't considered what the demons from Azazel's army had thought of him. He had just assumed that they blindly followed authority and that's why they had swarmed to Lilith in his absence. It hadn't occurred to him that they may have felt betrayed or angry at him personally. Let alone the thought that one of them saw some value in him, beyond the prophetic hype, and wanted to nurture it.
"Is it still there?" Sam asked while trying to act nonchalant.

"What?"

"That... spark. Do you still see it in me?"

"Of course. You wouldn't be such a pain in my ass if it wasn't."

A small chuckle escaped Sam. "I live to keep you on your toes," he teased.

"Sounds like a deal."

While in Hell a month earlier, Ruby had heard rumors about Sam surviving Lilith’s attack by being immune to some of her powers. Azazel’s special child had been a topic of interest from the first moment his campaign was announced in the higher tiers of Hell, but after Sam’s not-remotely-narrow escape from Lilith the gossip grew exponentially. Speculating about the nature and limits of Sam's abilities was common among the demons who weren't under Lilith's command. A few of the more liberal demons who openly hated Lilith even started referring to Sam as The Boy King as a slight against her. It was the closest thing to political intrigue Hell had seen in thousands of years —local time, which ran roughly 120 times faster than on Earth.

While in Hell, Ruby spent most of her time with the other Maji, the witch-centric demon caste who empowered covens and witches in exchange for their souls. Once a demon learned the basics, they were assigned a caste based on their background, skills, and other characteristics. Becoming a Maji was the obvious choice for Ruby since she had sold her soul to become a witch in the first place. That positioning in Hell gave her a surprising gift during her latest visit. Surrounded by demons who knew all things magic, it was easy to learn all about the powers that Sam would likely manifest. She took diligent mental notes while waiting for her opportunity to escape back to the surface, and escape ended up being much easier than she had expected.

For the most part she had a record of good behavior with her demonic superiors. She had even volunteered to fight in Azazel’s army, which was rare for a Maji to do. Recently it was only Lilith who really had it out for her, having lined up a fair bit of torture while casting her back into Hell. But Lilith was on Earth and in her absence the more pragmatic minds had to make sure the Hell machine kept running.

Lilith’s campaign on Earth was consuming more demons than anyone had imagined. She was primarily pulling demons from the Torquean caste, who tortured human souls into new demons, and the Cruciare caste, who existed primarily to wreak havoc on Earth. Her draw on the manpower needed to maintain the everyday functions of Hell hit the bottom line enough to worry the Crossroads demons, and the lawyers of Hell had never been a force to be taken lightly. Hundreds of demons were temporarily reassigned to other functions and many of the demons being punished were granted reprieves with the prospect of earning an outright pardon for good behavior.

Ruby was a bit surprised to be given a reprieve for what was essentially treason, but eventually she understood why. After ten years local time in Hell, a middle-ranking Crossroads demon asked Ruby to come with her. Being of lower rank and on probation, she agreed. The two of them traveled to one of the million unremarkable corners of Hell and the Crossroads demon turned to her. They were alone, which was an impressive feat in a place as busy as Hell.

“How do you feel about Lilith?” the Crossroads demon asked. Ruby couldn’t tell if that was a trap to test her loyalty or if the Crossroads caste was up to something more than damage control.
“I hate her,” she replied flatly. “Nothing would make me happier than casting her in white hot iron and dropping her in the Mariana Trench for eternity.”

The Crossroad demon smiled softly and then kicked Ruby through an invisible crack in the ragged stone wall next to them. The next thing she knew, Ruby found herself as a smoke cloud thirty miles west of Vancouver.

With the insight gained from the other Maji as a foundation, Ruby and Sam had started working on exploring and controlling his powers. The primary focus was on developing powers that would help in fights against demons. Early in the training Ruby played Sam’s sparring partner while the risks were minimal. He would try to prevent her from smoking out or he would try to force her from the meatsuit. He was even able to move her, body and all, on occasion. When they were ready to attempt an exorcism they had to find a random demon to trap and practice on. After two days of migraines and nosebleeds, Sam successfully performed the exorcism with powers alone.

He’d been feeling a little better each day that he was exercising his powers. They were a welcome distraction from his depression and he felt more disciplined than he’d been in months, maybe years. It made him feel stronger, but he tried not to let it go to his head. That wasn’t too hard since Ruby kept his ego in check with nearly constant ribbing.

Almost five weeks after taking up residence in that dingy, little house in the middle of nowhere, Sam had a vision. It was the first time in almost two months that he hadn’t dreamt of Dean’s death. Even though vision dreams took a toll that common nightmares didn’t, upon waking he was grateful that he hadn’t been forced to watch his brother be shredded into cold ribbons of flesh. He hoped that maybe things were looking up for him.

In the vision, he saw Lilith sitting in what looked like a hotel’s executive suite meeting with several other demons. Her meatsuit was an attractive blonde woman, not dissimilar to Ruby’s first vessel, in a simple white dress. She was instructing one of the demon underlings to relocate at least half of his followers to the Houston area. Once there they were to occupy the oldest holy ground until another group arrived with some precious cargo. After saying ‘precious cargo’ she smiled so broadly that it sent a shudder down Sam’s spine, jolting him awake.

After discussing the new development, Sam and Ruby agreed that it was time to get on the road. Sam’s powers were strong enough to give them an alternative to Ruby’s knife in a fight against demons and it seemed like the clock had started running. Whatever Lilith was working at, it couldn’t be left unchecked while they trained indefinitely. Having packed up the Impala, Ruby threw Sam the keys and he smiled so naturally that it made her heart beat a little harder in her chest.
The drive to Houston only took seven hours in spite of bad weather that had caused horrible driving conditions. A tropical storm had rolled through a few days earlier and some of the smaller roads hadn’t been completely cleared of debris. They found a motel on the edge of the city just after sunset.

Upon seeing their motel room, the first word that came to Sam's mind was 'classic.' It couldn't fairly be described as a throwback to the 1950's, but only because he was pretty sure that would require an homage or reference as opposed to simply not changing a thing in sixty years. The room was cheap in every sense of the word. And it filled him with a sense of nostalgia, like returning to any of the thousands of pay-by-the-hour homes he'd had growing up.

While Sam dug through his duffel bag looking for his pajama pants, Ruby started working on their demon tracking spell. She claimed the small, flimsy table in the corner of the room and unfolded a map of the greater Houston area on it. From there she started mixing powders in bowls, lighting candles, and placing raven bones in detailed patterns.

Only a small part of the preparation was finished by the time that Sam was about ready to climb in bed to sleep. The spell took a while to cast, but once cast it could be left active for hours. Every few minutes that the spell ran, the more accurately they would be able to locate any demons in the area depicted on the map used in the spell. Ruby figured that when Sam woke up in six hours, they would be able to know each city block that had a demon on it and possibly even how many individual demons.

She was particularly proud of that spell because it was designed so that it wouldn't even need to be channeled. She could just start it up and then spend the night however she wanted. As much as she felt that Sam was no longer a danger to himself, she didn't really want to leave him unguarded at night. If she went out looking for some fun, they couldn't put down salt lines without locking her out too. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad if she had something to look forward to outside their motel room, but starting a bar fight or joyriding in a stolen car wasn't as tempting when she knew the city was potentially crawling with Lilith's cronies.

Sam finished readying his gun on the side table between the two queen beds, then climbed under the sheets. Ruby was using a small wall-mounted lamp near the map, so he rolled onto his side, turning off the light closest to him. He tried to fall asleep, but was too distracted by the assorted sounds Ruby was making while she worked. He finally decided to say something when she started grinding reagents with a mortar and pestle.

He sat up slightly on one elbow. "Are you going to be grinding that all night?"

"Probably another ten minutes of grinding and then maybe fifteen of chanting. I'll try to start earlier in the night going forward. Well, either that or you can sleep a little later. It's not like we have a rigid schedule."
Sam rolled his eyes, but it was too dark to be seen—not that Ruby could tell since she had her back to him anyway. "How long does that spell take to prepare anyway? You've been at it for over two hours already."

"It's a good two or three hours depending on component quality and other factors. That's really not so bad. I might be able to refine it down, but not for a while." She emptied the contents of the mortar into a small brass bowl before refilling the mortar with whole dried petals. "Proper preparation of components is vital to the success of spells and rituals. You'd be surprised how many witches buy pre-made mats or cut corners and it bites them in the ass later. I swear half of all renegade constructs are the result of someone not rehydrating their wolfsbane the night before." She let out an annoyed or amused huff, probably recalling some sort of story from years past.

"Constructs?" Sam was more familiar with magical jargoon than most people, but he was coming to understand just how much there was that he didn’t know.

"Think golems—well, any animated minion really. Anyway, my point is that patience is a virtue that you need to pull off the big stuff."

Sam stifled a chuckle, making Ruby turn to stare at him.

"Sorry, demon talking about virtue. I know, I know. I'm a racist." He raised his hands in feigned surrender and then layback down to try sleeping again.

Sam woke up to find Ruby leaning against the wall next to the map-covered table, looking down at the results. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest and she chewed on her lower lip. She was scowling at the map.

"We have a problem."

Sam got out of bed and sleepily shuffled to the table. Tiny glowing dots marked too many locations on the map. Most of them were stationary, but a few crept along streets and highways. The two moving along southbound 45 were moving fast enough to cause a very short tail of light to form behind them. In general they were clustered in groups and none of them were at a church.

"At last count there were 27 demons in the greater Houston area," she explained. "They seem to be moving in groups. And don't ask me where this holy site is."

Sam sighed and ran his fingers through his messy hair in exasperation. They could fight a few demons, but even if only a fifth of them were working together under Lilith’s command he and Ruby could quickly find themselves overwhelmed. And if they somehow managed to get a few broken away from the herd, all it would take was one distress call during a fight and they would have maybe a dozen demons teleporting in on them.

Not that it necessarily mattered how many demons were around if they had no idea where the holy site was located. The two of them were there to stop some sort of transaction and if they couldn't find the meeting location, then there wasn't much sense in sticking their necks out. They both knew that they weren't invincible. Their failed assassination of Lilith a few months earlier had proven that thoroughly. So neither of them was pushing for a poorly-weighted battle of Thermopylae proportions without good cause. They had to fight smart.

After going through his standard morning routine, Sam started researching possible old holy sites in the area. He sat on his bed with the laptop resting on his crossed legs. They had agreed to leave
the tracking spell running on the table for as long as it still flickered with activity. Eventually the spell would fizzle out, but they figured there was no harm in letting it run its course even if it wasn’t being watched at that moment.

He had been researching for about a half hour when Ruby opened the door to the motel room. She sat down on the edge of the unused second queen bed and began digging through the bag of fast food she was holding. After scrounging around in the bag for a few seconds, she pulled out a plastic container of salad and a fork, which she handed off to Sam. She then withdrew one large french fries, one large seasoned curly fries, and a BBQ chicken sandwich for herself. Eating five french fries in a single bite, Ruby watched Sam consider the chicken in his salad before carefully eating around it.

Ruby stopped eating, but didn’t put down the carton of fries. “Don’t tell me you’re a vegetarian?”

“No.” His eyebrows scrunched together, then he tilted his head slightly and shrugged. “Not 100%. I just don’t like to eat meat that often.”

He didn’t feel like getting into that conversation. When he was a kid his dad had frequently called meat-heavy meals 'manly' and discouraged Sam from eating meatless food. The excuse had always been that John had wanted his kids well-fed and strong, but Sam never felt weak after changing his diet at Stanford. When he started hunting again with Dean, he was determined not to revert back to childhood habits on that point. A largely vegetarian diet was going to be a surviving characteristic of the new and independent Sam, though he would occasionally grab a burger of solidarity with Dean if his older brother needed a little extra comfort. Now that he’d been traveling with Ruby he had wondered when or if she would bring it up.

“It’s not like about the whole killing-animals thing is it?” she asked skeptically.

“What difference does it make to you?” Sam countered a little defensively.

“You kill things, basically professionally. Some chickens are really gonna be your line in the sand?” She smiled, either at him or the false equivalence. He could see the irony even if it was superficial.

“Most of the things I kill are already dead.”

“That chicken’s already dead.” She leaned forward to give the chicken pieces a predatory glance. “But if you’re that committed to your conviction, my sandwich could relieve you of that moral burden.”

He passed her the four strips of chicken breast. “You’re a saint.” He was relieved that she was dropping the subject so easily.

“Don’t you forget it.” She spoke between bites in a way that distinctly reminded him of Dean. The memory of any of the thousands of times Dean had spoken with a mouth full of cheeseburger hit Sam a little too hard. “An’way, d’you fin’ anything?”

“I’m not sure exactly where our geographical boundaries are for the holy site search or if the type or scale of religion matters…. So, I don’t have the absolute answer, but I have a few possibilities,” he explained while pulling up a few windows on his laptop and skimming through the results.

“The oldest church in the area is St. Mary’s in Galveston built in 1847. There’s a Spanish mission a bit further away that’s older. But if we’re going for the oldest place where there was any sort of religious activity, then we’re looking at the locations of the Akosisa villages.”
“Natives?”

“Yup.”

Ruby popped a few fries in her mouth while she considered the problem at hand. After finishing her bite, she commented, “They never make it simple. So you wanna flip a coin on whether Lilith’s flunkies are feeling Spanish or going local? Anything stand out in the research?”

“The Akosisans used cannibalism in some of their religious practices.”

His observation made her eyebrows rise, undoubtedly imagining the potential boon that would give a spell, ritual, or any other display of unholy theatrics. “Do you think that’d make it more appealing for demons or do you think they want big, obvious churches?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, having no better insight into the mind of demons than the demon in the room.

Her shoulders slumped slightly as she went back to her curly fries. “Looks like we’re gonna have to watch all of them.” She scowled at a curly fry, then muttered, “This is gonna be a long day.”

That evening, Ruby entered the motel room to find Sam on his bed making salt shells. He glanced up when she came in and noticed faint shadows under her eyes. Before he could say anything she said, "You didn't tell me that St. Mary's is a basilica."

"I guess I didn't. Does that make a difference?" he asked, then remembered who he was talking to. He put down the shell packing tools, and turned to face her more directly.

"Basilica's sometimes have relics.” Ruby smiled at a thought. “St. Mary's had a piece of a saint."

"Had? Don't tell me—"

Her smile turned into a mischievous grin. "Do you realize how much punch a little saint corpse can add to some spells? Anyway, it was in an ornate box. Nobody’s even gonna notice it’s gone.” When Sam just stared at her, she continued, “They weren't even using it. It'd be a crime not to take it.”

He sighed slowly and decided to just change the subject. "Did you get all of the alarm wards placed?"

"Yeah." She reached into her pocket and withdrew seven glass spheres of different colors. Each sphere was linked to a different possible holy site and would emit a humming sound if a demon entered a preset area that had Ruby designated while casting the spell. The whole process had taken around four hours. She teleported to a location, found a secluded area to cast the spell, and left without looking for trouble. "I sealed the ward bowls in tupperware so we won't have shit falling in and messing up the spells. They should stay active as long as nobody finds them and takes 'em apart."

The next few hours were spent in a cloud of quiet tension. They couldn't figure out a good way to prepare any further with the limited information they had. There was no way of knowing how many demons they might have to face, which location they would end up at, or what exactly they were going to do once they got there. Both of them tried to rest as much as possible while being ready to spring into action on a moment's notice. It reminded Sam of a stakeout, but he wasn't confined to the Impala.
Ruby had opted to lay down on the unused queen bed. It was true that demons didn't sleep, but they could become fatigued under some circumstances. She had performed eight moderately difficult spells in under 24 hours and was starting to feel it. There was only a finite amount of power she could easily draw from and she had overdone it, straining herself slightly in the process. She could still use magic if it was necessary, but it wouldn't be as powerful or reliable as if she was well-rested.

Sam had readied a variety of weapons and tools that might be useful, then opted to search online for any demonic omens on a national level. He found way too many omens to even know where to begin, so he closed his laptop. He looked over at Ruby lying on the other bed and couldn’t help but feel a little concerned.

It hadn't ever occurred to him that demons could get tired. He, his dad, and Dean had always seen demons as relentless forces that could only be confronted with confinement, exorcism, or destruction. The truth was that everything was turning out to be more complex than he had once believed. In a way it made sense. If demons had a limitless source of power then surely they would be doing a lot more damage on Earth. He would have found that to be a comforting thought, that Lilith's forces and power weren't infinite, but two against however-many hundred or thousands rounded off still seemed like impossible odds.

"Would it make you feel better if I shut my eyes?" Ruby asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “I could pretend to be sleeping." 

Sam huffed a small sigh and his lips curled slightly at the offer. It was surprisingly thoughtful of her, but it shouldn’t be necessary. "I don't need you to pretend to be human." 

"You look like someone killed your puppy." 

"I'm not used to you being…." His mouth formed around words that he didn’t voice as he struggled to find a diplomatic end to the sentence.

"Weak?" Ruby offered as the word he was looking for.

He didn’t deny it. He glanced over at her with an almost apologetic expression on his face, then leaned his head back against the headboard of his bed. "The first time I saw you, you killed three demons." The memory nearly made him smile. “You set the bar kind of high." 

Ruby brushed off his current concern. "You've seen me get beaten down before."

"Yeah, but this is different. I get that your body can be damaged or you can get exorcised, but that you—like smoke-cloud you—could get messed up…. That's a new one."

He suddenly felt self-conscious and wanted to stop the conversation before it ventured into any other awkward territory. Getting up, he walked into the bathroom to splash some water on his face, and wondered how much longer they’d have to wait.

About two hours later, the green sphere started humming. Demons had just entered St. Mary’s, and according to the dim lights on the barely functional map there were four of them. It was a thirty-minute drive to reach the basilica, so Ruby teleported directly there to monitor the situation until Sam arrived. When he got there, he parked a block away from the rear of the church and approached as quietly as possible on foot. As he entered the church’s garden courtyard, Ruby appeared next to him. He was only briefly startled, then looked around quickly to make sure that no one was outside with them.
"The second group arrived a few minutes ago. Seven demons total," Ruby immediately told him. He was confused because in the pale light he could've sworn that she was grinning in spite of just giving him bad news.

"There's a but, isn't there?" he asked cautiously.

"They're fucking up their ritual and they don't even know it." Ruby was now visibly delighted. "It's a ritual for sure. Looks like they're just preparing some components for a future spell, but they don't have a Maji or even a witch. They're going off some written instructions and screwing up all the subtle stuff. The best part..." She paused for a second to add a little suspense. "They need the relic I stole this afternoon and none of them thought to check that it was still in the chest."

Sam put his hand over his mouth, which was turning into a reflexive smile. He was trying not to laugh, but it was made difficult by Ruby bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet. They couldn't let their guard down just because the demons were apparently incompetent. Sam and Ruby were still outnumbered if a direct fight broke out.

"Do you know what they're at least trying to do?" he asked, trying to regain some feeling of professionalism.

"Based on the instructions the head demon was giving, I think they're trying to make sacred hearts."

"What?"

"Hearts from virgins that are killed under a full moon, etc." She noticed Sam look at the sky for the phase of the moon. "Don't worry. They're already dead. The hearts are cut out and in some big clay urns. It looks like they're in the process of treating the hearts. It's like stage four out of seven."

He wasn't as comforted by the thought of virgins having been killed in general, but that bell had been wrung some time ago. "Any idea what they're going to use them for?"

"Not really. They're used in a variety of spells and rituals, so I couldn't even narrow it down by magical school. Though, it's definitely meant to be used in something big. Sacred hearts take about three months minimum to prepare." She reconsidered her estimate, then waved her hands in an uncertain gesture. "Well, closer to eight months if you want them to be as potent as possible. But without the holy relic and with all their accidental corner cutting, I think these'll be duds."

Sam rubbed the back of his tense neck while weighing their options. "So we can either try to stop them now and if we're lucky we kill them, screwing up the ritual, but probably force Lilith to restart making sacred hearts, possibly doing them right. Or we just let them do the rest of the ritual with some bad hearts and in a few months something Lilith's planning will get messed up?"

"Pretty much. Unless she destroys a unique artifact in the process, this'll only delay whatever she's planning, not prevent it."

"But that's better than only setting her back seven underlings, right?" he asked, eliciting a shrug from Ruby as an answer. He didn't like the idea of letting those demons go free. They'd been training to fight demons and at their first encounter the two of them were thinking of passing. "It feels weird to just walk away from this."

"Fighting smart means picking our battles," she reminded him. "Anyway, it sounds like we'll have plenty of shit hitting the fan soon enough."
Suddenly, twenty feet from them, the handle of a door to the basilica began to jiggle and turn. Sam and Ruby crouched behind a row of rose bushes a moment before five of the demons exited the building. Four of them were working in pairs carrying two large wooden crates while the fifth one supervised. The demons were shuffling slowly across the courtyard to a van parked on the nearby street.

"These fucking hearts better be damn well worth it. I'm tired of babysitting hummie parts," one of the demons complained.

"Shut up, Kal. If the Mistress wants you nursing babies from your tits you'll do it." The supervisor's tone was only half-enthused and he appeared visibly annoyed to be there just as much as his underlings.

"It could be worse," offered a female subordinate. "We could've gotten number forty-seven. I don't know about you guys, but I don't want to spend the next however-long pretending to be an Alaskan fisherman—"

"Morgan, I'm just sayin' that when I enlisted I expected us to be laying waste to cities, not doing these stupid rites," Kal countered.

"We've just got the one to do and then we're free to have some fun," the superior said, trying to limit the complaining. "It's not like we have to do all sixty-four rites."

"Yeah, and when the fuck are we even gonna be able to do this? Alastair needs to get his shit together and start it already," Kal growled.

Morgan stopped walking and glared venomously at Kal. "Listen here, you sniveling Cruciare cunt, I don't care if we're playing for the same team. If you talk about my archdemon like that again I'll fucking end you."

"Both of you stop fighting or I'll throw you both back in the Pit and get less annoying replacements. We stick to our orders, whether our window is tomorrow or ten years from now. So Kal, stop complaining or I'll cut out your meatsuit's tongue and cauterize it with hot iron." The superior demon seemed pleased with Kal's submissive nod of understanding.

The group turned the corner out of the church's courtyard toward the van and the last thing Sam and Ruby could hear was Morgan saying, "I feel bad for Alastair, really. I hear that Righteous Man is a real pain in the ass."
The Hunts

In the three months since Houston, Sam and Ruby had gotten into a comfortable routine. They would track the movements of Lilith's minions, capturing and interrogating them if possible. Only a handful of demons were able to provide information, and only time would tell whether the intel provided was actually useful.

They were able to learn that Lilith had teams of demons working on sixty-four tasks around the world. None of the demons that they had questioned knew why she was sending them on these errands or what all of them were. Occasionally, one would know some of the details of another team’s task, but it seemed to be pretty unusual for the teams to contact each other directly. Most communication was sent up the chain of command, which involved a level of middle management that separated these teams from Lilith.

If the two of them couldn’t capture a demon safely, they would simply kill or exorcise the demons in combat. They had spent a lot of time debating the pros and cons of exorcising demons. Sam was very reluctant to use Ruby’s knife as the default because it would kill the human vessel nine times out of ten, but they both knew that every demon sent back to Hell was an opportunity for Lilith to learn about their own activities. Ruby didn’t like the idea of leaving a breadcrumb trail of demonic witnesses behind them, but she caved to Sam’s convictions as long as they could move on quickly after each exorcism.

Their fear that Lilith would realize the exorcised demons were a valuable source of information against them was realized quickly. When her subordinates began turning up dead or on the wrong plane, she became startled by the systematic attacks and called for an investigation into the matter. It hadn’t taken too long for her to find out who was consistently responsible.

By the time Sam and Ruby were able to confirm that Lilith was onto them through interrogation, they had already spent two weeks with demons turning up around every corner. It was a string of ominously bad luck and they tried to be more cautious. But when they got the news that Lilith was actively hunting them while they hunted her, it made them try to cover their tracks that much harder. Both of them wore hex bags at all times to reduce the odds of being found out by a demon.

Another valuable but daunting piece of information that they had learned through their interrogations was that Lilith was keeping an extensive personal guard and changed her location frequently. She knew that she was methodically being pursued and was taking her own precautions. Her measures may have proved enough to avoid normal hunters, but Sam’s training with his powers seemed to passively increase the clarity and frequency of his visions. Maybe once or twice a week, Sam would have a vision that would point them in Lilith's direction or reveal another one of her mysterious side projects. This allowed Sam and Ruby to try to disrupt her little projects, but the main priority was always closing in on her location.

All of these factors meant that the pair would find themselves ambushing or being ambushed by groups averaging four demons every few days. Sam utilized his powers almost exclusively when fighting demons, but occasionally carried a shotgun containing salt rounds as back up. Ruby stuck with her knife and a few minor spells when they knew there would be at least three demons. They were able to finish most fights with only a few bruises or cuts, and counted themselves lucky.

Sam felt like pretty soon Lilith would realize that she would need to allot more manpower to stopping them. Ruby had suggested that Lilith’s forces might be stretched thin, but they both knew that if she received a decent-sized number of reinforcements from Hell it would only be a matter of time before they faced overwhelming odds.
In their travels pursuing Lilith, on two occasions an obvious case fell into Sam and Ruby’s laps. One was a vampire and the other a shifter, but they didn’t bother pursuing either case. They had specialized their combat style to the task at hand, and knew they only had a limited amount of time to accomplish their mission. Anyway, Sam didn’t want to risk getting involved with hunting again.

On an unremarkable day by their standards, Sam and Ruby had tracked a demon to an abandoned duplex in south Philadelphia. It was the middle of the night and the surrounding homes in the area looked largely uninhabited. The lock on the front door of the duplex was busted, so the two of them cautiously walked in, weapons readied. Sam had his sawed off with salt shells as a precaution since a lone demon seemed too good to be true. Ruby followed him through the first few rooms, both stepping as quietly as possible. He stopped abruptly and she bent her knees, ready to spring forward into any melee that might break out.

Two middle-aged men rounded a corner toward them. One had fair skin, curly red hair, and something between a five o’clock shadow and a proto-beard. The second man had slightly rosier skin with fine black hair, and an old scar across his chin. They were both dressed in jeans and shirts straight out of an L.L. Bean catalog. The two men looked too rural for the desolate urban setting they were standing in. The black-haired one held a shotgun while the redhead appeared unarmed. On instinct Sam reached out with his mind to grab their smoke clouds only to realize with a start that they weren’t demons.

The four of them were in something of an accidental standoff. Sam and the man with the shotgun were aiming at each other while Ruby and the other man held still attempting not to startle anyone.

"What are you doing here?" Sam asked.

"It looks like the same thing as you," the unarmed redhead replied.

"You two hunters?" asked the black-haired man holding the shotgun.

"Yeah." Sam felt uncomfortable with that statement. He almost thought of it as a lie. At that point it felt like between him and Ruby they might barely be able to qualify. Technically, they were hunting Lilith, but they weren’t really falling into the job description otherwise. But that wasn’t the time to think about nuances, let alone voice them. Sam noticed Ruby spared a nervous glanced back at him.

"We thought there might be a demon in the area," Ruby commented, trying to get a conversation going enough to relax the nervous tension.

"Yeah, good luck getting a demon with that little pig sticker." The red haired man chuckled while pointing to her knife.

"It's iron," she lied, but wanted to show some competence without disclosing the value of her literally-secret weapon.

"Can we agree to lower our weapons? I don't want to be watching you while that demon sneaks up on my backside," the man holding the shotgun asked.

"Sure," Sam agreed.

They both slowly lowered their guns and everyone seemed to visibly breathe a bit easier.

"Well thank God for that.” The redhead sighed. “I’m Matt. He’s Riley.”
“Kathy,” Ruby offered.

“Keith,” Sam followed her lead in giving the hunters the aliases they’d been using since finding out that Lilith was tracking them. Matt nodded a little smile to them, but Riley just watched Ruby and Sam cautiously.

“I’m actually glad we ran into you two. We found something that—well, we just don’t understand it. Maybe you two could help us try to figure out what we’ve got? It’s confusing as hell,” Matt said as he gestured to the doorway he and Riley had just come through.

Sam and Ruby looked at each other uncertainly, but slowly followed the two men through to the other room. Sam entered the ruined bedroom first and Ruby followed him… until she couldn’t. In an instant her eyes grew wide with fear. Sam had turned to look at her and took in the devil’s trap drawn onto the ceiling just inside of the door jamb. He lifted his shotgun and swung to face the men, but they already had their weapons aimed at him. Riley had his shotgun trained on Sam and Matt now had a pistol in hand.

"Drop the shotgun," Matt ordered in a calm voice. Sam slowly placed the shotgun on the ground and raised his hands.

"I told you he wasn't actually a demon," Riley said to Matt without taking his eyes off Sam.

"What do you want?" Sam asked as he started working through the implications of the last statement.

"From you or your demon pals, nothing." He gestured at Ruby with the shotgun. "You see, we're just on a job."

With Matt safely in control of the situation, Riley lowered his shotgun into a holster, then pulled a flask from his back pocket. Ruby held up her hands and began shaking her head.

"Guys, you don't want to do this—" she managed to get out before being splashed with holy water. Her body jerked backwards slamming into the unseen wall of the devil's trap before collapsing to the ground. She screamed uncontrollably. Hissing steam curled off her body as she shook and spasmed on the floor.

Sam wanted to throw up. His left hand unconsciously reached toward her, until he heard the pointed cough from the man with the pistol trained on him. He was shaking slightly when he turned to face the men. He was caught up in a flurry of rage, fear, and adrenaline. To say that he hated having guns pointed at him was obvious and an understatement, but that wasn't the thing that was really driving him to the brink. It was the sound of Ruby’s screams. His friend was being tortured.

"Please, stop! She's not like other demons! She—" Sam’s pleas were stopped by Matt adjusting his posture to aim directly between Sam's eyes.

"Like we'd listen to you! Sam Winchester! Everyone knows you opened the Devil's Gate! You keep showing up in towns with demons. He's working with them; Clare was right." The last statement was directed at Riley. Matt’s eyes flicked to Ruby for a split second. She was crumpled on the ground. He smiled a little when his eyes returned to Sam.

Riley splashed Ruby with another swing of holy water. He then put the now empty flask back into his pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. Matt’s smile broadened at this turn. Sam's heart was hammering in his chest as he realized that the sheet was an exorcism.
"Let's just talk about this. There has to be something we can do to prove—"

"You don't get it. You aren’t talking your way out of this. It's not personal. It's just business."

It hit Sam hard, the realization that they were focused on him. They had come for him, on business—hunter business. This was like Gordon Walker all over again, but these two had gotten the drop on them. Ruby was completely out of commission and moments away from being sent back to Hell. He was unarmed and he’d only been training to use powers that worked on demons. He was not prepared to be facing off against one armed hunter, let alone two.

Riley began reciting the exorcism. Ruby started screaming anew and convulsed, clutching at her chest and throat. Her eyes turned black. Sam could see small wisps of black smoke creeping from her mouth. She was struggling against it, but her smoke couldn’t overcome the pull of the exorcism. Sam knew the exorcism incantation by heart and panic set in as he realized Riley was only a few seconds from completing it.

Something snapped in Sam. Without thinking he suddenly threw his hands forward. The two hunters were hurled backward across the room, slamming into the far wall before collapsing to the floor.

Before Sam could realize what had happened his vision became blurred with pain. His eyes were watering and not entirely focused. He staggered, then fell into a kneeling position. Looking down at his body he didn't see any injuries, but blood started dripping from his face onto his shirt. For the briefest moment he worried that Matt had shot him in the head, but reaching up Sam discovered that the blood was coming from his nose and left tear duct. The pain he was feeling wasn't that of a gunshot, but more like he had been hit in the face with a sledgehammer. His brain was throbbing in waves of pain that seemed to wash away any thought that tried to be more than a few words long. His sense of balance was barely enough to keep him upright and his vision tinted red from the blood pooling around his left eye. He had psychically strained himself before, but this was an entirely new level of injury, and it came at the worst possible time.

He looked over at the two hunters who were still on the ground across the room. The pistol had been knocked out of Matt’s hand, but Sam couldn’t see where it had landed. He glanced at Ruby. She was shaking violently as she struggled to push herself up into a crawling position. Her right arm gave way and she fell back down clumsily. Her clothes were still damp causing small coils of holy-water-induced steam to come off of her as she tried to move. Sam began to reach out for her, but stopped when he heard Riley groan and begin to move slightly.

Sam threw himself forward onto his hands and knees to crawl toward his shotgun a few feet away. He knew that his salt rounds would be ineffective at subduing Riley even if they would hurt like a bitch. Instead he grabbed the shotgun, turned around and fired both salt shells into the border of the devil's trap above Ruby, breaking it.

He turned back to the hunter, who was now getting into a kneeling position and taking in the scene. Sam knew that his sense of balance was ruined by his massive headache, so he didn't bother trying to stand. Instead he rushed the hunter in a chaotic, almost-feral crawling charge. In the last second of the charge Sam swung the shotgun in an attempt to hit Riley with the butt of the gun.

Riley saw the swing coming and grabbed for the length of the shotgun. The second he had gripped the gun, the hunter rolled backward using Sam's own momentum against him. Sam pitched forward as Riley swung a knee upward into Sam's torso. There was a distinct snapping sound as one of Sam's ribs broke from the impact. Sam fell onto the hunter and they were caught in a grapple.
They fought for control of the empty sawed-off, both also working their knees and elbows to land a few good hits each. After a few seconds of struggling to get a better position, Sam was able to knee Riley in the crotch hard. Taking advantage of the powerful hit, Sam twisted the shotgun as he yanked it from the hunter's hands. He swung the gun down swiftly, hitting Riley in the head with the butt of the gun. The hunter stopped moving.

Before Sam could think to do anything else, Matt tackled him from behind. Sam slammed to the dirty wooden floor with a tearing pop, followed by burning pain emanating from his left shoulder. He was pinned to the ground and his empty shotgun had been knocked out of reach. Matt was on top of him, punching at Sam's face. Sam did the best he could to block or dodge the hits, but his left arm seemed to be dislocated, leaving his left side vulnerable.

He had taken three hits to the face before he was able to catch Matt's incoming left hook in his right hand. Sam tensed his body, which made his broken rib and head scream in pain. Gripping the hunter's fist tightly, Sam pushed upward. Matt's arm had gone rigid in an attempt to deliver the full force of his body into the punch, and he was too surprised by Sam's move to think of relaxing his elbow and shoulder. Sam pushed forward using his right leg and hip to roll the slightly smaller hunter off of him, like one might push over a statue.

Sam and Matt started scrambling into better fighting stances when they both noticed the pistol lying a few feet away below a broken chair. They each dove for it. Limbs tangled as bloody hair fell in Sam's eyes. Another loud crack that came without pain signaled to Sam that his elbow had probably broken Matt's collarbone. But in the last few inches of the fight for the pistol, Sam's right arm was pinned and the hunter closed the distance first.

Sam struggled, shifting his weight against the hunter, hoping to knock the gun loose in the chaos of the melee. They rolled once more on the ground, freeing Sam's right arm. He swung a fist at the hunter's head, but its impact was weak. A moment before his fist connected, Sam heard a gunshot and felt the energy start to drain out of his punch. Only the momentum of the swing stopped his arm from simply dropping to the ground.

His head had been a foggy mess before, but now everything was becoming saturated and sounds started growing muffled. Sam heard Ruby shouting in what sounded like rage, another two gunshots, and the distinct thwack of something very hard hitting meat. The last thing that passed through Sam's mind was the sensation of feeling a small, cold, damp hand touching his hot and bloodied cheek.
Healers & Helpers

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my awesome beta-reader, Lastarael, for proofing this chapter.

For an unknown stretch of time, the only thought that entered Sam’s mind was the word ‘pain.’ Every breath he took was labored, expanding his aching ribs and causing a dull, stabbing sensation just to the right of his belly button. His head felt thick and every sense was taking too long to acclimate to receiving input again. He thought he could hear humming, but his poor sense of time made it hard to distinguish a musical beat. His mouth was dry and tasted like blood, but maybe a little bit sweeter. Rolling his tongue around his mouth, he noticed that two molars from the upper-left quadrant had been knocked out. They weren’t the first teeth that he had lost in a fight and he decided that he was lucky they weren’t from the front.

He opened his eyes, then looked around the dimly lit room. There were no windows; in fact, he realized fairly quickly that he was in what looked like the basement of a commercial building. The walls and floor were concrete with steel beams supporting wooden floors above him. The room was large with a freight elevator and stairwell in one corner. The elevator had been padlocked from that side and the door to the stairwell had half a dozen magic symbols drawn onto it with chalk.

He was lying on a massive workbench that had been hastily converted into a bed. The wooden work-surface was covered in dark stains that Sam instantly identified as blood. A towel had been rolled up and placed under his head to act as a pillow. Three IVs hung above him from a wall-mounted industrial rack; two were blood while the other one appeared to be saline. His shirt was missing and a large bandage covered the right side of his upper abdomen. He lifted his right hand, which had an IV affixed to it, then began slowly reaching for the bandage.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

He rolled his head back and to the side to see Ruby sitting at another workbench looking at him. She was perched on a stool and it looked like she had been grinding something up in her mortar. Her workbench was covered in spell components and, to Sam’s surprise, guns. To his knowledge she didn’t have a problem with guns, but he couldn’t recall ever seeing her use one before. Now she had one holstered on her hip. She dragged the stool over, than sat next to him.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked with visible concern that made Sam worried.

“I think a truck must have hit me after I was shot.” It occurred to him that he hadn’t actually seen the gun firing or injury. “I was shot, right?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed unenthusiastically. “Point blank in the gut.”

The news stunned him. A gut shot was a hard thing to deal with under the best circumstances and it seemed like a safe bet that he hadn’t gone to a hospital.

“How bad was it?”
Her eyes briefly met his, then drifted down to the bandage and didn’t dare return up to meet him. “It went through your liver, pierced your diaphragm, nicked your right lung. . . .”

He felt lightheaded. All he could manage was to barely exhale, “Fuck.”

“You got lucky.” He chuckled at Ruby’s low standard of luck, then flinched in pain. “The bullet stopped just short of your spine and didn’t touch your heart. . . .” She trailed off, decidedly trying to will the next part of her update not to take place.

“So, what’s the bad news, doctor?”

“The gunshot wound was more than I could really deal with well. The bullet was in too deep for me to get to it.” Sam hadn’t realized he could get any fainter without actually passing out, but there he was still listening and trying not to picture a bullet still lodged in his torso. “I can’t do powerful healing spells, but I know a healing ward that acts somewhat passively.”

He wasn’t sure what she was getting at. “Somewhat?”

“The ward converts magical and supernatural energy into healing magic. When it’s on you, I can either cast spells on you or channel magic into you and it will increase your rate of healing a bit,” she explained. “There was even a very passive effect triggered by the demon blood in your system, which basically acts as your own power source... but there wasn’t enough of it in your system to increase the rate of healing to really let you recover against an injury like that.”

Sam was tired, but not so tired that he would miss her referring to him not having enough demon blood in the past tense. He didn’t know what exactly had happened or what to say, so he let her continue.

“You were pretty far gone at that point. I wasn’t able to keep up the channeling with the temporary ward needing to be redone. So I gave you some blood to increase your innate power source, which bought me the time to finalize the ward,” she said as she pointed at his chest.

Sam pushed himself up onto his elbows to get a better view of his torso. The lower half of his breastbone, between his pecs had a tattoo. It was shaped like a drop and contained a dozen ancient looking pictographs. The lines were a little rough, but it was incredibly complex despite the haste with which it was made. The skin under the tattoo was slightly raised, but fully healed.

“I drew it with a pen at first, but it starting failing after about ten minutes,” she said a bit defensively. “Without getting a permanent ward on you, you wouldn’t have made it.”

“How much blood did you give me?” Sam meant the demon blood, but his eyes lingered on the bags that were feeding into his IVs. The bags seemed to be the real deal, so he assumed those were plain human blood. They even read B+, like he had told Ruby after she’d kept bugging him for the information in their first weeks together.

"A couple drops in the wound itself and I'm not sure about the rest. Your mouth was on my arm. I couldn't see, but it wasn't just a drop or two."

She waited for a few seconds, bracing herself for him to get upset, but he wasn’t angry. He had spent his whole life trying to be as normal as possible, especially since finding out what Azazel had done to him. Now he was finding out that not only had she exposed him to more demon blood without his consent, but it had been a considerable amount. And yet, she’d done it with good intentions. She’d saved him.

"It's... okay," he reassured Ruby as he looked over at her with quiet sincerity.
"You're not mad?" She leaned backward, ready to dodge a sneak attack.

"Some humans tried to kill me and a demon saved my life. I used to think having a little demon in me meant that I was tainted by something evil…. I don't know what evil is, but it's not you. Maybe being entirely human isn't as important to me as it used to." He knew he had a lot to think about, but he felt far too drained for that sort of deep introspection. "What happened to the hunters?"

"Both are dead. You got one. I got the other. I…." She looked away from him. Her lips thinned and she shook her head slightly. "I should've gotten to you sooner."

He couldn’t remember if he’d ever seen her express regret before. It made him feel a bit uncomfortable, the way he wanted to ease her guilt—to comfort her. But he wasn’t about to let her feel like she’d failed him after she’d just saved his life. "You were really messed up. I'm just glad you managed to stop him from finishing the job."

She hesitated a bit to bring up the other elephant in the room. "Speaking of 'job'...."

"Yeah." Sam's voice turned a few degrees colder. "Those hunters referred to a woman, Clare, who was 'right' about me. I'm guessing they were given the job by her. And with two dead hunters in our wake, she'll probably send more after us. We need to be more careful."

"Once you were stable I started prepping spells that'd be more effective against humans and grabbed some guns." Her had voice brightened when she began speaking about what she succeeded in doing, rather than failed.

He found some surprising comfort in the familiarity of her confidence and nearly smiled. "Sounds good. We should also try to figure out how to cover our tracks against humans better."

"I know just the person to help us."

It took four days for Sam's bones to mend and an additional three before he stopped having pain related to the gunshot wound. As soon as he was physically able they departed for Portland. The drive took three days, mostly because Ruby insisted that Sam take it easy and sleep in a bed during his recovery. He suggested that he could sleep in the back seat of the Impala while Ruby pulled all-nighters at the wheel, but she didn't take 'no' for an answer.

It was early afternoon on a Thursday when Ruby pulled the Impala into the visitor parking lot at the Portland Community College. After parking, she double-checked some information on her phone and they climbed out of the car. She walked as if she had some idea of where she was going, so Sam followed.

"Okay, the guy we're looking for should be teaching a class in room CC-308 right now," Ruby explained as they strolled through the quad. "We can talk to him after his lecture."

"This guy is a professor?" Sam asked after realizing that he’d only been half paying attention to her. The nostalgia of being on a campus in the warm west coast sun had temporarily overtaken him. Even if this wasn't Stanford, he wanted nothing more than to lounge on the grass while reading a book. Unfortunately, they were there on business.

"He teaches stuff like Pre-Christian Religions, Folklore of the West, or, my personal favorite, Fantasy and Literature of Magic.” She grinned back at him. “I bet the school board would shit itself if they knew he was actually a witch."

"So what, he's one of yours or are you two friends?" Sam wasn't a fan of the idea that as a demon
Ruby had bargained for human souls, but he wasn't about to start a fight over it now.

"Bit of both," she answered with a vague wave of her hand. “Gabin is the leader of my coven. I've known him his whole life, but I haven't seen him in years."

"You have a coven?" He missed a step and almost fell on some stairs, but caught up to her before she noticed.

"Yeah. It's pretty small and keeps to itself mostly—here we are."

Opening the back door to CC-308, Ruby and Sam quietly slipped inside and sat in the back row. There were around twenty students in the under-decorated, underfunded classroom. The seats were molded, blue plastic with wood desktops hinged to them that reminded him of middle school. He could barely fit in the seat and looked around with an awkward self-awareness.

The professor, Gabin Beauvais, was busy drawing a diagram on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom when they enter. When Sam saw his dark skin and french name he immediately wondered if he was from Louisiana, somehow having a connection to the hoodoo community that Ruby had been familiar with in Lafayette. But Gabin didn't speak with a southern accent. He continued lecturing on the early theories of alchemy for fifteen minutes before calling an end to the lesson. One student lingered to ask a question about an upcoming assignment, but Ruby and Sam waited patiently, then approached him when the girl left.

"Gabin Beauvais?" Ruby asked politely.

"Yes, miss. Can I help you?" He appeared used to strangers popping in on him. Sam imagined there were a lot of late adds to his class looking for some easy credits.

"I certainly hope so." Ruby smiled and then said something in what Sam suspected was Dagbani. Gabin was visibly overtaken with emotion. His eyes widened and his right hand touched his chest. To Sam’s surprise, the witch laughed with joy.

"Rubahnali!" He exclaimed as he embraced Ruby. She allowed the hug, even patting him on the back gently in return. When he finally released her, she tilted her head to indicate Sam.

"This is Sam. He's a friend of mine. I'm helping him take on a big bad and we need a favor or two from the coven."

Sam offered his hand to be shaken, but Gabin grabbed him, pulling him into a hug. Sam was caught off guard for a moment and then relaxed. Wrapped in the tight hug, he suddenly was very grateful they had waited for his injuries to heal before seeking out the oddly-enthusiastic witch. Gabin released him and smiled broadly.

"It's an honor to meet you, Sam. Anything we can do for you—" Gabin turned back to Ruby.

"You are going to visit the coven, aren't you? Everyone will be so happy to see you."

"Of course, Gabin. I would love to see how the flock is doing. Anyway, we have a lot to discuss." She looked around the only-temporarily-empty classroom. "In private."

"Let me go cancel my Friday classes and then we can go right now. Actually, do you have a car?" he asked, earning nods from both of them. "If you want to take 84 east just past Bridal Veil there's a gas station on the right-hand side. I can meet you there and then you can follow me the rest of the way. It shouldn't take me more than a few minutes to catch up."
They parted ways in the hall. Gabin turned to the administrative area of the building while Sam and Ruby returned to the Impala. When they had gotten back into the car Sam ran a hand through his hair and shook his head slightly.

"Something wrong?" asked Ruby.

"Not wrong, just unexpected." Sam hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "It's just that I thought someone who sold you their soul wouldn't be so happy to see you. The last time I saw witches with their demon the witches were terrified and got killed."

"There are a lot of different ways that you can interact with the humans you contract with," she replied as they started pulling out of the parking lot. "Some demons like to be menacing or hold it over their heads, but some of us don't. I'm not into that whole being-a-dick thing; it's so much work for what? Having some humans be scared of you? Impressing a few demons? Who cares? Beyond the whole meeting-my-quota thing, I've made deals in my coven to empower them when historically they've been weak. And beyond giving them power, it's my duty to protect them. When they need help, I can feel it."

"What?"

"The power that these types of witches can tap comes from their Maji. In order to transfer the energy easily, the witch's soul is tethered to the Maji. I can feel when they're at extremes of emotions. So if they're in distress, I can teleport in to help them or I can give them extra power through the soul-link. My coven knows that in an emergency I'll come as fast as I can to help them—assuming I'm topside."

"So you give them power and protect them in this life in exchange for going to Hell. I know that's a better deal than a lot of people get, but it's still a one-way ticket to Hell." Sam was trying not to sound bitter. He was grateful for Ruby’s help and companionship, but sometimes he had difficulty with what she might argue was part of demon society or something.

"Not necessarily," she said with a shrug.

The turn in the conversation caught him completely off guard. He'd been expecting their discussion to end up as a fight. Yet every time that they headed toward the sensitive subject to Ruby’s role in the same ecosystem of torture that held Dean, it didn’t quite reach the breaking point. Once again, he had no idea how to feel. It was becoming an all-too-familiar situation with Ruby.

"I don't understand…"

"Maji create links to the witches' souls and can manipulate the souls through the link. It's not as clearly worded a contract as with a Crossroads demon. With Crossroads, they explicitly tell you 'You get this for your soul in however many years.' But Maji don't have to make direct contact with the witches or discuss terms. You remember that coven we fought last year with the three women in suburbia? The witches hadn't even realized that they'd technically sold their souls.

"My point is that apart from the soul-link, nothing happens automatically. With witches, a soul goes to Hell because the Maji can manipulate the soul, dragging it into Hell. Likewise, the Maji can just let nature takes its course and not cash in on the soul-link. I don't like seeing my witches in Hell, so I release their soul on death and if they aren't assholes then I don't run into them downstairs. I make it very clear that they don't do anything to earn an eternity of torment."

"Why do you care?" Sam bit his lower lip and mentally kicked himself for the blunt phrasing. "I
mean, it's just that you seem to be more concerned about your witches than any other demon I've ever heard of."

Ruby didn’t say anything for a long while, but she finally answered, “They’re family.”

“What?”

"Gabin and most of the coven, they're the great-great—I forget how many greats at this point. They're related to friends of mine when I was a human." Her fingers tightened and loosened on the steering wheel. "My friends were the founding members of the coven. When I came back as a demon I wanted to protect them. They were basically the only family I had, so I gave them power and protection. They had kids, grew older, and eventually died. I protected the kids, who grew up, and had more kids—and that's how it's been."

He stared at her, struggling to process the new, highly-personal details. "You've been playing guardian a—demon to your friends' kids? For how long?"

"I started the coven around 1732, give or take a few years."

"You don't know the year?" he asked, confused how someone could not remember the year of what had evidently been a major life—well, afterlife—event.

"None of us could read and we had almost no education or resources at the time," she rebuffed his implicit criticism.

Sam mulled the new information over in his mind. He felt like he was actually starting to get an idea of what Ruby was like as a human. She must have been incredibly protective of her friends in order to endure being turned into a demon and still wanting to take care of them. She wasn’t formally educated, but knew several languages. She had lived in the Caribbean, but grew up in Ghana… probably during the early 18th century—Sam’s stomach sank.

"You... were a slave." Sam was looking for some sort of confirmation or denial of his theory, but Ruby didn't respond right away. Instead, she quietly drove down the highway for almost a mile while carefully considering how much to say.

"Yes." Sam suddenly felt uncomfortable. He wanted to say that he was sorry, but wasn't sure if that was appropriate or not. His white-maleness suddenly flashed in the forefront of his mind. Ruby continued speaking, which brought him back to the moment. "That's actually why I became a witch. I wanted the power to get out—get my friends out. I made the deal. I joined an unsuccessful revolt and was killed—didn’t quite get the lifetime’s worth of witchcraft that I was hoping for before payment came due. Anyway, I went to Hell, was turned demon, and the first thing I did when I got back topside was burn as many of the plantations in Haiti as I could. In the process I found a few of my old friends, and made some new ones. They traveled to New Orleans, then to some non-slave states, and settled in Oregon. They've been here for about eighty years."

“Okay.” Sam exhaled slowly as he nodded. "Now I get why they'd be happy to see you.”
Sam and Ruby pulled into the gas station that Gabin had mentioned and only had to wait ten minutes before he arrived to escort them the rest of the way to the coven. They followed his dirty, green 2006 Subaru Forester a quarter mile further out of town into a thick forest. Gabin slowed, then pulled off to the right shoulder and Ruby did the same. Unexpectedly, Gabin turned his car so that its front bumper was up against a large evergreen tree. He then proceeded to drive forward. The car slowly disappeared as it passed through an invisible barrier marked by the tree.

When Gabin's car had fully disappeared, Sam blinked a few times. Ruby began inching the Impala forward. Just before they crossed the barrier Sam noticed the tree’s trunk was marked with a carving ‘9 ¾.’ He laughed and turned to Ruby who beamed with pride.

On the other side of the barrier was a small, dirt path that led into what Sam assumed was Mount Hood National Forest. Gabin had waited for them and continued to guide them for about another mile until they reached the coven.

Sam wasn't sure what to expect, but he wasn't prepared for the wholesome setting they'd stumbled upon. There was a large clearing in the forest housing a small farm. It had a barn, one two-story central building, and ten smaller house-sized buildings. There were a handful of adults walking around, but the thing Sam hadn't expected was the group of five children playing outside the barn. He had been imagining a group of adults hanging out practicing magic in their free time, not families living in a little commune. Gabin and Ruby parked on the edge of the clearing, and the three of them got out of their cars.

A small crowd quickly formed to greet them. The adults seemed eager to make introductions while the children hovered at a safe distance, watching with curiosity. The majority of the people looked like they had some African lineage, but Sam noticed that a few looked very fair-skinned; two of the kids even had reddish hair. There were maybe twenty men, women and children there to greet them, though he could see a few faces peeking out windows in the distance.

Gabin had announced to the crowd that they had guests. When he introduced Ruby, he called her Rubahnali. Sam turned to her, one eyebrow raised. It was the second time that Gabin had called her that. Leaning down closer to her ear level Sam asked if that was her actual name. In lieu of an actual answer, she gave a little confessing shrug before they were ushered off.

Gabin showed Ruby and Sam into the two-story building, which turned out to be a tiny community center. The bottom floor contained a small office, a library that was large for a private collection, what appeared to be a laboratory, a kitchen, and a moderate-sized hall with several folding tables surrounded by chairs. Gabin offered them a seat at one of the tables, then sat down beside Ruby. They’d hardly gotten settled before two women and a man approached their table, looking to Gabin for instruction. He gestured for them to take a seat as he made introductions.

Pascoe was just an inch or two shorter than Sam, with a thick, black goatee and shaved head. He was in charge of monitoring the protective magics of the coven and teaching offensive magic as
well as some physical combat skills. The older of the two women looked slightly frail with greying hair shaved into a short afro. She was Seline, the coven's dedicated archivist, who maintained their library and records. The younger woman was probably just out of her teens, with soft features and frizzy, shoulder-length black hair. Her name was Belda and she was responsible for teaching the children of the coven.

Right on cue, a squeak from the doorway caught Sam's attention. When he turned to see what had caused the sound, a handful of children ducked out of view. He had become aware outside that their visit was something of a spectacle to the witches. It seemed a few of the kids wanted to investigate further.

"Rubahnali, please tell us: what brings you to us?" Seline asked politely but to the point.

"We need warding against divination," she replied before elaborating. "We're tracking a very powerful demon who would like us dead, and we've just found out that hunters are looking for Sam—possibly me too if they are able to identify me. The hunters knew where we'd be and were probably directed there by someone who might be a psychic. We don't know much, but I'd rather not have to find out any more."

"Well, the barrier surrounding this camp will protect against all forms of scrying including portable clairvoyance devices," Pascoe offered as reassurance.

Sam suspected that he would only be able to understand half of the conversation going forward if the numerous witches were starting to get into the nuts and bolts. He found that candid view of a coven discussing their craft interesting, but he couldn't contribute in any substantive way and dared not interrupt to ask for a translation of the jargon. He was the clear outsider there and didn't want to confess how foreign he felt just then.

Gabin and Ruby started discussing which language the preparatory incantations should be in when Sam glanced around the room. A boy approximately five-years old stood awkwardly a few feet to Sam's right. The boy straightened up when Sam spotted him, but he didn't retreat to the doorway where several sets of youthful eyes watched curiously. Sam recognized that the boy must be the ambassador for the other children.

"Hi, I'm Sam. What's your name?" He was trying to keep his voice quiet enough that it wouldn't interrupt the business taking place on the other end of the table. To his relief the discussion continued, though Ruby and Gabin both eyed his interaction.

"I'm Tom. You're new—and tall," observed the little boy, causing Sam's lips to curl into a helpless smile at the innocent bluntness of the statement.

"Thomas, he's a guest here," Gabin interjected. "Try to remember your manners."

"Sorry, Dad." Tom looked back to Sam. "I didn't mean to insult you. Is it neat being tall?"

Gabin looked like he was about to say something, but stopped when Sam started chuckling. "It definitely has its moments. I can reach even the highest shelves."

Tom's expression was that of someone meeting a god. It'd been so long since Sam had interacted with a child that he'd forgotten how refreshingly direct and silly it could be.

"Are you a demon?" Tom asked matter-of-factly while staring at Sam, who was a little startled by the question. That answered the question of whether the children in the coven knew that Ruby was a demon. And judging by the lack of caution Tom had about asking Sam, the kids weren't
particularly scared by demons.

"No, I'm a human—"

"Are you a witch?" Tom was certainly inquisitive.

Sam didn't really know what to say. He didn't want to commit a faux pas or oversell his limited experience working spells. He looked to Ruby, who had leaned back in her chair, arms folded across her chest as she enjoyed the show. Sam raised his eyebrows at her, silently asking for help.

"He's cast spells before and has some innate magical abilities, but he isn't a witch. He isn't bound to a demon," she said, hoping that that was a sufficient enough explanation for the boy, but he scrunched his brow in confusion.

"You aren't his demon?"

Sam pointed his palms outward in mimed surrender and looked pointedly at Ruby again. He was not touching that line of questioning with a ten-foot pole for fear of screwing up some nuance. The encounter reminded him too much of meeting a girlfriend or boyfriend’s parents. That association made his brain hiccup.

"I am Sam's friend and I am helping him," she replied. “It's as simple as that.”

Sam inwardly sighed with relief that Ruby's answer was clear and firm. He'd started worrying that he hadn't understood some aspect of their relationship. The idea of trying to parse their interpersonal dynamics wasn't something he was prepared to do, let alone have to explain it to a child.

"I have friends too! We even have a secret fort!" Tom stated proudly to Sam as he pointed to the children lined doorway.

"That's great. But it's not really a secret if you go around telling people about it." Sam had relaxed slightly at the prospect of topics that a non-witch kid might discuss.

"It's only not secret if I show it to you." Tom bounced slightly, then inched closer to Sam. He leaned toward the giant man in the chair and whispered. "Do you want to see our fort? It's really cool."

Sam smiled at Tom before looking around the table. The discussion about the protection wards had been put on hold thanks to Tom's questions. It was obvious all of the adults had heard Tom's not-so-subtle invitation. Belda stood from her chair and gestured to door.

"Would you like me to give you a tour of our camp? If we happen to end up near any secret forts, so be it," Belda offered as she smiled sweetly.

Sam was profoundly grateful for her social charity. He got up from his chair, nodded politely to the four witches still seated at the table, then followed Belda out of the room. Rushing to catch up, Tom rounded the corner and grabbed Sam's left hand.

"Wait until you see our slides!" Tom exclaimed and began pulling Sam along.

Tom led Sam on a zigzagging, chaotic path through the camp, occasionally letting go of Sam’s hand to run around, pointing and grabbing objects to show off. Belda walked along beside Sam, letting Tom determine their agenda. Behind them, the pack of children followed from a safe
distance, but closer than before. While Tom ran up and down the rows of a large vegetable garden listing off every plant type, Sam decided to take advantage of the opportunity to chat with Belda.

“So, did you grow up here?” He decided that was a good place begin the small talk.

“Yes, sir—”

“Please, call me Sam.”

“Okay.” She seemed a little surprised by his informality, but she relaxed visibly. “My mother was born into the coven, too. My dad was the outsider—”

“He wasn’t from the coven?” Sam asked.

Belda’s mouth turned into a slight frown on one side and her brow furrowed in confusion at the question. “No…. The core of the coven is so small that dating within the camp would be... inappropriate.”

“I don’t get it. How do you guys meet anyone outside the coven, let alone date? This place seems pretty secluded.” He couldn’t picture how they’d get decent internet out there for online dating, but then again they were witches. Maybe they had wifi everywhere they went?

“Most coven members attend college and a significant number of them don’t return.” She stopped briefly to gesture at some of the children, communicating to them to that she was still watching them despite her divided attention, then continued. “I actually have a brother who’s a dentist in San Diego.”

The idea of an ex-witch dentist made him chuckle. “He quit being a witch in order to clean teeth?”

“Oh, he still practices the craft in his spare time,” she corrected him. “But everyone needs a day job.”

Sam put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. That was the strangest cliche small talk he could remember being involved in.

“Where did you end up going to college?” he asked as he carefully sidestepped to not crush a tiny tomato plant that had somehow evaded the garden’s otherwise tidy rows.

“I haven’t actually left yet. There was a death in the coven and I took over teaching the children. I’m hoping that in a few years I’ll be able to go get my degree. Gabin told me that I didn’t need to stay—that they would find someone else, but it didn’t seem right.”

“It’s nice that you’re getting that kind of support about pursuing your education. It’s really important, no matter what you end up doing afterward.” The thought of being someway isolated from mundane civilian life and having college act as the chance to experience normalcy struck him as deeply familiar. He looked down at Belda with sincere hope that she’d get her chance at a higher education. “What do you want to study?”

“Early childhood development,” she replied, then chuckled to herself and added, “After spending so much time with the children, it’s become obvious how much more I have to learn.”

Sam smiled warmly at her. “That makes sense to me.”

Tom ran up to Sam, having realized that his guest hadn’t heard the names of any of the herbs he’d been listing off. The boy grabbed Sam’s hand again, determined to show him something that
would be more interesting. Their little party made its way into the barn, half of which had been converted into a classroom.

Tom resumed his attempt to explain every single thing in view, and Sam didn’t have to try very hard to feign curiosity. The kid was clearly brilliant and made the lesson in the subtle differences between witch and non-witch culture very entertaining. He was dismantling an oversized toy hex bag on the floor when Sam noticed a framed charcoal portrait of a woman on the wall.

The woman was stunning. She wore a pale dress that draped over her shoulders, contrasting with her incredibly dark skin. Her neck was slender, her lips were plump, and her eyes had a fierce beauty. Her hair was natural and loose, curling out several inches. Below the portrait was the name Grace Beauvais. Sam leaned over to Belda and nodded toward the portrait.

“One of Gabin’s ancestors?”

“His wife. She used to teach the children, before….”

Sam swallowed hard, worried that he’d just accidentally brought up Tom’s dead mother. Tom had stopped playing with the hex bag at the mention of her and was staring thoughtfully at the portrait.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—” Sam’s mind sputtered, trying to find a way to finish his apology without making it worse, but Tom didn’t leave him floundering for very long.

“Dad gets sad when people talk about Mom, but I don’t mind. She looks nice.” Tom kept staring at the portrait for a few seconds before returning to the toy hex bag.

Belda leaned closer to Sam and whispered, “Grace died when Tom was very young. He doesn’t seem to remember her very much.”

Sam nodded with very profound understanding. He could relate to the feeling of loving someone, but never knowing them well enough to feel grief over their death. He had only known the pain of seeing his brother and dad suffer, without sharing that loss. Whenever he had cried for his own mom it had been either out of the regret that he never knew her or guilt. Tom didn’t seem to have those feelings, or at least not that he’d shown in the small amount of time that Sam had spent with him.

After another hour of being shown around the camp, the group found its way back into the social hall where Ruby and her tiny council still sat. Seeing that Sam had finally returned, Ruby stood up for a long-overdue stretch.

“I see you didn’t get turned into a frog,” she joked as she walked over to Sam.

“I don’t know how to make frogs!” Tom replied a little indignantly.

“Maybe when you’re older,” Ruby said while she patted Tom on the head. The boy put a finger to his lips bashfully at the contact, then ran behind his dad’s chair giggling.

“Gabin, I think we’ve got the big stuff figured out,” Ruby commented, signaling to everyone that they were wrapping up their meeting. “We can nail down the rest of it later. Right now, I’d like to relax a bit. We’ve been running on all cylinders for a few months and I’d like to take advantage of Pascoe’s hard work.”

Pascoe straightened a little in his seat, proud of the compliment.

“I was hoping that we could have a celebration tonight,” Gabin offered. “It’s been so long since
you were able to visit. But if you would like to rest that’s fine too.”

Ruby didn't even glance at Sam for his input before answering. “Definitely the party. It’s been decades since I’ve been able to have fun with the coven.”

“You should really visit for sabbath,” suggested Pascoe.

“First we see if Sam survives tonight, then we’ll talk,” Ruby replied, with what Sam hoped was a joke.

A large bonfire was lit in a clearing nearby the camp shortly after sunset. The entire coven, including a few members that had been living in the city, turned out, totalling around sixty people. A safe distance from the fire folding chairs, picnic blankets, and various types of improvised seating had been assembled. The food was a disorganized potluck, with many dishes that were reminiscent of cajun, creole, or caribbean flavors. Pascoe grilled a seemingly endless collection of meat and seafood. Two kegs of beer found their way into the party, along with an unlabeled bottle of clear liquid that Sam cautiously avoided. He reminded himself that these people were basically alchemists and their moonshine would almost certainly be the strongest he’d ever encountered.

An impromptu band had formed early in the night. It included a female guitarist, a man playing a clarinet, a teenage boy playing something that looked like a ukulele, a girl with a fiddle, and two women playing barrel drums that Sam later learned were called Tanbou. The collection of random instruments made no sense to Sam, but somehow the combination worked. It quickly became obvious that they weren’t playing songs as such, but more jamming. That was the first jam session that he’d been to since his second year at Stanford. His dad and Dean would’ve probably called it noise, but Sam leaned back in his chair and couldn’t help tapping his foot to the strange melodies that formed.

Ruby spent the first two hours making a pass around the crowd, before climbing onto a table, calling for the group’s attention. Sam had seen her drinking the moonshine earlier in the evening and suddenly wondered how easy it was to get a demon drunk. She gestured for the children, thirteen not including the fiddler and ukulele player who stayed with the band, to sit on the ground between her improvised stage and the bonfire. When the children gathered, the music died down slightly allowing her to address the crowd.

“It’s been a little over twenty years since I last came to this coven. There are many faces that are new to me and some old friends that aren’t with us.” Sam gave her credit for tactfully avoiding the word ‘dead’ in her slightly intoxicated speech. He wondered if anyone here knew her well enough to sense her drunkenness or if it would pass underappreciated. She continued, “You are all strong, incredible people and I’m very proud of you. Maybe it’s because I’m old, but some traditions are dear to me. Anyone old enough to know this one better join in so that I don’t make an ass of myself. And if you’re too young, watch and listen.”

Ruby began singing. Sam couldn’t understand the words, but recognized it as Dagbani. She drew out words and varied the pitch into a simple rhythm. After a few lines she began clapping and stomping on the table in time to the singing. Sam had a flash of sympathetic embarrassment until he realized that several of the older witches had started singing and clapping along with her. That wasn’t just some drunken silliness. It was a real song. The lyrics started to repeat and more people started joining in the singing. Following the singing for guidance, the band started playing along.

Sam leaned over to Belda, who sat in a nearby chair. “What’s the song about?” he asked, hoping that she spoke Dagbani.
“It recounts our ancestors’ enslavement and fight for freedom. It’s more uplifting than I just made it sound. The coven’s sung it at major gatherings since its founding.” She dragged her chair closer to him and began trying to translate the lyrics as best she could.

Still singing, Ruby jumped down from the table and began dancing like a woman without an ounce of shame. She gestured for the kids to join her and they all happily obliged. Pretty soon almost everyone was doing some combination of singing, clapping, and dancing. Sam remained seated, watching in fascination. He couldn’t remember the last party he’d been to where people were more concerned with having fun than impressing others. Maybe there were perks to the no-dating-within-the-coven mentality?

Eventually, the song died down and someone started singing a new song that was another crowd favorite. Things went on like that for some time. Sam was enjoying himself immensely and started to get a little buzzed from his third beer of the evening. During the sixth song, Belda collected the children who were getting sleepy and escorted them to their homes. A few minutes after the kids were gone, Pascoe knelt down next to Sam’s chair and handed him a partially smoked joint. It didn’t smell like the pot he’d smoked at Stanford. He gave Pascoe a cautious glance.

“Don’t worry. It’s pretty mild,” the witch assured him. “It’s the red tablets you’re gonna want to stay away from.”

Pascoe patted Sam’s shoulder and drew another joint from his pocket, which he lit and started smoking. Sam realized that taking drugs with witches was probably just as risky as the moonshine he had declined earlier…. But, if anyone knew their recreational drugs it had to be a group of witches. Also, with the way Lilith and now hunters were closing in on them, that might very well have been his last chance to get really intoxicated in a safe environment.

He finished the joint in three long pulls, which earned a nod of respect from Pascoe. Then things began to get a little strange. It felt like someone had turned up the bass. The music reverberated through his body unnaturally. Sam sank into his chair as much as possible to find some sensation of stability, but it wasn’t working very well because his limbs suddenly felt lighter than air. He gripped the seat of his chair, desperate to not make a scene.

His eye darted around trying to find something to focus on, but there was too much to take in. The bonfire was made out of too many colors that somehow hadn’t been there before. For a minute he thought that he could smell every type of food that was scattered around the clearing. The texture of his jeans made him think of mountains, which made him think of sand, and oceans, and endless water. He wondered how incredible it’d be if it started raining right then, bonfire be damned. He was laughing at nothing in particular when Pascoe rested his hand on Sam’s shoulder again.

"Check this out," the witch said in an ominous move.

Pascoe stood up and approached a small wooden chest that had been brought forward while Sam was distracted. The chest's sudden appearance made him wonder if he had lost some time. Pascoe opened the chest and considered the contents carefully before selecting a glass jar that held yellow powder. He took a pinch of the powder in his fingers and walked up to the bonfire. This caught the attention of a few of the remaining witches, who proceeded to cheer in support of whatever was about to happen. He threw the powder into the fire, which flashed green momentarily, then started reciting an incantation.

Sam put down the beer that he was holding, though he wasn’t entirely sure where it had come from, and got a little worried. He could deal with drugs and he could deal with magic, but he wasn’t sure if he was prepared to deal with both at the same time. That seemed like an inevitable bad trip. He looked around for Ruby, who he spotted a third of the way around the bonfire popping
one of the notorious red tablets into her mouth. He had no idea if he said ‘fuck’ or just thought it. He should've been even more freaked out by the whole situation, but his ability to panic seemed to be partially impaired by whatever he had just smoked. Clinging to his chair, he resigned himself to riding it out.

Pascoe finished speaking, then raised his right hand to the sky. The bonfire swirled upward into the shape of a large dragon's head. He flexed his wrist and the dragon made of flames mirrored the motion with its neck. He snapped his fingers, making the flames flash green again. Then blowing across his palm, the bonfire hissed before returning to its normal state. The two dozen remaining witches applauded Pascoe's performance.

Sam's eyes were wide. He had seen some impressive things in his time and under different circumstances he might've just accepted it as a neat trick, but that was definitely not normal circumstances. The drugs had given the dragon a slight afterglow and the heat coming off of it as it swept around made him want to melt with relaxation. Some objective voice in his head was observing that he was more playful and relaxed than he really should have been. The voice was struggling to keep him grounded, but he was about an inch away from shutting off his brain and going on impulse.

A middle-aged, female witch had taken Pascoe’s show as a challenge. She withdrew a bottle from the chest and poured some of its liquid onto the ground in front of her. Whispering something, she sliced her thumb with a pocket knife, allowing a drop of blood to fall into the small, mysterious puddle. Vines of neon-blue light grew out of the puddle and crawled out in a ten-foot radius. The witch whispered something else, causing the vines to bloom brilliant, orange flowers that smelled tropical and sweet.

Sam couldn't help but examine the flowers close up. He carefully walked over and sat down cross-legged on the grass bordering the vines. The petals had a velvety texture that made his skin vibrate on contact. The scent of the flowers was lovely, though it made his head swim. For a moment he thought the petals emitted musical notes when touched, but he managed to stop himself from testing it by sitting on the ground petting a magical flower for who knew how long. Pascoe gently collapsed onto the bed of vines and flowers next Sam, sending up a puff of sweet pollen.

"How are you holding up?" Pascoe asked as he rolled onto his side to face Sam.

"I'm good. I'm feeling it, but good." Sam nodded to himself a few times, then looked around. "Quick question: Is this all real or am I hallucinating?"

"Did you eat anything that looks like roots?" Pascoe tilted his head back and used a small, plastic dropper bottle, letting two drops of blue liquid hit his tongue.

"I don't think I ate any roots," Sam said uncertainly due to his distorted sense of time. He looked down to notice he'd been petting the orange flowers. His left hand grabbed his right to stop the embarrassing petting. Pascoe saw the visible self-restraint and raised an eyebrow.

"You seem a little tense. Are you fighting the trip?" Pascoe’s question made Sam laugh awkwardly and shrug. "You need to relax. Otherwise you'll start second-guessing everything. Surefire way to get twitchy. You'll be fine. Just stay away from the bonfire—and the red tabs. They hit like a tank. Here." Pascoe handed Sam the dropper bottle.

"What does it do?" Sam eyed the blue liquid, unsure whether adding more sorcery or chemicals was really the right answer.

"It'll help you mellow out and it's great for opening the mind. Take a drop or two. You'll feel
blitzed, like the world is whispering secrets in your ear."

Pascoe's pupils had grown slightly and his smile was reassuring. Sam took two drops, then handed the bottle back to Pascoe.

After a minute or so he did feel calmer in spite of the random bizarre displays of magic going on around him. Sam could tell that whatever he had smoked earlier was still lingering in his system, but the little sensory effects didn't really worry him. He was just enjoying the ride, which currently meant watching four witches having a pissing contest to see who could conjure the largest cloud of sparks.

When the victor was crowned, Sam looked back down at the orange flower he was seated in front of. He decided to pet the flower again, no longer embarrassed by what anyone else might think of him. Reaching his hand out to touch it, the flower moved slightly away from his fingers. He stopped, stared in confusion, then tried to touch it again. The flower once again was pushed away, just a half-inch from his fingertips.

"Now that's a nice trick." Pascoe had lifted himself into a sitting position and was watching Sam with professional curiosity.

"This isn't part of the spell or something?" Sam had no idea what to expect. Things just seemed to take weird turns at any given time with that crowd.

"That's not any spell I've ever seen." Pascoe tried reproducing the effect with another flower, but couldn't get it to move.

The realization crept over Sam slowly, that he was pushing the petals of the flower with his telekinesis. The same telekinesis that had nearly given him an aneurysm a few days earlier. He was using his powers without being threatened or even focusing on it. Thankfully, he was too calmed by the blue liquid to be scared of the situation. Aside from not expecting to be able to use a power like telekinesis, he didn't feel incapable of controlling it. He wondered if the change was from the additional demon blood in his system or the blue liquid 'opening his mind.' At some point when he was sober he'd have to try to test his powers again.

He looked over at Ruby, who was dancing a few yards away. She had taken off her jacket and shoes. Sam smiled as he watched her. She had entered her completely-shamelessly-authentic phase. He had grown to treasure those moments, when she'd sing along to her music, sharing her secrets, or in her moments of concern for him. Watching her dance, he felt content for the first time in far too long.

Blue vines filled Sam's vision, wrapping around his body. His shirt was missing for some reason. The vines bloomed their divine-smelling flowers and he felt incredible. He could hear a woman's voice whispering, but he couldn't understand the words. Suddenly, the vines grew thorns, which pierced his flesh. He tried to pull them off, but when he went to touch them they dissolved into his skin, forming a massive tattoo that covered most of his torso.

The air around him filled with sparks that fell like shooting stars. Blinking to recover from the flashes of light, he discovered that he was in a grassy field that he didn't recognize. A figure ran through the grass in the dying light, but he couldn't make it out. There was more whispering behind him. He turned to see the bonfire from the coven's celebration, but no one was in sight. He walked around the crackling fire, coming full circle to find Ruby standing before him.

Her jacket was off like when he'd been watching her dance, but now he noticed a tear on her shirt's
left sleeve. His attention shifted helplessly. Her shirt was clinging to every curve and bend of her body. She licked her lips, making them shine in the fire light. He watched her fingers trail down her stomach to the button of her jeans. He felt a warmth growing inside of him.

The whispering began again; it was Ruby's voice. He was confused because she was standing in front of him, yet the voice spoke softly only a few inches from his right ear.

"You want to go?" It was pure seduction and he felt his heart skip a beat.

Sam woke up in a folksy-looking attic bedroom. He could hear the sounds of the coven from outside a nearby window. It was probably late morning and he was surprised he didn't have a hangover considering the night he’d had. Shaking his brain awake he realized that he had an erection, remembered his dream, then covered his face with both palms.

"Oh, God," he groaned. “Fuck, no."
Someone had thankfully left Sam's duffel bag at the foot of the small bed he'd woken up in. Pulling back the blanket, he found that he was still wearing his clothes from yesterday. The thought that he hadn't stripped or been stripped naked was very comforting. If he had woken up half or entirely naked after last night he probably would have just stayed in bed out of embarrassment indefinitely. Instead he grabbed a set of clean clothes from the duffel and got up. He had to readjust his jeans and tried to casually hold the bundle of new clothes over his crotch.

He snuck downstairs, then into the first bathroom he could find. He took a cold shower to help quell his morning wood, which had only been made worse by his dream. The cold water made him shiver, but he thought he noticed an extra shudder go through his body at the memory of dream-Ruby whispering to him.

That was bad. From the moment she'd turned up in the soulless brunette he'd been aware of her body's attractiveness, but he hadn't thought twice about doing anything about it. Recently though she'd become a primary source of emotional comfort and fun in his life, which made a little part of him want to find physical comfort and fun in her. He felt like an awkward teen. He'd basically gotten drunk at a frat party and noticed that his long-time friend was fuckable. Turning off the shower he decided not to make things weird. The last thing he needed was to have Ruby get upset and leave over some failed pass at her. Anyway, the whole thing was too confusing to act on anytime soon, if at all.

After toweling off and dressing, Sam wandered out to find everyone. He went into the central building, where he found Gabin and Ruby standing by a table looking over a series of drawings. She glanced over at him and smiled, making his stomach knot a little bit.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Ruby greeted him. "You were pretty awesomely high last night. I mean, I'm impressed. Pascoe said you handled it like a champ."

"Thanks." He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Did I do anything I should be embarrassed about? I have a few gaps in the night."

"Not that I know of."

Sam sighed with profound relief, then approached the table to examine the drawings. They were of an ornate ward in the shape of a simplified and inverted fleur de lis. It was filled with tiny symbols and pictographs that were reminiscent of the tattoo Ruby had given him over his breastbone.

"This is what we're thinking of for your personal ward of protection and veiling," Gabin said as he pointed to different elements. "This will prevent all known forms of magical scrying, including through the use of magical devices. We also incorporated an evasion charm that will increase your luck in evading pursuers. There's no way to create a passive spell to stop them from physically seeing you, but any traces you accidentally leave in your wake will be more likely to be destroyed.
by chance. It's a bit hard to picture, but luck-based spells can be deceptively effective."

"Yeah, I had a run-in with a hoodoo rabbit's foot two years back," Sam commented, causing Ruby to raise an eyebrow. Clearly she needed to hear that story at some point.

"Ah, good," Gabin continued. "I'm including an extra part here to make it more effective against demons and humans. It would be too difficult to place extra protections against all sentient species so we opted to stick with the two most likely to go after you. Each tattoo will take four eight-hour sessions—"

"Each?" Sam asked, suddenly realizing that he was looking at at least a day and a half of being jabbed with needles.

"I'm getting one too."

"Each ward needs to be completed within sixty hours of starting to be the most effective," Gabin explained. "Since that's a lot of pain and physical stress in a short period of time, we think it'd be best to put you in a trance for the duration. It will also prevent you from having to get up for food or to use the bathroom. I can do yours first and then Rubahnali's. By the time hers is done, yours should be completely healed." The witch readied himself for follow-up questions, but Sam had come too far to get squeamish then.

"When do we start?"

After a quick lunch, the three of them went into the laboratory-like room in the community building. White tiles gave it a cold clinical feeling, but Sam noticed that unlike hospitals, the tiling extend up to the ceiling, which undoubtedly made the room easier to clean when experiments went wrong. The far wall was covered in cabinets, of which the lower set contained small apothecary drawers. There was a medical style exam table, that Gabin started adjusting to include a ring of cushioned head-support that one might see on a massage table.

"So where exactly is this tattoo going?" Sam asked while eyeing the exam table.

"Your back," Gabin answered while walking over to the cabinets to collect some powders and dried plant material. "It's too big to go anywhere else and the wards on your chest rule the front out."

When they had entered the room, Ruby had immediately started digging through the apothecary drawers. She noticed Sam watching her and held up a small porcelain bowl.

"I'm making some borderline-coma tea. You prefer mint or lavender?" After he stared at her for a second not fully understanding the context of the question she added, "Otherwise, it tastes like wet dog."

He'd never been offered flavor options for a potion before. "Mint, I guess."

Ruby started grinding and mixing components. She uncorked a bottle, sniffed it, looked thoughtful for a moment, then poured some into the brew. It unnerved him to see that for something that was going to put him into a near-coma, she wasn't measuring anything. Not to mention the fact that the night before she had been taking probably-lethal quantities of drugs and alcohol.

"Don't you need to know my weight in order to make the right dosage?" he asked, but she didn't seem remotely concerned.
“It doesn’t work like that. I’ll take about the same amount.”

Sam noticed that the wooden box of the perme kit that the old witch from Lafayette had given them was sitting on the counter. He opened it up and looked at its contents. One of the four vials was empty and the bone-needle had some dried blood on it. It made sense that Ruby would have used these tools on him while pressed for time in a warehouse basement, but it still struck him as a little unsanitary. Granted, those tools were supposed to be excellent quality. Not to mention he was pretty certain that his healing ward reduced the chance that he’d get an infection. He absentmindedly scratched at the scar by his liver.

“I’m going to be using different ink,” Gabin told Sam while hanging the sketches on the wall next to the exam table. “Those are excellent quality, but there isn’t enough for a whole tattoo and consistency is more important right now.”

Ruby tapped Sam on the shoulder and handed him the small bowl containing an opaque, reddish-brown liquid. He swirled the dish gently, noticing that the liquid had a muddy texture. Though he had to admit that it did smell faintly of mint.

“One once you drink that you’ll have about three minutes before you start get insanely tired,” she explained. “After that it’ll take less than a minute before you lose consciousness entirely. You shouldn’t be aware of anything until you wake up in a few days. We’re always gonna have someone here, even when Gabin is resting between sessions. Also, we’ll be watching your vitals. You ready?”

She was trying to reassure him. He appreciated that she had given him as much information as she had. If she had been in a bad mood or distracted, she might have just given him the brew and fed him information as it became relevant. Sam recognized that in her own way she seemed to acknowledge that that sort of thing might be intimidating.

“Are you ready for me to pass out?” he asked, eyeing the brew.

Gabin gave the thumbs up and Sam downed the sludgy liquid in a few gulps. It tasted a little metallic and minerally, but there was a vaguely-refreshing mint aftertaste. His stomach rebelled against the brew for a moment and he braced himself against the exam table. Luckily, after a minute or so the nausea passed.

“You’re going to need to take off your shirt, then lie face down on the table,” Gabin instructed while preparing a tray of needles and black ink.

Sam took off his t-shirt and started to climb onto the table. He could already start to feel a heaviness in his limbs. Rolling down onto the table came far too easily to him. His muscles relaxed, pressing him into the table. With a quick adjustment, his face rested in the donut-shaped cushion, which allowed him a view of part of the white tile floor. He could feel Gabin reposition his arms further away from his body to allow better access to the sides of his torso.

“Are you in a comfortable position? This is going to be your last chance to change,” Gabin warned.

Sam could only murmur in response. He’d meant to say he was fine, but the drowsiness was becoming overpowering. He saw Ruby duck down between his face and the floor to check his facial expression for insight. Sam smiled and gave her a look of contentment. She smiled back at him, her face half a foot from his.

“We’re awesome,” she said as Sam fell asleep.
Sam woke up from a heavy, dreamless sleep in the same twin bed that he’d found himself in the night before—actually several nights before. He was lying on his stomach, wrapped in a large quilt that smelled like mothballs. When he sat up he realized why he had been left on his stomach. His entire back felt bruised, probably because it was. Stretching felt both amazing and terrible as his sore joints popped with relief, but his muscles screamed. Not unsurprisingly, it only took a few seconds of consciousness for his stomach to remember that he hadn’t eaten in days.

He staggered downstairs to the house’s kitchen, where he ran into Belda and Tom eating bowls of oatmeal at a small dining table. The last time he’d woken up in that house no one had been home, but seeing that Tom was still in his pajamas, Sam thought it was a safe bet that he had been sleeping in Gabin’s attic.

Tom immediately tried to engage him in conversation, but Sam was still a bit too groggy to follow its twists and turns. Belda had apparently foreseen that possibility because she started pouring him a mug of coffee even though she wasn’t having any herself. Taking the mug and a bowl of oatmeal, Sam sat down at the table to join them for breakfast while trying not to lean against his chair’s back.

“What’ve I missed?” His voice cracked slightly from lack of use.

“Gabin said the tattooing went well. He’s about halfway done with Rubahnali’s so it will probably be another day or two before she’s awake.” Belda looked over at Tom. “I’ve been watching Tom while Gabin focuses on his work. He’s taking breaks to rest every eight hours, but he hasn’t had free time— He doesn’t mind. It’s part of the craft,” she added hastily, trying to lessen Sam’s guilt over putting Gabin out.

“I learned about volcanoes!” Tom had evidently decided that Sam’s request for an update called for more exciting news. “They’re mountains that blow up and shoot fire and rocks, but the rocks are really hot and soft. I drew a picture, but it’s not here. It’s in the classroom.”

“Well, Tom, I’m still waking up,” Sam said between sips of coffee. “I was asleep for awhile—”

“Three days,” Tom corrected.

“Yeah.” He tried not to grimace at the thought of how much caffeine he would need to feel human again. “And I need to regain my bearings a bit. If you give me a few minutes to pull myself together and finish my breakfast, then I’d love to see your drawing. I can even tell you about some islands that were made by volcanoes.”

Sam was confident that he’d successfully bargained for fifteen minutes of serenity in which to enjoy his meal, when Tom’s eyes shimmered with awe. The boy bounced out of his chair and yelled something about getting dressed while turning the corner down a hallway. Belda nodded in approval.

“I think you have a fan. And no wonder, with all these big stories of volcanoes in water.” She waved her arms around to emphasize the sarcasm.

Sam smiled into his coffee mug, then asked, “The idea of Hawaii is going to blow his mind, isn’t it?”

True to the deal, Tom returned a few minutes later and quietly waited for him to finish breakfast before dragging him out of the house by his hand. Sam found himself running the gauntlet of entertaining the child for the better part of a day. It was more fun than he’d expected, but a bit tiring, especially after the tattooing ordeal his body had just gone through. But he tried not to
complain. Tom was surprisingly sensitive to Sam’s nuanced behavior, picking up on even the briefest moments of hesitation when Tom would try showing off a spell.

In the middle of the afternoon, Sam found himself being dragged by Tom into a storage room inside the barn. The walls were lined with shelves full of educational supplies and a small, tattered area rug covered part of the floor. Sam was a little confused why Tom had taken him to the relatively drab closet until Tom stared at him seriously, arms folded across his chest.

“This is a super secret so you can’t show anybody.”

Tom didn’t even wait to see if Sam was prepared to pinky-swear or cross his heart and hope to die. The boy just turned around and lifted the rug off of a cellar door. The secret fort’s location had been revealed. He pulled open the door and descended a wooden ladder into darkness. Sam didn’t like the idea of going into a cellar with the kid—it felt too much like something from To Catch A Predator—but he also wasn’t a fan of the idea of a kid wandering around alone in a nearly-pitch-black cellar.

Sam climbed down the ladder, carefully making sure to not accidentally kick or step on Tom on his way down. His back felt like it had been torn to shreds by the time he reached the bottom and he decided he was not looking forward to the climb back up. The cellar was big enough for Sam to stand at his full height, which was a pleasant surprise. He heard a shuffling sound maybe ten feet away. Tom turned on a battery powered camping lantern, illuminating the whole room.

The cellar was actually quite large, maybe spanning fifteen feet in both length and width. The dirt floor was mostly covered in a foam puzzle-piece play mat. Drawings made by children covered the walls. The whole place would’ve looked slightly serial-killer-menacing except that Sam reminded himself that it was obviously decorated by kids in a commune who were unfamiliar with that cliche. Tom grabbed one of the drawings from the wall and sat down on the play mat. He looked at the drawing of what appeared to be the stick figure equivalent of two adults and a child.

"Dad said that you fought hunters." It was a question.

Sam ran his fingers through his hair at the prospect of the looming conversation. He sat down on the play mat across from Tom. "Yeah. Two of them attacked us a little while ago."

"Were they scary?" One of the corners of the drawing was already dogeared, bordering on falling off completely. Tom anxiously flicked the corner back and forth.

"The fight was scary, the hunters themselves…. I've fought a lot of really scary things, but the hunters were just people."

"Did they hurt you?"

"I've been hurt by all sorts of things," Sam evaded.

He thought about saying he was a hunter. Part of him wanted to mitigate any negative feels the boy had about hunters, but he hesitated. Would Tom feel betrayed or frightened? Maybe there was value in a witch growing up cautiously fearful of hunters? He didn’t even know what Tom might be getting at.

"They hurt my mom." The boy had lost his frantic energy. He looked older. "Why do they hurt people?"

Sam admired that his curiosity seemed to somewhat tame whatever fear or anger Tom was feeling. There was a chance to really talk about the issue, though he wasn’t entirely sure what to say. Hell,
it wasn’t even really his place to color Tom’s opinions, but the boy had asked him a question.

"They think that they're making things safer. You know that most humans aren't witches, right?" Sam asked, earning a silent nod from Tom. "Humans tend to be scared of witches and other supernatural things. And when they're scared, they want to protect themselves, but sometimes they're proactive; they do too much. In general, hunters are trying to protect humans from things that they think are scary."

"I'm not scary," Tom objected softly.

"But they don't know how cool you are. They see a lot of really scary things. If they meet a scary witch, it's easy for them to assume that all witches are scary too. The world is a place full of things people don't understand, and people are often scared of the things they don't understand."

Tom put down the drawing and switched to picking compulsively at the velcro straps on his shoes. Sam wondered if Tom had taken in what he had just said.

"I don't want to be scared. That's why I come down here. It's safe."

"Is it protected by magic?" Sam asked.

Tom shook his head. "Because it's secret. If not, it'd just be fort."

Sam wondered if growing up in a hidden community had given Tom some early understanding of the power of knowledge and ignorance. Being brought in to Tom's little club of people who knew about the cellar suddenly took on a new, profound meaning. This was the boy's way of opening up to him and sharing something of value.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Sam asked, piquing Tom's curiosity. The boy nodded without breaking eye contact. "My dad was a hunter. He became one after my mom was killed."

Tom had wrapped his arms around his knees. He looked incredibly thoughtful and serious compared to the child that had been running in circles with a toy raven an hour earlier.

"What killed her?"

"A demon," Sam answered, making Tom's brow furrow, but the boy didn't say anything. "Ruby—Rubahnali is a nice demon, but there are a lot of mean, scary demons."

Tom looked like he was trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together using his mind alone. After almost a minute, he said, "The hunter killed my mom because he was scared of her. Was the demon scared of your mom?"

"I don't think so." Sam thought back to the vision of his mom's death that Azazel had shown him. She had definitely recognized Azazel before he had killed her. Looking back, she seemed more angry and worried for Sam rather than generally fearful. "I don't know. The reason why it all happened…. The truth is I don't entirely understand it."

"Does it scare you?" Sam looked at Tom, surprised and confused by the question. Seeing Sam's expression, Tom tried to be clearer. "You said you don't understand it, and people get scared of things they don't understand. Does it scare you?"

"Yeah. I think it does."
They found Belda reading a 1960’s pulp mystery novel on the patio of Gabin's house. Sam tagged her in for entertaining Tom, then went for a walk to clear his mind. He skirted the border between the clearing of the camp and the surrounding forest. Several men and women greeted him, but went about their tasks in the last hour or so of daylight. About halfway around the circuit, Sam noticed Pascoe walking to the tree line twenty yards ahead. He shouted a greeting to Pascoe, who stopped, allowing Sam to catch up with him. Pascoe casually kicked his heavy boots against a fence post and adjusted a leather satchel while waiting for Sam.

"I'm glad to see you're up and around. I snuck a peek at your tattoo. When they're that big it can be rough." Pascoe pulled up his shirt in solidarity, revealing a large ward tattoo that wrapped around the entire left side of his torso. Sam’s eyebrows rose and he nodded, impressed by both the craftsmanship and physical pain endured. Pascoe put his shirt back down and had to realign the satchel once more.

"I'm still a little sore," Sam admitted. "But it's getting better. Looks like you can relate."

"Yeah, I got this one a few years back. It’s great for helping me look out for danger in the camp, but I get a lot of looks when I go to the beach.” The idea of Pascoe in swim trunks amused Sam for some reason. “What're you up to?"

"Just taking a walk to kill some time before dinner," Sam replied, then pointed to the satchel. "How about you? Are you working or something?"

"Yeah. I’m going out to walk the barrier, make sure everything is in good shape. I do it twice a day. It’s incredibly boring, but when you’re in charge of security you want boring."

"Want some company?" Sam offered, having nothing better to do.

Pascoe patted Sam’s shoulder and started walking into the woods. “Try to keep up.”

The barrier was a circle, two miles in diameter, that was marked by an iron chain fence except for at the road they’d entered through. Pascoe invited Sam to touch the unseen and incorporeal wall, which Sam did very carefully. While passing through it when they’d arrived at the camp, he had been so distracted by the spell that was cloaking the dirt road that he hadn’t noticed the cool, clammy sensation the barrier produced.

“I don’t see any runes or markings around here. How is this maintained?” Sam asked as he stopped playing with the barrier.

“The real source is buried in the center of the camp. I’d have to look at a map to tell you exactly where. I haven’t actually seen it myself,” Pascoe confessed.

“I thought Gabin said you run the barrier?”

“I maintain it, reinforce it out here by channeling spells and the like, but I didn’t make the barrier. It’s been up and active since the 1930s. I have the user manual in the archives, but digging it up to mess with it would knock out the barrier temporarily and, according to records, the last time that happened it took months to bring it back up properly.” The witch shuddered at the thought of so much effort and vulnerability.

“I guess if it isn’t broken don’t fix it?” Sam shrugged.

“It works, but it definitely has a couple annoying characteristics. It attracts lightning strikes so in a storm I have to keep watch for fires. Another annoying thing is that one of the creators had the idea to have it defend against parasitic monsters like vampires and ghouls, but the spell was so
vaguely worded that if a woman gets pregnant in here she can’t get out.” Pascoe shook his head. “I get no end of headaches having to deal with this thing’s quirks. I swear, I find one more bizarre personality trait, I’m divorcing it and moving to Santa Cruz.”
The next day was a school day in the camp so Sam found himself without Belda and Tom's company for the entire morning and afternoon. Gabin was finishing the last session with Ruby, but she probably wouldn't be awake until late into the night. He decided to use the quiet day to himself to explore the coven's library. Seline greeted him from her reading chair when he entered, but didn't bother making any small talk before returning to her book.

Over several hours, Sam worked his way through a dozen large tomes. The library contained many collections of spells from various schools of magic. Most of the magical schools in the catalog were hoodoo and other southern United States or Central American in origin, but there were also volumes covering various Native American, Eastern European, African, and Central Asian schools. In his research of different schools he realized that the design of the ward on his back had incorporated a wide variety of sources. The level of expertise Gabin had shown with the design was truly masterful.

Aside from the spell books, Sam found a large collection of histories written by magic users. Some of the annals predated this coven, a few going back to the twelfth century. He found those accounts fascinating. On occasion he would find references to major historical events or encounters with hunters or monsters. He was in the middle of an account of three witches attempting to kill a particularly-skilled hunter in Paris only weeks before the French Revolution when Gabin entered the library to tell him Ruby's tattoo was done.

Ruby was sedated, laying on her stomach in a small bed at Gabin's home. A bandage had been placed over her back, before an oversized shirt was slipped over her for modesty. She was wrapped in a purple and maroon quilt, which helped her dark brown hair contrast against her pale skin. Sam had meant to only check on her for a moment before leaving to find some dinner, but he ended up sitting down in a nearby chair.

It was strange watching her sleep, even if it was artificially induced by a spell. She looked more human and vulnerable. He wanted to see how bad the bruising on her back was and maybe put some ice on it, but he didn't want to risk adjusting her shirt, even if he wasn't about to take any inappropriate peeks. He felt a little flush at the thought of touching her. Instead he stared with interest, watching her back rise and fall as she breathed. She probably didn't even need to breathe as a demon, but maybe the act was purely reflex. He watched her for a long while before falling asleep in the lumpy armchair.

It was the middle of the night when Ruby regained consciousness. She was sore, though she’d experienced much worse and considered herself lucky that she could afford the time to let herself rest a bit. The room was dark, but once her eyes became unclouded by the anesthesia she saw Sam. He was sleeping in what looked like a terribly uncomfortable chair. His long legs were stretched awkwardly in front of him, almost resting against the side of her bed, which was probably four feet away. His head was tilted back and to one side. It rolled slightly, unconsciously trying to find a
She thought about waking him up, but hesitated. He was bound to be sore from sleeping in that haphazard position and the sooner he moved the better. But she was taking a moment to appreciate his presence. He’d been keeping an eye on her, even though there was no real danger in the camp.

She knew that he cared about her. He was one of the most thoughtful humans she’d met and she generally liked that quality about him. Doing the right thing was so important to him. His conviction was one of his greatest strengths, but he didn’t seem to appreciate it. He’d been so caught up in concern over his demon blood and thinking that he was cursed that he didn’t realize how good he actually was. Maybe he was overcompensating, but at that point goodness was so ingrained in him that maybe it didn’t matter if it was an innate quality or a habit formed from years of concerted effort.

After the hunters tried to kill him, Ruby worried how his—innocence wasn’t the right word, but maybe purity would do—Ruby worried how his purity might be affected. The black-and-white, good-and-evil world he’d been raised into was beginning to crumble quickly. He’d suddenly found himself thrown into the monster category and it wasn’t just by a lone, insane hunter. These hunters had been working on pretty convincing evidence to an objective eye. And now, taking refuge with a coven, was Sam starting to question where the lines were drawn? He had been less upset over her giving him more demon blood than she had expected. She wondered if he’d given up on clear-cut answers long ago.

Sam suddenly jerked awake and looked around the room, regaining his bearings. He saw her lying in the bed, staring directly at him. He quickly rubbed his hand across his face, checking to make sure he hadn’t drooled all over himself.

“You okay, Sammy?”

“Yeah, I um…. You’re awake.”

She noted that he didn’t object to her using his nickname. In the past he’d only reserved that privilege for Dean, but he had started opening up to her more and more in the last few weeks.

“Only for a few minutes. It’s actually kind of funny, usually it’s me in the chair and you beat up on the bed.” She huffed out a laugh, but smothered it partially-formed when it made her sore back throb.

“Well, turnabout is fair play.” He smiled. “Anyway, I’m sure I’ll be getting beaten up soon. We need to get back on the road as soon as you’re able.”

“What’s up?” She began to lift herself up on her elbows, but thought better of it.

“I just had a vision. Lilith is going to be in St. Louis and she’s pissed.”

By midday Ruby was physically able to get back on the road, even if she was still pretty bruised. They packed up the Impala and said their goodbyes.

Tom was visibly disappointed to see them go, but he had apparently foreseen the possibility because he had made them a little stick man as a keepsake. It was made from a few twigs, glue, and orange yarn. The stick-man’s ill proportions made it incredibly endearing and Sam put it in an old cigar box that held his most treasured items. Sam had formed a nice little friendship with the boy, probably one of the most sincere friendships he’d had since Stanford. He promised Tom that he’d send letters or postcards, care of Gabin.
Ruby gave Gabin one of her private cell numbers so that he could reach her in an emergency or with updates. It’d been a long time since she’d been in regular contact with the coven and thought there might be value in reestablishing that connection. Sam seemed to have bonded with several of the coven members and she wanted him to have that kind of human connection in his life if possible.

Falling out of contact with Bobby had hurt Sam more than he liked to admit. The older hunter was basically the only person Sam had had in his life right after Dean’s death. Now Sam was in a much better headspace, but he couldn’t bring himself to reach out to Bobby. Ruby suspected that Sam was scared to potentially face Bobby’s official rejection, instead of continuing to exist in the safety of relationship-limbo. But the coven had given him new relationships that could hopefully help fill the gap left by the loss of his family and community.

Gabin gave them a large collection of spell components, tools, and a few of the annals that Sam hadn’t gotten around to reading. Sam initially rejected the offer of the books, reluctant to take them from the safety of the camp. But a tentative plan was made for the two of them to return a few months later for an important sabbath, and Sam could return the annals then.

Pascoe had offered Sam the little dropper-bottle of blue liquid, but he successfully declined the gift. While it had ended up being a rather relaxing and interesting high, the liquid had temporarily destroyed his fight-or-flight instinct. It would be incredibly dangerous to voluntarily put himself in that state while on the road, where he might be attacked by Lilith’s forces or hunters at any given time. Sam assured Pascoe that he’d take a raincheck until the next time he visited the coven, where they could safely indulge together.

They hit the road by two o’clock and Sam felt a twinge of regret as he pulled the Impala back onto the highway. He was more frustrated with Lilith than usual. He had wanted to spend some more time there, digging through their library, and getting to know Gabin better. It was a shame that for so much of their visit Gabin had to have been working. If he had had more time there he could’ve learned more about the coven’s structure and activities. He may have even had a chance to improve his spellcasting skills or practice his powers in a better-equipped environment than a motel room or abandoned warehouse.

But Lilith was hard at work preparing something nasty and he still felt a burning desire for revenge. It was important to kill her, both to stop whatever she was trying to accomplish and to allow him a chance to close that chapter of his life. He didn’t know what he was going to do after defeating her, assuming that he’d even survive, but he suddenly found himself wondering about the future for the first time in what felt like forever. The idea that there might be something out there for him to look forward to was unsettling and painfully hopeful. It reminded him of holding the letter from Stanford and seeing that the first word below Mr. Winchester was ‘Congratulations.’

Ruby and Sam reached St. Louis in roughly a day and a half. They quickly found a motel room, then started researching Lilith’s location. Ruby prepared another demon-tracking spell while Sam worked on locating her based off of the clues from his vision.

In the vision Lilith had been standing in an expensive-looking hotel room, pacing angrily while yelling at subordinates through a blood-filled bowl, the standard demonic telephone. She was threatening minions over their inability to locate Sam for over six days. It seemed that the last place Lilith’s demons had managed to tracked them to was the Oregon-Idaho border, where they had been just a few hours before initially meeting with Gabin. She was nearly frantic in her drive to locate Sam. She wanted to find him, but more than that, Sam also got the impression that she was fearful of what the stretch of inactivity might mean. It had always frightened Sam when demon
activity dropped off to nothing; she must have found his absence equally unnerving.

Lilith had told the blood-filled bowl that she’d only be in St. Louis until a ritual was completed, probably three more days. After that, if she didn’t have intel on Sam’s location she would start executing some of her underlings and finding more effective subordinates. She finished the call by throwing the bowl against the wall. Some of the blood splattered against a beautiful, arched window that overlooked a building with white, roman-style columns and a copper dome that had been aged blueish-green.

It only took a few minutes of research for Sam to determine that the building outside Lilith’s hotel room window was the Old Courthouse in downtown. Based on the angle that he was able to see in the vision, he determined that Lilith was staying on one of the upper floors of the Hyatt Regency on the southwest side of the building. One quick trip down to the city archives gave Sam blueprints of the hotel, which he handed off to Ruby to perform more of the demon-locator spells.

By the end of their first day in St. Louis, they had four different locator spells running on four different maps that had been spread across all the empty floor space in their motel room. The primary demon activity for the city was definitely located in the hotel, and the bulk of the demons we’re located in the southwest corner of the sixth floor. It appeared that Lilith was holed up in a suite while twelve demon guards occupied the halls and adjacent rooms. One pair of guards would patrol the hallways every five minutes, give or take, and another pair made a larger circuit that averaged ten minutes. There were also two demon standing guard outside the suite door at all times. Inside the suite, Lilith maintained two guards that rotated every few hours.

Sam and Ruby decided that their focus while in St. Louis had to be going after Lilith and that whatever ritual she had mentioned in the vision had to be a secondary priority. They still didn’t know why she was orchestrating so many rituals, but they felt like the loss of the mission’s leader would be more devastating than a single meddled-with ritual. Aside from weighing the respective harm, there was also the problem of not knowing what the St. Louis ritual even entailed. Lilith hadn’t left the suite in the six hours they had been watching her and it was unclear if they’d be able to decipher any details of the ritual at all.

“Are we really ready to do this?” Ruby asked as she sat on the corner of one of the queen beds, looking over the locator maps while casually playing with her knife.

“This is the first time since New Harmony that we’ve known where Lilith will be. We can’t pass up this opportunity.” Sam was leaning against the wall, one arm crossing his chest, and the other rubbing his chin. He shifted his weight every few seconds betraying just how nervous he was.

“I’m just saying that this is going to be asking a lot and we’re not even sure you can take her down —” Sam looked up at Ruby half-insulted, half-sympathetic to her concern, but he didn’t interrupt “—yet. I’m just saying maybe we wait until we’re stronger, better prepared.”

“If she steps up her hunt or security…. We might not get a better chance than this. We might not get another chance at all.” Sam pushed himself off the wall and walked to the blueprint of the floorplan, then squatted down next to it. The tiny dots of light slowly patrolled the hallways. “I think this is doable.”

“Sure,” Ruby acknowledged the possibility. “If we’re careful we can probably take out the guards, but Lilith…. She’s an archdemon. If push comes to shove, I’m not even sure the knife’ll work.”

“So how do we know when we’re ready?” He wasn’t trying to be confrontational; it was a serious question and he knew that neither of them had the answer. He sighed, turned to look up at her, and
their eyes met. “We can’t keep this up forever. We’re going to have to jump at some point.”

“Yeah. Let’s do it.” She put the knife down on the bed next to her and sat up more to gain some appearance of professionalism. “We need a game plan.”

“We’ll take out the patrol with the longer route. Hit them when they round the first corner out of view of the guards at the door.” Sam pointed at the map while he suggested the plan. “That’ll give us a two-minute window to take out the second pair of guards. From there we’ll have about a minute or two before the guards at the door notice neither patrol hasn’t completed their route. Once we take out the two manning the door, we should clear the adjacent rooms one at a time. Then bust into the suite, guns blazing.”

“So to speak.” She nodded thoughtfully as she studied the map while considering his proposed plan of attack. “These halls aren’t very long and corridors carry sound like nobody’s business. We’re gonna have to be real quiet when taking down the patrols. And we’re gonna be in deep shit if a human walks in on us killing—”

“Or exorcising,” Sam corrected her out of habit. At that point, he wasn’t upset that she seemed slightly more indifferent to killing than he was, but he still tried to keep her in check when he could.

“Or exorcising in the halls. The last thing we need is a good samaritan,” she pointed out the potential complication. “We should do this in the middle of the night. There’ll be fewer hotel guests running around if they’re asleep.”

“That will mean all these rooms will contain civilians that could be in danger,” Sam gestured to a dozen rooms surrounding the demon occupied corner. “If we attack during the day most, if not all of them, will be empty.”

“But we’ll be risking any of them or a maid showing up, and do you really think that person’s life will be any safer panicking in the hall with us? If they’re asleep in their rooms, then there’s a chance Lilith and the flunkies will overlook them completely. Hopefully, they’ll be too busy choking on their own smoke to think about human shields.”

Sam leaned back against the side of the bed, a foot from Ruby’s right leg. He ran his fingers through his hair, then rested his face in his palms. Part of him wanted to find some way to clear the building, but he knew that that would spook Lilith. Every idea for getting the floor free of civilians was bound to alert the demons or was completely infeasible. He knew there was no good answer and that the Ruby was probably right about that point. With a little luck the demons wouldn’t have enough time to think of the humans at all.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Sam had conceded the point.

“When was the last time you had a good feeling?”

They arrived at the hotel at around three in the morning in order to allow any civilians enough time to stagger back to their rooms after last call. The quiet lobby only contained two receptionists manning the front desk and a janitor mopping the marble floor. Ruby and Sam waited for a minute at the elevator banks to watch the displays above each elevator indicating its movement. When they were confident that none of the elevators were in use, they pushed the button to call for one.

Sam looked at the floor as soon as they entered the elevator. He wanted his face to be recorded as little as possible, especially now that he was about to attack and possibly kill six people in hallways.
that were undoubtedly being recorded. They had a miniature EMP-like spell that would shut down
down the elevators near them, hopefully buying them enough time to get to Lilith before security showed
up, but that wouldn’t solve the problem of the dozens of cameras throughout the hotel. In a perfect
world they would be able to disable each camera with the spell, but they couldn’t possibly
knockout every camera without alerting security that something was wrong. Worse than that, in all
probability a broader spell would likely accidentally kill a hallway light and put the Lilith’s guards
on alert.

Ruby drew her knife and double-checked a cloth bag that hung around her neck. It was a new tool
she had picked up from Gabin. The bag contained a radius-effect binding spell for demons that
activated when worn. It would prevent demons within a twenty-foot radius from smoking out of
their meatsuit or teleporting away. The hope was that it would stop Lilith or her minions from
fleeing or retrieving backup. The downside was that Ruby was also subject to the binding. She
hadn’t planned on abandoning Sam at all, but when she’d tried smoking out as an experiment the
restriction made her feel particularly vulnerable.

When they exited the elevator, Ruby lit a small leather pouch on fire and dropped it on the floor.
All six elevator doors on the fifth through seventh floors became nonfunctional, along with three
lights, one courtesy telephone, a smoke detector, and three security cameras. They proceeded
silently down one hall, then another, waiting just around the corner from where their first fight
would take place. Ruby stood closest to the corner, dagger ready to strike if the patrol came upon
them unexpectedly.

Sam closed his eyes and tried to use his powers to sense the patrolling demons. It wasn’t
something he’d really been practicing at, but sometimes he could feel Ruby’s presence from the
other side of a wall and hoped that it was something he could recreate. After a few seconds, he
became vaguely aware of an approaching presence, but it was very difficult to identify or place. He
used his hand to indicate to Ruby that something might be coming. She nodded in understanding.

The two-demon patrol turned the corner and stopped in their tracks. One of the demons lunged at
Ruby initiating a very brief melee, which ended with Ruby’s knife slitting the demon’s throat. The
other, smarter demon attempted to run backward and yell for help. Unfortunately for her, Sam used
his powers to grab her body before it became visible to the demons guarding the suite. A particular
stroke of brilliance on Sam’s part was the realization that if he could manipulate a demon’s body,
he could probably also paralyze their vocal chords. He held the demon paralyzed and mute while
wordlessly performing the exorcism. They quickly dragged the dead and unconscious bodies to
just under a nearby security camera, hopefully taking advantage of a blind spot.

They continued down the hallway to intercept the other patrol. The pair of demons would be
walking in the same direct as Ruby and Sam. This meant that they had to sneak up on the patrol,
because every second that they were stationary, the closer their targets moved to support. Sam
wasn’t sure that he could hold and silence both demons at once so they attempted to close the
distance as much as possible, allowing Ruby to join in any skirmish that might form. They
managed to get fifteen feet from the patrol when the demons turned to look at a squeak the floor
made under Sam’s weight.

Ruby ran as quietly as possible and leapt forward. She stabbed one of the demons in the eye just as
he let out a small cry, which was cut off by her knife. Her momentum kept carrying her forward
after stabbing the demon, who was beginning to collapse. She grabbed his torso close to her body
and brought his corpse into a rolling tumble that muffled some of the impact.

It took Sam only a second or two longer to exorcise his own demon the same way as before. Once
he had lowered the unconscious body to the ground, he rushed over to help pull the dead body off
of Ruby. They both staggered to their feet and listened for the two guards stationed at the door.

Some quiet talking was audible from around the hallway corner in the direction of the suite. Ruby looked up at Sam, then dragged her index finger across her throat. He rolled his eyes at the pessimism, grabbed her arm, and pulled her silently along in the direction of the talking.

A single guard reached the corner and saw them. She was still within view of the suite door and Ruby bit her lip in frustration at the turn. But before the guard could yell or react, Sam had grabbed her with his powers. He awkwardly manipulated her legs into a clumsy act that barely resembled walking, but it seemed sufficient to prevent the other guard from screaming for help right away. Sam decided that he needed to work on detailed movements with his demon manipulation powers—assuming he survived the next few minutes. After exorcising her, he rounded the corner, paralyzing and exorcising the second door guard within a few seconds.

They were accidentally ahead of schedule and took a second to catch their breath before attempting to clear the adjacent rooms. The plan was relatively simple: hold up an exorcised guard’s body to the room’s peephole, knock on the door, then when it opened rush in and try to down everyone as quietly as possible.

The first room went pretty well. There were three demons inside, one of which Ruby silenced with her knife. Sam found that he could silence the other two demons, though he struggled to restrain them. Both staggered toward him, but Ruby grabbed the one closest to her, stabbing it in the heart. With only one demon to content with, Sam easily exorcised it. Ruby looked at Sam with concern at seeing the limits of his powers, but he waved her off and crept back into the hallway.

The other adjacent room started off the same way, but Ruby and Sam only found one demon inside. There should’ve been at least three demons in that room based on the patterns they had observed on the maps. It was unnerving to not know exactly where the other two had gone, but the most likely scenario seemed to be Lilith’s suite. That would mean that the fight originally thought to be them against Lilith and two demons, might actually end up being against Lilith and four demons. Ruby and Sam had fought four demons before and they had absolutely been planning on fighting Lilith, but doing both at the same time gave them pause.

“We’re either doing this or not. We’ve got who-knows-how-long before somebody notices all the dead bodies,” Ruby told him.

She had followed Sam that far and was prepared to continue no matter what he chose, but he needed to choose quickly. His lips thinned in a way that she didn’t find reassuring, but he was decided.

"We're too close not to try."

They held the body in front of the suite door and heard the handle turn as it started to open. Dropping the guard’s body, Sam kicked the door in, knocking down the demon who was answering the door. Sam ran in first, followed closely by Ruby. She paused briefly to slit the throat of the demon who’d fallen to the ground between the door and the wall. He had managed to let out part of a scream, but it didn’t matter at this point.

The suite had a large, open layout so it was easy to assess the situation as soon as they were into the small entryway. Two minions were standing up from a large, glass dining table about ten feet ahead and to the left of them. They both grabbed steak knives from place settings on the table. Another demon with a pistol came running out of a doorway on the right wall five feet ahead of Sam.
Lilith was twenty feet ahead. She had been sitting in a black leather, chair gazing out the massive, arched window that overlooked the Old Courthouse. When Sam and Ruby entered, she smiled sourly at them and stood up. She wore a slightly fancier white dress than Sam was used to seeing in his visions, but otherwise she looked the same as always, giving her an eerie eternal quality.

Seeing that the closest demon was armed with a gun, Sam immediately grabbed him with his powers and began the exorcism process. The two demons with knives rushed at Sam, trying to take advantage of his temporarily vulnerable state. Ruby ran forward, putting herself between him and the demons.

Both demons attacked her at the same time. One slashed with his knife, which she was able to parry, in turn thrusting her blade forward into the first one’s chest. The other demon had chosen to use a harder to block stabbing motion and she connected hard. The demon had managed to stab Ruby with enough force to embed the knife deep into her ribcage. There was a lingering moment while Ruby tried to recover from the impact and the demon attempted to yank her steak knife free of Ruby’s torso.

By then Sam had finished his exorcism and was turning to help Ruby Lilith waved her hand, flinging Ruby and the female minion across the large room. Lilith began moving menacing toward Sam, ready to fight him. She raised her hand at him, but scowled when nothing happened. She paused, then began taking a few steps backward, away from him.

There was a short scream and the sound of a blade cutting through a hunk of flesh from behind the couch where Ruby and the other demon had landed. Ruby climbed up from behind the couch. The handle of the steak knife had snapped off upon her hitting the wall, but the blade was still visibly extruding from just right of her breastbone. It probably would have been a lethal injury, if she was alive. She staggered for a moment before straightening, then she began approaching Lilith, demon-killing blade in hand.

Seeing that Lilith was once more unable to use her powers against him, and that Ruby was relatively fine, Sam began moving toward Lilith. He raised his hand at her, focusing his mind. He tried to grab her, torture her, kill her—almost anything, but nothing seemed to work. Only the slightest flutter of her blonde hair was earned for all his effort. A look of worry marked his face as he glanced toward Ruby, who tightened her grip on her knife. Lilith laughed bitterly at their stalemate of powers.

"You don't have the juice to take me down. Azazel was a fool to think that you could lead us."
She snarled her words and bared her teeth like a cornered predator. “I am the first of our father’s! And you—you're just an abomination!” Lilith stood for a second, expecting something to happen, then frowned at Ruby. "A binding spell? Not the smartest move."

Lilith raised her hand, palm out at Ruby. It began to emit burning, white light. Sam jumping in front of Ruby as she started to crumple to the floor. He turned his back to Lilith as he tried to insulate Ruby from her attack. His arms and knees wrapped around Ruby's smaller body, holding her tightly to his chest. He covered her head as best he could. Her body convulsed and he felt a few spots of warm wetness form on his shirt.

"Do yourself a favor; don't bother running,” Lilith scoffed. “I'll have them make it fast."

Sam was afraid to look back at Lilith for fear of exposing Ruby to more harm. But suddenly the light stopped and there was the sound of breaking glass behind him. He turned to see the large, arched window had been shattered. Lilith was no longer in the room. He gently lowered Ruby to the ground, then ran to the window.
Lilith's body was a contorted mess on the sidewalk below. Blood was already splattered and pooling around her. A valet ran over to look at the body when a massive cloud of black smoke poured out of the broken meatsuit's mouth. The cloud immediately tunneled into the innocent valet. Lilith turned up to face Sam, blew him a kiss, and disappeared.

Sam ran back to Ruby. She was shaking with blood trickling from her ears, nose, and tear ducts. She didn't speak, but she followed Sam's movement with her eyes in a way that comforted him. He scooped her up in his arms, knowing that at any minute Lilith would be sending in more minions to finish them off. Carrying her, he hurried down the six flights of stairs and out a fire exit. He ran two blocks, turning down the alley where they had stashed the Impala just as the first police cars were approaching the front of the hotel. He placed Ruby in shotgun and drove away from the scene as fast as he could without drawing attention.

When they were a few miles away he pulled over to check on Ruby. She was slumped against the car door, but she had stopped shaking and the bleeding had slowed. He gently reached over to pull back some of the hair that had fallen into her face and was at risk of sticking to the tacky blood. When he touched her face, she looked over at him.

"Sam?" she whispered, pausing a moment to take in what had just happened. "So this is what it feels like to shoot at the devil and miss?"
A New Approach

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this chapter.

Sam drove east across the state line, stopping a half hour later just outside of Trenton, Illinois. He found a dingy, little motel, put on a dark coat to cover his blood-stained shirt, paid cash for the room farthest from the lobby and road, then parked as close as he could to the room’s door. It was around four in the morning and he was carrying a bleeding woman into his room after fleeing the scene of multiple homicides. He was half-expecting the night to go from bad to worse at any moment.

He laid Ruby down on the closest bed, then returned to the Impala for the first aid kit. She wasn’t at risk of dying, but he wanted to get the knife blade out of her chest as soon as possible. She had ominously barely spoken on the drive out of St. Louis. Her demeanor wasn’t the usual spitfire; it was closer to an ashing ember.

Sam sat down next to her on the bed. He took a multitool from the kit, then configured it into pliers. Reaching down, he instinctively began to pull her shirt up, but hesitated. On numerous occasions he’d wordlessly helped Dean get his shirt off before stitching up a wound, but Ruby wasn’t Dean. She had breasts, one of which was only an inch above the stab wound. He was trying to find the right way of asking if he could take off her shirt when he was interrupted.

Ruby pulled her shirt up to the wired-bottom of her bra. She also pulled the breast, still mostly secured in the cup, up slightly toward her head, thus providing Sam a bit more space around the wound to work. His eyes drifted helplessly up to the dark green bra. He might’ve blushed but for the dizzying draining sensation that had overcome him at the sight of such a severe injury. His own blood had no idea where to flow, though thankfully it didn’t venture toward his crotch.

Using the pliers in his right hand, he gripped the exposed quarter-inch of the blade’s broken edge. Bracing her ribcage with his left hand, he counted down from three, and yanked out the blade. Ruby choked down a cry and bit her lower lip so hard that it bled. The knife blade was about four inches long. Sam felt like he must’ve turned green at that discovery.

As soon as the blade was removed the wound started bleeding profusely. The knife had probably hit her hepatic vein or heart and had been keeping a seal on the mess while it was still in. Sam ran to the bathroom to grab a towel. When he returned, he heard a sucking sound from the wound and realized that her lung had also been pierced. She would’ve died in no time at all if not for already being dead.

Sam held the bleached-white towel over the wound and tried to decide how to proceed. He could try to stitch the wound, but it’d be a complete mess with so much blood gushing from it. It occurred to him that the only reason that the blood was being forced out of the wound was because her heart was pumping. And as a demon that was completely unnecessary.

"Ruby, I need you to listen to me.” Sam looked up from the blood soaked towel to her face. “I can't patch you up with you bleeding this much. Can you stop your heart for me?”
She was sickly-white with blood now gurgling from her mouth. Her eyes looked at him in understanding, but she didn't speak. For a moment she looked strained and then frustrated. Weakly her left hand reached up to the cloth bag around her neck that still contained the binding spell. She slipped the bag off, then tilted her head back slightly.

Black smoke spilled out of her mouth and feebly settled on the queen bed next to the body. Ruby's smoke looked pitiful compared to the usual tempest that demon-clouds resembled. Sam felt devastated for her, but focused his attention to the task of patching the wound that had suddenly become still.

"I'll get this fixed and then you can get back in her. It'll just take a minute."

He barely even noticed that he was talking to a cloud. Until then it hadn't crossed his mind whether demon-clouds could understand words and fully appreciate their environment or if it was some more primal mode fixated on locating a meatsuit. Now he was fairly confident that Ruby was still herself, even as a cloud. She had been smoke while conscientiously trying to locate an empty body per his request months ago. And in that moment she was patiently waiting next to the body as he mended it. At one point Sam could've sworn that she drifted closer to get a better view, though that posed the distracting question of how smoke-clouds could see.

After a few minutes, Sam tied off the final stitches, and gave her the go ahead to enter the meatsuit. Ruby's body gasped back to life and immediately began coughing up at least a cup of blood. Sam helped hold her upright by grabbing her shoulders. When the coughing fit had passed, he leaned her back against the headboard before going to wet a washcloth. He sat back down next to her, visibly fighting back tears.

"I'm sorry. We weren't ready." Sam apologized while wiping the blood from her chin.

Ruby reached up and touched his arm, stopping him briefly. "We couldn't... have known without trying." She spoke quietly, but with determination. "You don't need to apologize."

"We should have—"

"There's a lot of shit we should've done in hindsight." Her hand let go of his arm and instead settled on his thigh. "So stop beating yourself up. That's just doing Lilith's job for her."

He didn’t reply, but continued to clean the blood from her face. She didn’t fight against his help in some stupid gesture to protect her dignity. She was exhausted. More importantly, she understood that he needed to be able to nurture her for his own emotional wellbeing. The night had pushed him to the brink and he had gone to his comfort-zone: saving someone. Neither of them said anything for a long time, both appreciating the calm after the storm.

"That was a good idea, stopping the heart." She thought a compliment and a little small talk might help Sam get out of his own head. "I should try to figure out how to do that without having to leave my body."

"You couldn’t just stop your heart?" he asked, still a little shaken from seeing Ruby smoking out on top of her injuries.

"I have less control over this body than I’d like. That’s one of the things about meatsuits that are healthy when you grab them, sometimes they just go about their normal business."

"Wasn’t your body dead? That seems pretty far from healthy." He finished cleaning the last smudge of blood from her neck.
“It was only braindead, still fully functional minus a pilot.”

Sam remembered how she had breathed in her sleep. He had thought it was odd at the time, but it started to make some strange sort of sense. How did you will your lungs or heart to stop working? There were so many moving parts to a body that don’t take any thought at all. Trying to manipulate the finite functions of a human-puppet must’ve been overwhelming at times.

He looked down at Ruby’s body. Under different circumstances he’d have been aroused, sitting so close to her while she lay in bed, her shirt pulled up exposing a forest green, silk bra, as her hand rested gently on his thigh. But the pints of blood that covered the duvet and their clothes definitively killed the mood.

"The management is going to think I slaughtered a cow in here," he muttered as he took in the carnage.

"Flattery will get you nowhere." She raised an eyebrow to tease offense at the term ‘cow.’

"I meant—it’s just a lot of blood." Sam was too tired to catch her joke at first, but smiled with relief when he realized that she was well enough to harass him. "Are you feeling okay? Aside from the whole, you know." He pointed to the stab wound.

"Her ray of hellfire or whatever, that was…." She had no words to explain what it had felt like and that was okay with her. It was a tiny glimpse of Hell and she wanted that to stay inconceivable to Sam. "Thank you."

"We look out for each other. It's no big—"

"Don't give me that 'it's no big deal' crap," she countered. “You saved me. Hell, you even turned your back on her to protect me. I'm just saying that I appreciate it."

Ruby took a shower while Sam tried to gather everything that was bloody. He bundled the blankets, sheets, towels, and his blood-soaked clothes into a large pile. After flipping the mattress over to hide as much of the stain as possible, he transfered the unsoiled sheets from the second queen bed in the hopes that the maids would overlook the mess a little longer. Part of him wanted to set the pile of bloody linens on fire, destroy it completely, but that’d almost certainly cause a scene. Assuming that no one was dumpster diving, he could probably throw it away on their way out. The motel manager was more likely to think that the linens were stolen instead of disposed evidence.

He was still weighing his options when he heard the bathroom door open. Ruby came out wearing a clean pair of jeans and a Sonic Youth t-shirt. Her hair dangled around her, dripping water onto her shirt and the carpet. She had a small bundle of her old, bloody clothes, which she threw onto the bigger pile that he had assembled. Sam noticed the dark green bra in the mix. He tried not to let his eyes linger, but she spotted him looking and the corner of her lips curled up slightly. He decided to evade the impending teasing by getting down to business.

"Lilith's really going to come after us now.” He turned away from the laundry pile, sitting down on the stripped bed. “Do you think the warding will hold up?"

"It's gonna help without a doubt, but if Lilith puts enough resources into tracking us….” She made a shrugging gesture, but it pulled on the skin around her stitches making her cringe inwardly. She sat down on the opposite bed to steady herself. “More than a few wars have been won by throwing bodies at superior technology. We're better equipped for now, but if she has enough demons to be
physically turning over rocks…. It's not like these wards make us invisible."

"If we keep moving, don't follow obvious routes, maybe we could lose them," Sam suggested.

"If you want to run and hide, we can always go back to the coven. That seemed to work well enough against Lilith's scrying. The question is whether we're gonna keep going after her and screwing up whatever she's working on."

"What? I'm not—I'm not saying that we give up and hide under a rock, but you were nearly incinerated two hours ago. Now you're seriously suggesting we go at her again?" He'd been expecting Ruby to be done with that crazy vendetta of his. She'd followed him against her better judgment and suffered for it.

"I'm not suggesting anything exactly.” She tried to shrug despite the discomfort from her refresh stitches and minimally-treated internal injuries. “I'm just saying that we need to think this through. I mean would you even be open to give this up?"

"I want to kill her, for everything she's done, to stop her plans... and now more than ever for my own peace of mind. We might be able to use the knife on her. She seemed scared of it.” Sam knew that he was grasping at straws trying to make the task less daunting. He wanted their mission to be more reasonable, but he couldn't convince himself to sit out the fight. It was what his heart wanted and if Ruby would stay with him through this, then even that terrible situation didn't leave him feeling so conflicted. If she had wanted to quit... he wasn’t sure what he would have done. "So we keep moving, do what we can to cover our asses, hope our wards give us the advantage, and I keep training?"

"Sounds like a good enough plan for now. Oh yeah, if any of her minions find us, we should kill them. We can't risk exorcising witnesses down to Hell at this point." Sam looked like he was about to object to killing possessed humans, but she cut him off. "Look, I know you hate killing humans, but it's not like we can just kill the demon without touching the meatsuit."

He raised an eyebrow at the thought. "Actually, I think I found my next homework assignment."

Sam reluctantly agreed that any demons he failed to kill with his powers had to be killed with the knife. He didn't like the arrangement, but he had to admit that it would have been laying out the red carpet to exorcise a demon at that point. Ruby had said that by the time she left Hell, every demon including the ones not under Lilith's command had known who he was. Being sent downstairs by the Sam Winchester was bound to raise attention.

Sam wasn't exactly slaughtering humans with a long life ahead of them though. He insisted that they only take demons that had ridden their meatsuit to the breaking point. When he sensed the presence of a demon within a human, he could feel how much effort the demon was using to keep the body operating on a basic level. Healthy bodies with intact human souls gave off a different energy than ones that were gravely or lethally injured but limping along under demonic influence. Even with Ruby trying to label the killings as merciful he loathed it. But in a way their rule helped motivate him to learn to kill demons faster.

It took four demons—and their battered, human prisoners—before Sam successfully killed a demon with his powers. They were lucky that in the two weeks following St. Louis, prior to mastering his new power, they hadn't been found by Lilith's minions. He would've had to fight with one hand tied behind his back, unable to exorcise and without a lethal weapon. But when the fifth demon flickered and died, they knew they were bringing up their fighting proficiency to the next level.
For her part, Ruby was trying to develop spells and tools to help them anticipate attacks and be more effective in fights. She tried designing binding spells to prevent smoking out or teleporting, but they all equally affected her, making them underwhelming. After helping Bobby repair the Colt, she had hoped she might be able to modify a ranged weapon to at least harm demons, but enchanted metallurgy was not one of her strong suits. In spite of several dead ends, she did manage to develop a few helpful spells and continued to tinker in her downtime while Sam slept.

One of her most useful creations was a repurposing of the alarm spell that she had used on the holy sites in Houston to act as an early detection system. Eight different colored glass sphere were activated every time they stopped at a motel. Each sphere would go off if a demon entered a specific area. One set of four spheres designated a certain distance radius from the motel, ranging from five miles to 100 yards. The second set of four spheres monitored quadrants of the five mile radius, so that if one of the other four alarms was tripped, they would know in which direction the demons were located. And she only felt like an idiot for the ten seconds of annoying buzzing that it took to exclude herself from tripping the alarms.

Three and a half weeks after St. Louis, Lilith's minions finally caught up to them. Sam and Ruby had successfully fled the motel before the demons had tripped the one-mile radius alarm. They would travel to a new location only to have the alarms sound. Sam had them reset the alarms several times a day in different locations, sometimes pinging the demons two or three times a day. He plotted the locations of the demons on maps to try to make sense of what was happening. The longest break they had between alarms was three and a half days.

After three weeks of mapping and running from demons, Sam suspected that they weren't being directly tracked. His theory was that the demons were covering ground like a wave, in the same way a search party might look for a missing child in the woods. Each time the demons found their motel or some evidence of them it gave a new point on the curve to adjust the search area. Sam and Ruby were traveling by car—mass transit had been abandoned after they had committed several murders on camera. If the demons formed tight-enough lines and closed in from multiple directions, the two of them would be forced to cross the line at some point, giving up their location. If they didn't turn and sneak by or charge the approaching demons, then eventually the demons would converge on them.

The best idea they could come up with was to attack one of the approaching groups, killing all the demons, and keep moving. If they could cover enough distance after breaking through the line before Lilith's minions found out about the breach, they might just be able to keep up the evasion for an extended period of time. Attacking and killing the demons on the line would only give them a headstart as long as the dead demons weren’t missed, but trying to sneak by was almost more dangerous. If Sam and Ruby were found out by a demon that was allowed to live, then their real-time location would be revealed. So they decided to save sneaking for emergencies only and stick to attacking the demons head on, leaving no witnesses.

They gave their new strategy a shot, and it mostly worked. After a few weeks, they noticed that it generally took about four days after a fight for the lines to readjust and press in on them enough to initiate another fight. Sam and Ruby took the consistent frequency of these fights as a sign that Lilith had plateaued out on her resources again. It seemed like she couldn't afford to improve the quality of her manpower dedicated to finding them.

Their idea was also supported by the fact that her demons weren't particularly skillful. Instead they relied on traveling in larger groups than what they’d had prior to St. Louis. It seemed like after St. Louis, Lilith had collected an army to throw at them, given them a basic strategy to follow, and hadn't been able to infuse enough heavy hitters to make it more successful.
Which wasn't to say that the approach was completely ineffective. Ruby called it 'death by a thousand cuts' and she wasn't too far off. Sometimes it felt like Lilith was just trying to keep them preoccupied, but they took cold comfort in the fact that their skirmishes did prove to be good training for Sam. But above all else, there was a growing feeling between them that they were walking a very fine line and that some little slip-up or change of the rhythm could undo them.
Ruby nearly broke the motel room door as she threw it open, then rushed inside. She cursed and kicked a trash can across the room before Sam could even cross the threshold. Digging through a medical bag, she found a container of salve and exhaled with relief. Her leather jacket had been ruined less than a half hour ago when a demon threw a moderately-corrosive potion on her. Since then she had been trying with all her willpower to not explode in frustration.

She'd been experimenting with incorporating grenade-like thrown potions into their bag of combat tricks. It had been her latest attempt at creating a ranged anti-demon weapon. The first few attempts had worked well for when a demon was running and Sam wasn't available to grab it with his powers. She'd been able to tag the demon with a potion and it would be rolling on the ground in agony in under a minute. The best part was that the potion also temporarily prevented smoking out.

Unfortunately, that night's demon must have been a former baseball player with hands as gentle as feathers while he was a human because he had caught the damn bottle and hurled it right back at her. Ruby had managed to duck and her jacket protected her flesh from the potion, but on the drive back to the motel it had become clear that something was wrong. She had abandoned her jacket in the alley where the fight had broken out, but it was dark and they hadn't seen the trace amount of liquid that had soaked through to her outer shirt.

By the time they had reached the motel room she had discarded the button-up outer shirt and a hole had started eating through the back of her tank top. The skin covering her left shoulder blade and central back was turning an angry red. She threw Sam the healing salve and took out a small knife.

"A knife?" Sam asked.

He hovered around her with concern, but wasn’t sure what she was doing, let alone how to help. She didn't reply, instead she slid the knife under the shirt and began cutting off her tank top. After cutting the right strap and side, she carefully peeled the shirt off so as not to get potion residue on any other part of her body.

Sam stopped hovering and sat on the side of his bed. He turned away from Ruby in an attempt to give her some privacy. He could feel his ears turn ever-so-slightly pink. Her bra was tossed to the ground just inside his field of view.

"Holy fuck! Now is not the time for chivalry!" she shouted when she noticed him pointedly looking away from her. “Get my back with that salve before this shit burns my ward.”

He turned to look at her cautiously. She was standing two feet from him, facing away. She was completely topless and held her breasts cupped in her hands. The redness on her back looked fierce and was almost blistering.
Sam took a small scoop of the salve and gingerly rubbed it onto a portion of the red patch on her skin. Ruby groaned a little, then took a half step backward, closer to him. As he rubbed the salve over more of her back she leaned into his touch. He felt her take a deep breath and release it slowly.

He could see that the redness in her skin was fading where he applied the salve. She had relaxed visibly. Her shoulders lowered and the muscles in her neck started to loosen. He started massaging the left side of her back around the quickly-fading injury, trying to work in the remaining salve and ease the tension in her muscles. She took another half step back, standing between Sam's thighs next to the bed.

Her arms were held up slightly as she cupped her breasts, revealing the sides of her torso. From Sam's angle he could see the side and lower curve of her left breast. He felt flush. That awkward, familiar warmth started growing in his gut. He rolled his eyes upward and closed them trying to regain his composure. His hand slid a little too far along her rib cage and his fingertips grazed the side of her impossibly-soft breast. His eyes snapped open, startled by what he'd just done.

The soft skin of her chest slid under his shock-frozen hands as Ruby slowly turned around without stepping away from him. She didn't look upset or like she was about to tease him. Instead her eyes glinted mischievously back at his own, and then traveled down to stare candidly at his lips. She took another deep breath that made her chest expand and contract in his touch. Her arms lowered, then her delicate hands released her breasts and settled on Sam's shoulders. Her thumb reached up and stroked the side of his neck, tracing his jugular.

He shuddered subtly at her touch and he became painfully aware of his own body. His heart was pounding, sending a flush through him. And of course there was the fact that his pants were getting tighter by the second. He swallowed and licked his lips as anticipation began drowning out his anxiety.

He slid his hands along her waist and then upward to caress her breasts. She pressed forward, even closer to him. She pushed his legs closer together, climbed on top of his thighs, and straddled him. Gentle warmth radiated from her flesh, but it was nothing compared to the heat that was sitting on his lap.

She bit her lower lip, laced her fingers around the back of his head and leaned in. Their lips met softly at first, deceptively chaste. He inhaled sharply at the surprise that he was actually kissing Ruby. Happily taking advantage of his vulnerability, she parted her lips, tongue diving in for a deep, ravenous kiss.

Her enthusiasm overcame his shock. His ability to reason and worry melted away against his overwhelming desire. They kissed recklessly. Teeth bumped into teeth and tongues fought for dominance. Ruby bit his lower lip, causing his eyes to briefly lose focus and he squeezed her tighter. With one hand he grabbed her nape and the other gripped her waist. He bit her lip in turn and tugged, making her legs clench. The hand on her neck slid down to her chest, stopping to massage her right breast.

Her fingers moved down his chest and peeled off his shirt. They barely stopped kissing long enough to allow the shirt to be removed. Ruby leaned closer to bite his ear, breathing warmly before she descended to his neck. She kissed, sucked, and nibbled the flesh below his jaw. Sam let out a small moan, then grabbed her hips, pulling her closer to him. Her breasts pressed into his torso and her crotch slid up against the unmistakable bulge in his jeans. She smiled as she arched her spine backward to look him in the eyes.

She slowed down, looking at him like he was a cross between a work of art and prey. They both
breathed heavily. Gripping his shoulders for stability, she pulled herself up so that her crotch was
directly against his clothed erection. She gently straddled him through their jeans. Ruby kept eye
contact the whole time, daring him to do something about it. He knew that she was getting off by
teasing him, but that only made him want her more.

After a few good rubs, she leaned in to suck on his earlobe. Her fingertips traced along his abs
down to his jeans and she unbuttoned his pants. Exhaling warm breath into his ear she gripped the
zipper.

"You wanna go?" It was pure seduction and he felt his heart skip a beat.

Sam answered with action. He grabbed Ruby. One arm reached across her back, the other
supported her ass. Lifting her, he stood and threw her onto the bed. She landed on her back, breasts
jiggling slightly from the impact. She didn’t move to get up. Instead clutching the sheets in her
hands, she braced herself and waited to see what he was going to do.

Sam knelt onto the bed between her legs, then slowed his pace. He had the fleeting idea that he
would drag everything out and torment her as best he could, but when he looked down at her he
really just wanted to savor the experience. He climbed on top of her, but stopped at her chest. He
gently licked her left nipple, kissed the tender flesh of the breast, then switched to the right side.
His soft warm kisses moved downward. He paused briefly at the red scar he’d sewn up only a few
months earlier, then kissed it too. He descended down her stomach to the top edge of her barely
exposed black cotton panties.

Leaning back into a sitting position, Sam pulled off her jeans and panties in a single motion. Her
legs had been lift up near his head as he removed her clothes, and he caught her left leg in his hand
before it could fall back to the bed. He kissed her calf, then bit it before placing the leg onto the
bed. He sliding his hands along her from ankle to upper thigh, spreading her legs. He leaned down
and began kissing her inner thigh.

Without rising from between her legs, Sam glanced up at Ruby’s face. She was looking across the
length of her body at him. He admired the small hills of her hip bones, the way her breasts heaved,
and her dark, hungry eyes. Even completely bare and exposed she radiated a strength that he
revered.

His hands slid up her legs, spreading them wider. His thumbs gently pulled her open to him.
Leaning in, he exhaled warmly, adding to the heat before softly kissing her clit. The touch made
Ruby tense and hum quietly in pure anticipation.

Excited by her reaction, he licked and sucked at her tender flesh. She writhed against the bed. He
could taste her wetness. Without missing a beat, he slid a finger into her. She clenched around him
as he massaged her from the inside. After a few seconds, he pulled his finger out briefly and then
inserted two fingers. She moaned as he pressed in knuckles-deep, caressing her until he found that
sweet spot. She moaned loudly and tore the bedding that she had been gripping when she came.
Her back arched up, but he held her hips in place as he continued eating her out until she finished.
He removed his fingers as he thoughtfully kissed her most sensitive flesh. Sam crawled up her
body and stole a long, penetrating kiss from her lips.

Ruby was completely riled up and reached down, undoing the remainder of Sam’s pant zipper.
She pushed down both his jeans and underwear in an almost desperate gesture. He kicked off the
clothes without getting up, then leaned down, pressing against her. He rubbed his hard cock
against her incredibly sensitive clit a few times while kissing her. Wanting to entice him more,
Ruby bit his lip playfully.
He pulled backward slightly, to line up her pussy with the tip of his dick. He had wanted to draw out the moment, but she was so wet and he was so eager that his head started to slide into her. He looked into her alluring, dark eyes, and she locked his gaze. She chewed her lower lip and stroked her right nipple without breaking eye contact.

Sam had reached his limit. He just wanted to fuck her, taking her as hard as he could. She moaned loudly and tore the sheets even more as he pushed into her. He only entered a few inches at first, then pulled out slightly before thrusting fully into her. She felt overwhelmed, spread wide around him. She cried out. With every thrust she was overcome, feeling his raw power. She felt like he was going to break her at the seams, but she found her hands had gripped his body, pulling him deeper into her. She tried to take him in as much as possible.

Trying to push even deeper, he used one hand to brace Ruby’s shoulder, which prevented her from sliding backward with each powerful thrust. He pressed deeper inside of her, earning louder moans. As he thrust, he rubbed against her sensitive clit. Ruby could feel that beautiful blend of pleasures clouding her other senses. A familiar tingling grew in her, and she only wanted more. Sam had also started losing himself in the sensation of her tight, supple pussy. He gave into instinct, and thought of nothing beyond chasing a deeper high.

Ruby's lower back was lifted off the bed several inches, allowing Sam a better angle to push even deeper. He was too consumed with the raising heat of his building orgasm to notice that Ruby hadn’t lifted herself off the bed. For a fleeting second she was surprised that her ass had been picked up while Sam’s hands were by her head, but Sam’s even deeper thrusts pushed her over the top and she couldn’t think at all. She came hard—again—and let out a loud quivering moan that bordered on speaking in tongues. She clenched and pulsed around Sam, pushing him over the edge. The sound and feeling of Ruby’s orgasm proved too much. Sam thrust in as deeply as he could, coming longer and harder than he had thought possible.

They were both panting for air, skin flush and sweaty. He pulled out of her, still a little lightheaded. A slight groan escaped him as he realised that her wonderful tightness was going to leave him sore in a few minutes. Sam rolled onto his back next to the completely blissed-out Ruby.

"Did I just sell my soul?" Sam asked as his head started clearing a bit.

"I don't remember you buying anything."

Ruby rolled to the edge of the bed and started reaching around on the floor trying to find her panties. Sam was momentarily transfixed watching the way her spine curved, hips accentuated— but he snapped out of it.

"Wait a second." It started sinking into Sam's mind what they'd actually done.

Ruby stopped with her black cotton thong slipped half way up her left leg and turned to face him. "You wanna go again?" She raised an eyebrow and smirked.

Sam was a little dumbfounded. He'd been planning on talking in an attempt to mitigate the awkwardness of the one-time lapse in judgment. Yes, he found her attractive. Yes, he admired her as a person. But she was his partner on the job and it was a mess to mix in feelings. As soon as he thought that he felt like a hypocrite. He’d been emotionally invested in every other person he’d ever worked with, but this was different. In the past, they had all cared for him in return, but with Ruby…. He wasn’t sure what she was capable of feeling.
"No—I mean, maybe—but that wasn't what I was getting at," he managed despite being flustered. "It's just—I mean— Seriously? This isn't going to be an 'Oh my god, we shouldn't have done that. Let’s not,’ kind of thing?" He’d pantomimed the regretful statements.

"Wow. Tell a girl how you really feel." She wasn’t actually offended. Sam was just being awkward. Actually, she found it oddly endearing. "You can put this one in the same column with drunken mistakes and one-night stands if you want, but this doesn't have to be weird and it doesn't have to be a one-time thing. You know, it might be good to occasionally work off some steam outside of a fight to the death."

She was suggesting a friends-with-benefits-style arrangement. An alarm sounded in Sam's head. When he really was honest with himself he knew that he had feelings for Ruby. He wouldn't call it love, but maybe a slight crush. She was incredibly important to him; more important than he would ever admit to her. And he could absolutely envision himself eventually getting hurt if they started having casual sex. Ruby liked him, but he knew that a real relationship wasn't in the cards. But an impulsive and reckless desire suggested that if he knew from the beginning that it was only sex, maybe he could stop himself from wanting something more.

"Well, the offer's open," she said when he didn’t immediately respond. “I’m gonna grab a burger. Want me to pick you up anything?"

He shook his head, lost in a debate between lust and emotional self-preservation. She slipped on a fresh pair of dark jeans and a The Donnas t-shirt with a torn left sleeve, then left the motel room. Sam leaned back on the bed, too deep in thought to even care that he was still naked. He wondered how many months of celibacy he would need to somehow endure before he had cooled off.

He caved four days later and never looked back.

It was only a matter of time before another hunter caught up with them. The protective wards were helpful; after all, they didn’t have demons raining down as heavily as it could’ve been. But the wards weren’t an absolute solution to their problems either. Hunters tracked prey professionally and very few relied on scrying or luck to get the job done. So when Sam and Ruby ran into one at an abandoned ranch outside of Billings, Montana, they were disappointed but not surprised.

In the two and a half months since St. Louis, Sam had made significant changes to his training regimen. He tried to balance his time between physical and psychic combat training, but he found himself using fists and weapons in a fight with decreasing frequency. Also, the psychic powers Sam was most proficient in were demon-based: exorcism, killing demons, sensing demons, having visions related to demonic activity, discerning their strength, and manipulating both their smoke and meatsuits.

He had used telekinesis on non-demonic people and objects before so he knew that his powers weren’t limited to interactions with demons. But for whatever reason his non-demon-based powers were much harder to control. The three times he’d used telekinesis in the real world, it hadn’t been intentional. He had moved a cabinet to help him save Dean’s life over a year earlier. He had thrown the two hunters who had attacked Ruby and were planning on killing him. Then he’d nudged the conjured flower while he was high. But when he would focus intently on moving a penny even an inch in a controlled environment, it would just give him a headache. It was like his telekinesis was instinctual and incompatible with discipline. The closest thing he routinely felt to wielding his telekinesis was occasionally feeling like he had delivered a little extra force in a punch or kick.

As a result of Sam’s uneven training style he was not very well-equipped to fight hunters. He was
still valuable in a brawl or shootout, but so were most hunters. His real advantage was his diverse pairing with Ruby, who as a demon had weaknesses that didn’t overlap with his own.

The hunter had no idea that Sam and Ruby had spent months being continuously pursued by demons, making the pair borderline paranoids in their attention to details. Sam had noticed that they were being tailed after only ten blocks in moderately dense traffic. Granted, it didn’t help the hunter that his black Dodge Dakota had a North Carolina license plate in the middle of Montana. Sam subtly circled around downtown and then down the same highway that had taken into Billings that morning. He found the abandoned ranch that he had stopped by to stretch his legs after the long drive across North Dakota. The ranch seemed to be as good a place as any to have a fight and, sure enough, the hunter obliged.

The fight couldn’t be called fair, but fighting fair didn’t count for much with a hunter trying to kill them. Ruby teleported from shotgun into hiding before the hunter even pulled off the road. Sam played the bait, walking into a barn that barely had any walls left. He made sure the hunter saw where he went, but was careful to keep obstacles between them. The hunter drew a pistol, then silently followed him in, just as Sam ducked into hiding behind a large pile of debris. Before the hunter could look around the corner where Sam had disappeared, Ruby clicked her tongue behind him. The hunter spun, shot her in the stomach as Sam jumped out and got him in a chokehold. Ruby grabbed the hand with the gun to prevent any further injuries while Sam subdued the hunter.

They stripped the unconscious hunter naked and checked him for tattoo, brands, or any other sort of magical markings. He had an anti-possession tattoo of a different design than the one on Sam’s left shoulder. Sam pointed to the tattoo and shrugged in suggestion, but Ruby looked less-than-thrilled by the idea of possessing him for intel. They tied him to a large support column in the middle of barn, turning his hands palm outward before binding him to leave his wrists ominously exposed. They placed a cloth bag over his head, then waited for him to wake up.

Ruby volunteered to play bad cop. When he stirred awake, she removed the bag from the man’s head while Sam stood silently behind the column. Sam didn’t want to take the lead on the interrogation, even if he was a hunter instead of a civilian. But that didn’t mean that Sam could just leave Ruby alone with their captive and pretend like the unpleasantness wasn’t happening. He wouldn’t allow himself to imagine that he was better than that because in their desperation he really wasn’t. Maybe when he was younger he would have been appalled at the idea of torturing a human for information, but at that point the prisoner’s humanity mattered less than their culpability. The man before him was a seasoned hunter after all; he should have known the risks of the job.

Ruby didn’t have a particular aversion to hurting humans that she didn’t already have a vested interest in, especially if it was to her advantage, but she knew Sam was uncomfortable with the concept. Since Sam had to watch, she tried to start easy on the hunter.

“What’s your name?” she asked, arms crossed in front of her, knife prominently displayed on her belt. She waited a few seconds, but he didn’t say anything. “Fine. I had hoped that he could just have a little chat and part ways, but if you’re going to be difficult, then I have to be difficult too.”

She drew her knife and dragged it along the hunter’s right arm. He cringed, holding in a cry as a line of blood quickly formed. The cut didn’t cross any major veins or go deep enough to be a serious health risk, but it did venture into the nerve-dense skin near the inside of the wrist. She moved the knife over a few inches, about ready to take another drag, then looked the hunter in the eyes.

“I’m not… going to tell you anything.” His voice shook at first, but he regained his composure.
She sliced up and down his arms and stomach for fifteen minutes without success before deciding to switch techniques. She may have been hellspawn, but she wasn’t one of the Torquean caste, skilled in torture. Also, he was stubborn; she definitely had to give the hunter that.

Ruby stepped back to grab a bottle of brown liquid from her duffel bag a few feet away. The hunter looked around the barn, turning his body as best he could to see behind him, but his bindings restricted his range of motion. Even so, Sam silently leaned away from his field of view. The reason for the quick check of his surrounds became clear when the hunter began reciting an exorcism incantation. He had waited until Ruby was too far to reach him and the barn appeared empty except for the two of them. Ruby collapsed to the ground at the incantation. In a second Sam was standing next to the hunter, one hand gripping the man’s hair, the other holding a knife to his throat.

The hunter immediately stopped the exorcism. “So you aren’t a demon.” It seemed he was more eager to talk to Sam.

“I’m just a human,” Sam replied as he moved his knife a quarter of an inch away from the hunter’s neck.

“Bullshit.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” The hunter opened his mouth, but Sam continued, “But I will in a heartbeat if you push me.”

The hunter paused while Sam circled around in front of him. Sam put his knife back into its sheath, then walked over to Ruby. She was on her hands and knees, trying to shake off the painful disorientation of the attempted exorcism. Sam offered her a hand up, which she accepted. She shot the hunter a vicious glare before dusting off her pants.

“Tell us what we want to know and we’ll let you go,” Sam offered in a tone that was calmer and colder than he had expected.

“Don’t try to play me like that, boy. You killed good people, my friends. I’d rather die than help you.” The hunter spat on the ground.

Sam wanted to rub the bridge of his nose in annoyance, but didn’t want to his frustration to be misperceived as weakness. “If you’re talking about the two hunters in Philadelphia, they tried to kill me—”

“I tried to kill you,” the hunter aptly pointed out.

Sam’s jaw clenched as he tried to think of how to respond. Suddenly, he had been put on the defensive. The hunter had struck the nerve more than he had realized. Sam knew that his natural aversion to ruthlessness toward his enemies was waning, forcing him to make a more conscious effort to moderate himself. The idea that he might let that bleed into his gentler everyday demeanor worried him. So the suggestion that his reasoning might be consistent with needlessly killing a prisoner was disconcerting.

Sensing that Sam was uncomfortable, the hunter decided to take an attempt at another jab. “You know how it is. You used to be one of us, for fuck’s sake! You don’t get to play that pity crap on me. You’re a damned monster! You can go fuck yourself!”

“Fine. I’m done trying to coax this shit out of you like a fucking human,” Ruby said, thoroughly tired of the hunter. She had been frustrated by the exorcism assault and her failed attempt to break
him, but his verbal attack on Sam put her over the edge. She knew that that encounter would trouble Sam for a long time. She walked up to the hunter and dragged her knife across his anti-possession tattoo, then sat down on the ground. “You came here to fight a monster. Prepare to get your soul reamed hard by one.”

Before Sam or the hunter could say anything, smoke poured out of Ruby’s body and dove into the hunter. She hadn’t been a fan of the idea of possession when Sam had wordlessly suggested it earlier. Demons could generally overpower humans for control of a body, but hunters were often strong-willed and emotionally scarred, resulting in an unpleasant experience all around. Furthermore, she liked her female body and the thought of letting it slowly die on the ground while she dug through some guy offended her. She’d wanted to make the physical torture work, but in her fury she decided to tear his soul a new one in the process of taking the information they sought.

Sam caught her body before its head hit the ground. He lowered it down gently, then watched the hunter’s body. It twitched and spasmed, eyes wide staring at nothing in particular. After a minute or two, Ruby’s cloud flew out of the hunter’s body, which immediately went limp. She returned to her body, sat up, and looked at Sam. Her expression was flat in a way that worried him.

“He’s name is Nelson Reed,” Ruby explained. “He’s a hunter out of Charlotte, North Carolina. There’s a bar there that’s a local hangout for hunters. One of the waitresses is Clare, who claims to have visions. He knows six other hunters who go to that bar, including the two in Philly.”

“Why are they coming after me?” Sam asked.

“You know how I used to joke that you were the antichrist? Turns out Clare thinks it’s true. She’s been preaching about the coming end times or something.” Ruby grabbed her knife and looked at it thoughtfully.

“Seriously? What is it with these mission-from-God hunters?” Sam ran his fingers through his hair.

“He is from North Carolina.” Sam just stared at her, confused, so she added, “Give me a second to take care of this guy and then I can spend days telling you all about my feelings on the Confederacy.”

“You know the Civil War ended like 150 years ago.”

She didn’t reply to his observation; she was too busy staring at the hunter. Her eyes narrowed and she chewed her lip absently.

“I know we were gonna wipe his memory and dump him, but I really want to kill him.” She couldn’t decided if she was asking for permission or just prefacing her next murder.

“Killing another one of Clare’s hunters is just going to just piss them off at us even more. If we spare them maybe they’ll see it as a sign of goodwill.” Sam suggested. He could tell she was on a ledge and needed talking back from acting out of a rage he didn’t fully understand. “There’s something you’re not telling me?”

Ruby continued to glare at the unconscious hunter. She knew that killing the hunter would not only upset his hunter pals further, but more importantly it would hurt Sam. If she killed the hunter Sam would be more likely to take his words to heart.

“He’s done things.” She pursed her lips. “If I told you, you might let me kill him. But they
happened years ago and don’t affect us.”

Sam watched her for a moment, unsure of what she’d do. If she made a move to kill the hunter, he wasn’t sure that he’d try to stop her. He didn’t like that she was leaving him in the dark, but in the end he trusted her. She sighed and started preparing the spell.

Ruby wiped the hunter’s memory for the last month. It was fairly complicated, taking thirty minutes to perform. When she had initially mentioned the spell to Sam, he’d been hoping that they could weaponize it somehow, but it proved too involved and the risks associated with a misfire could be devastating.

They left the hunter wrapped in a blanket in front of a church-run homeless shelter. Ruby had been uncharacteristically quiet on the drive to the shelter. Walking back to the Impala after dropping the body, Sam put his arm around her. To his surprise, she didn’t pull away. Instead she reached over and held onto the side of his jacket. He gave her a comforting squeeze and gently kissed the top of her head before they wordlessly climbed into the car.
They were driving through south-central Tennessee on an abnormally warm spring night. Ruby was at the wheel, giving her authority over the iPod that Sam had purchased along with a car adapter. She was tapping her fingers to Soul Coughing's *Monster Man* when she noticed Sam acting oddly. He was checking his watch and scowling at the dark, overcast sky.

"Something wrong?" she asked as she turned the volume down slightly, then leaned back in the seat adopting a more inviting posture.

"No. Not really…. It's nothing." He was acting too dodgy, almost embarrassed.

"It's something. So, spill it. You've got me curious now." From the corner of her eye, she watched him play with his watch anxiously.

"It's just that there's supposed to be a meteor shower right now and we're far enough from any city that the light pollution shouldn't be a problem, but this cloud cover is…." He trailed off, looking a little dejected.

"You want to watch the meteor shower." Ruby hadn't meant that to come out as patronizing, but Sam braced himself for her to make fun of him. Clearly it was important to him if he was so prepared to suffer hurt feelings.

It was a nice change of pace to see Sam focusing on something other than demons, hunters, and the continuing fight for survival. It’d been too long since he’d done something for himself. Embracing their new sexual relationship over the last month and a half had definitely helped, but she still worried about him. Aside from the time with the coven and when they were having sex, she didn’t see Sam fully enjoying himself. The near-constant danger obviously put a strain on their lives, but he wasn’t embracing the small pleasures, like music, as she was able to. During Sam’s initial period of depression, Ruby had hoped that the mission to kill Lilith would give his life purpose again, but recently she’d come to realize that purpose wasn’t the same thing as happiness. But maybe wanting to watch the meteor shower meant he was finally starting to want more from life.

"Okay." Her voice was determined as she nodded to herself.

She pulled off of the road, directly into a large, grassy field. Sam, startled by the sudden turn, gripped the edge of the bench seat and braced against the dashboard. All feelings of embarrassment were left back on the highway; he was too distracted by Ruby’s detour. About eighty feet from the road, she stopped the car.

"What the hell are you doing?!!" Sam was still stunned by veering into a field at night at fifty miles an hour.

"This is as good a place as any," she said as she climbed out of the car, then ducked her head back
in to look at Sam, who hadn’t moved an inch. "Come on. We're gonna make this happen."

Sam followed her to the trunk, still trying to understand what she was getting at. She pulled out a bottle of white powder and a red blanket, the latter of which she threw to him. Moving back around the passenger side of the Impala, she grabbed a book of maps from the glovebox, and proceeded to the hood. She flipped through the book until she found one depicting their current location, then placed the open book on the Impala. Ruby unstopped the bottle, pouring a thin coating of powder over the area where they were located. Putting down the bottle, she placed one hand over the small circle of powder and the other hand she held up to the sky. She recited an incantation for a few minutes, then relaxed, dropping both arms to her sides.

Looking up at Sam with a playfully smug expression on her face, Ruby gently blew the white powder off the map. As the powder blew away, uncovering their location on the map, the clouds above them blew away. Within seconds the clouds had been completely pulled back, exposing a clear night sky full of stars and falling meteorites.

Sam's mouth fell open, both from shock and delight. Ruby had cast many spells around him in the past, but that was easily the most visually impressive.

"Totally worth a little flash flooding in Chattanooga, right?" Ruby winked at him. "You better throw down that blanket. I'm not gonna strain my neck by standing all night."

Sam spread out a blanket on the grass next to the Impala. He laid down, knitting his fingers together and placed his hands below his head to act as a pillow. His legs were too long to fit on the red flannel blanket, but the grass was dry so he didn’t mind. It was a wonderfully-mild night, warm enough that he wasn’t even wearing his jacket. To Sam’s relief, mosquitoes largely avoided him since Ruby had increased his demon-blood content. It seemed he was no longer deemed fit to be snacked on.

Ruby finished putting away the map and her magic supplies, then joined him. At first she sat cross-legged next to him, staring up at the sky as a few meteors flashed in and out of view. Her expression turned briefly to that of a child watching fireworks. Sam watched the meteors, but couldn’t help watching her too. After a few minutes, she turned to glanced down at Sam who quickly looked around pretending that he hadn’t just been blatantly staring at her.

“This was a good idea, astronomy boy.” She smiled and repositioned so that she was lying next to him. She shifted trying to find a more comfortable position and riggled into the crook of his right side. Her head rested on his arm like a pillow. “How’d you know about this anyway?”

“Email. I’m on a mailing list for astronomical events. Occasionally it came in handy on hunts, but it’s also just fun. I always enjoyed this kind of stuff.”

“I never really got into astronomy or astrology. They’ve been adding new planets my whole life and now they’re taking one away. I’m not ready to deal with all that uncertainty.” She swept her right hand across the sky.

“I’m less interested in the planets; it’s always been the stars that called out to me. I used to love to just spend nights when we were away from the cities lying on the hood of the Impala watching them. They’re just so beautiful. Hell, I even wrote an English term paper on a poem because it talked abo—" He pursed his lips at the realization that in his reminiscing he’d opened himself up to teasing. "You’re going to make fun of me for that.”

“It’s definitely a possibility.” Ruby ran her fingertips along the zipper of her brand new leather jacket. She didn’t look at him. “Which poem?”
“Shakespeare’s Sonnet 14, ‘Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck.’” He hadn't planned on elaborating, but Ruby glanced up at him expectantly so he cautiously continued.

“Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck,
And yet methinks I have astronomy;
But not to tell of good or evil luck,
Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons’ quality;
Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
Pointing to each his thunder, rain, and wind,
Or say with princes if it shall go well
By oft predict that I in heaven find.
But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
And, constant stars, in them I read such art
As truth and beauty shall together thrive
If from thyself to store thou wouldst convert:
Or else of thee this I prognosticate,
Thy end is truth’s and beauty’s doom and date.”

“Holy shit. You just have that thing memorized? You must’ve been a theater kid or something. Did you do ‘Midsummer’? Did you wear tights?” Ruby grinned, fighting back a small laugh at the mental image.

Sam tensed and rolled up onto his left elbow, getting ready to eject Ruby from his right arm. “Hey. You can’t encourage me and then make fun of me for it.”

“No such luck, pre-law. I didn’t agree to that,” she replied, but she gripped onto the side of his shirt with her left hand and started stroking his chest with her right hand in an attempt to soothe him.

Sam relaxed slightly at Ruby’s gentle touch and laid back down. He decided that she hadn’t intended to embarrass him; she was just used to swinging at low-hanging fruit.

“It was implied.”

“You’re really gonna argue contracts with a demon? Anyway, don’t be embarrassed about knowing stuff like that. It’s good to be well-rounded. I like that even though you have the life and spirit of a fighter, you’re still such a hopeless sentimental.” Her right hand stopped to rest over his heart and she bit his bicep softly. “Don’t ever change.”

They laid there together silently watching that sky for a long while. Sam eventually shifted his arms to stop them from going numb, but Ruby wouldn’t give up her improvised pillow. So he ended up wrapping his right arm around her, supporting her head with his shoulder.

“Do you still pray?” She had almost whispered the question.

Months before Dean’s death, she had been spying on Sam and noticed him praying briefly while his brother was in the bathroom. It was a hasty action. He had sat on the edge of his motel room bed, folding his hand and lowering his head. He shut his eyes and mouthed some words before glancing over his shoulder at what was probably the sound of Dean finishing up in the bathroom.

She hadn’t seen Sam do anything remotely resembling prayer in all of the time that she had spent by his side since Dean’s death. For the most part it didn’t bother her. She had never really been a believer even after discovering firsthand that there was an afterlife. But she knew that that sort of faith was important to others and if Sam had been hiding it from Dean he was obviously protective
of it. The idea of Sam losing something so important to him was unsettling.

“No.” His body had tensed again briefly at the question and he struggle to relax. “I thought that maybe there was something out there... that might save Dean. But I don’t know. I just don’t feel it the way I used to. Maybe there is no Heaven or anything. Learning about Hell was reaffirming for me, but after Dean died.... Maybe the existence of evil doesn’t prove the existence of good? Maybe it’s not that simple? I mean, I actually died once for a day or two and looking back there was just nothing.” He realized how introspective he was being and redirecting the conversation outward. “You’ve been to Hell and back a few times. Any thoughts on Heaven?”

“My betting money is on no Heaven, but it’s never been the kinda thing I dwell on. It’s not gonna make a difference to me anyway.”

His brow furrowed and he glanced down at her. “What do you mean?”

“I’m a demon, remember. My soul’s already broken and I don’t think any amount of saving kittens from trees is gonna change that.” She stared thoughtfully at the streaks of white light falling across the sky. “This is as close to Heaven as I’ll ever get.” She immediately bit her lip. “Shit! I didn’t mean it to come out like that. You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

“Now who’s the hopeless sentimental?” Sam looked incredibly smug, raising an eyebrow. Ruby shoved him in the ribs halfheartedly. She knew he would tease her relentlessly with her nearly-romantic slip of the tongue.

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah. That was my plan.” He smiled mischievously, then kissed her.

The five angels flew downward, camouflaged in the flickering light of the meteor shower. They descended to the Earth and beyond. Shockwaves incinerated the demons around them as they crashed into the bedrock of Hell. The group had been tasked with rescuing the Righteous Man before the Archdemon Alastair broke him. Ralmiel, Etlindial, and Wendael died in the fighting trying to reach Alastair's private dungeon. Ardinel fell at the hands of Alastair's private guard. Castiel was the only one in zir party to actually lay eyes on the Righteous Man.

He was already broken. His soul was a twisted and torn echo of his former self. He had endured seventy years of torture, each day ending with the offer to end his pain if he instead inflicted it on others. But one day he couldn’t take it any longer. The Righteous Man took up the archdemon’s blade. He became student to the master of pain, Alastair, Master of the Torquean.

For twenty years, the Righteous Man had practiced the art of carving a human soul into a demon, and every gouge he inflicted unconsciously cut him in return. He had walked a longer road into damnation than a normal human because he was the Righteous Man. There was more beauty to tarnish, more spirit to destroy. He was dangerously close to losing the final fragments of his humanity when he saw a light that pushed the blackness from his eyes.

The angel's human vessel was barely visible in zir silvery-blue glow. In Hell, the angel's grace manifested around zir and stretched backward into massive, beautiful wings. The sight of the angel made the Righteous Man fall to his knees, dropping Alastiar's blade in awe and remorse. The light from the angel was fiercely powerful but as comforting as salvation.

The angel reached out and clutched his ravaged soul. The Righteous Man’s very essence was naked and exposed like a raw nerve. Everything he had ever touched in Hell had burnt and scarred
his very being, but the strange figure of light was relief incarnate. He allowed himself to be
gripped by the glowing creature and began to weep as they started their ascent from Hell.

Severely injured and helpless to retrieve the bodies of zir fallen siblings, the angel looked down at
the human soul they had risked everything to save. He was nearly beyond repair, but beneath the
pain his soul still shone brighter than any the angel had ever seen before. The soul was worn thin,
still weeping and shivering with fear even after being removed from the pain. The angel felt a stir
of an unknown sensation and was overcome by what zie would later learn was pity and concern. In
that moment zie wanted to comfort the soul, more than anything.

The angel had been holding the soul, but instead began to embraced him. Cradling the soul in zir
arms, zie could feel the tears and shaking subside. He was no longer feeling the echoes of blades
along his flesh or even the guilt of what he'd done. All the Righteous Man felt was the joy of being
saved, of being loved. He cried again, but they were tears of relief. The angel embraced the
Righteous Man tightly against zirself, trying to engulf him in the comforting grace of zir presence.
The Righteous Man shuddered with pleasure and moaned slightly in newfound rapture. The angel
held him even tighter, though zie knew deep down that that indulgence into affection might very
well be zir downfall.

Chapter End Notes

I'm using the gender neutral pronouns of zie/zir/zirs/zirself for non-binary gendered
characters. Though angels and demons will be referred to by their vessel's sex while
on Earth, unless otherwise specified.
Omens & Omissions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a mistake to venture into New Mexico during summer. Sam & Ruby had wanted to take a more northern and therefore cooler route. Unfortunately, they had found themselves in northwest Texas while there were a lot of demonic omens throughout Colorado and Kansas, so they were given the choice of backtracking east where they had come from or continue into the massive oven known as the southwest.

There were several reasons why Sam & Dean had avoided hunting in drier climates. The air conditioning in the Impala left a lot to be desired and there were relatively few roads. Also, their dad had once gone off-road for a hunt in Arizona, got severely dehydrated, and swore never to go hunting in 100° weather again. As a result, Sam was unfamiliar with that corner of the country and didn't want to be there any longer than they had to.

It was Sam's turn driving, but he had offered the choice of music to Ruby. All day she had looked miserable. She was sweating in her snug jeans and black tank top. Her right elbow rested against the door, her hand being used to help hold up her head. She seemed tired. It was like the heat was suppressed her normally talkative and playful demeanor. A particularly energetic song came on, Eagles of Death Metal's Flames Go High, but Sam noticed that she wasn't even tapping her foot let alone shouting her usual off key singing. Sam pull off highway 40 at the first diner he could find. Ruby looked at him confused, but didn't voice any objection.

"We need to stop. You look awful and I could use some food."

He grabbed his laptop bag while climbing out of the car, and was followed shortly by Ruby. They entered the diner, grabbing the first table they could. Sam signaled to the waitress asking for water. Then he reached across the table to Ruby, touching the skin on her face. She frowned slightly, but allowed it. Her skin was clammy, but not as warm as he'd expected.

"Are you feeling okay? Because you seem off. I think you might have heatstroke or something- Can you even get heatstroke?"

"I don't know- about the heatstroke thing. I feel drained. This heat- the running and all the spells-"

The waitress dropped off two glasses of ice water and a pair of menus for them, then left to check on another table. Ruby took a sip of the water and looked a little pained. It worried Sam. He knew that she could get worn out if she overused her magic, but this seemed wrong. She'd been casting the same number and complexity of spells everyday for months, but recently she had lost some of her edge. It was possible that there was an accumulative effect that was finally beginning to show.

"You need to take it easy on the magic. Let yourself rest a bit. You can teach me the spells and I'll take over- anyway, it'd be good for me to know in an emergency." He didn't want to say 'if something happens to you' but the evaded implications hung in the air.

The waitress came back for their order. Sam ordered a veggie burger with avocado and a side of green chile corn sopapillas. Ruby ordered a regular burger with a side of seasoned fries, and declined the waitress’ offer to upgrade them to chili fries. Sam could’ve sworn the suggestion of
covering her glorious french fries in anything other than ketchup made Ruby’s skin flash sickly green, but it passed quickly.

Ruby went to the restroom to go splash some water on her face, leaving Sam alone at the table. He opened up the laptop and then set his phone to act as a wifi hotspot. He began researching to see if there were any new demonic omens in their corner of the country. Sam opened up half a dozen bookmarked pages in different tabs and looked around the diner while waiting for them to load.

He spotted a small rack of postcards by the cash register. He walked up to the selection and found one that featured a picture of the desert at sunset. It had been over a week since Sam had mailed Tom a little souvenir of their travels, so he bought the postcard and started writing out a short greeting. He never signed the letters or postcards for some paranoid fear that it might be intercepted, but the coven knew who the cards were from. None of the cards ever mentioned the difficulties that Sam & Ruby faced, but instead focused on the places they went or fun anecdotes. Writing these cheerful vignettes always brightened Sam’s mood by forcing him to think about the positive aspects of the previous few days.

He jotted down a little story and drawing of lumpy looking armadillo as the web pages finished loading. After moving the postcard safely away from the glasses of water, Sam started tabbing through the pages looking for new developments. Lightning storms, cattle and crop death marked demonic omens that continued to circle ominously in central Colorado, but the thing that caught Sam’s eye was the omen cluster that hadn’t moved at all in the last two days. It was located directly in the center of the circling demon groups.

Ruby returned from the bathroom as Sam was looking up details on the location of the unmoving demons. A few seconds later, the waitress dropped off their meals. Sam continued reading while he ate one of the sopapillas. Ruby nibbled at her burger and fries while watching his signature intense research face. After a few minutes she decided to interrupt his concentration to find out what was so interesting.

"Find anything?" She played with one of the seasoned fries, dipping and dragging it through her massive pool of ketchup to make little swirls.

"I think I may have found one of Lilith's upcoming tasks." Ruby abandoned the fry on the plate, giving Sam her undivided attention.

"Cute and brainy. What’d you find?"

"Well I think in two days-" He started but was cut off when Ruby bit her lip and raised an interrupting finger.

"Lilith wouldn't be planning anything for the next few days. Tomorrow's the start of The High Holy Season." Ruby mentally kicked herself for not having told Sam earlier, but for the last week or so she’d been feeling abnormally tired and forgetful.

"The what?" Sam looked completely dumbfounded, causing Ruby to briefly question whether she’d even spoken English. Instead she realized that this was likely just another instance of Sam not appreciating that demons have a more complex existence than cartoon devils.

"It's a holy time for demons. Demons can't do violence except in defense and they can't make deals for souls or perform major rituals."

"They? You mean you can, but not the rest?" His brow was still furrowed, but at least he was able to ask follow up questions.
"It's not like it's physically impossible for demons to do those things- It's just a major cultural institution that they'd be violating. The High Holy Season is a celebration of Lucifer's fall and the creation of Hell. So it's kinda like the Devil's birthday- Yeah, it's basically Hell's Christmas. Everyone gets it off work and the religious castes take it way more seriously. Maji usually celebrate by holding Sabbath with their coven, but nothing too exciting. Lilith is Archdemon to the hardcore zealots caste, so it'd take major stakes for her to be taking the initiative on anything substantive for the next few days."

"How long does demon Christmas last?" The concept of demons celebrating holidays had come as a shock, but once he'd gotten over his surprise, Sam started trying to find a way to use this opportunity to their advantage.

"40 days in Hell, so…” She did some quick math. “Just over three days on Earth."

"Three days when demons are more vulnerable, how have I not heard about this?"

"The High Holy Season only comes around every 1,800 years plus or minus in the pit, so it happens… around every fifteen years up here. Maybe the hunting community just never caught the pattern? I mean until recently there hasn’t been a strong demon presence on Earth in centuries."

"I guess… So, is this the time to go after Lilith?"

"She's still perfectly capable of arming herself to the teeth and defending herself. No, I don't think this really gives us an advantage on her. It just gives us some time when she isn’t going to sneak up behind us. Unless she really thinks it’s a life or death situation, she won’t make any moves."

"So, if she really is up to something in the next three days though, it's probably really important...

"You really think she’s angling to do one of her sixty four tasks in the next three days? She'd be damn near committing a mortal sin to work one of those, so yeah it'd have to be a big deal."

Ruby saw him look at his laptop thoughtfully. “What did you find?"

"There’s a group of omens clustered in the middle of nowhere Colorado, and it looks like there are surrounding groups protecting it. The only thing noteworthy that ever happened there was a massacre of sixty six people in a church, one hundred years ago from the day after tomorrow."

Sam looked up to meet Ruby’s eyes. Neither of them wanted to spend their vacation from demonic assault voluntarily confronting Lilith’s minions. They’d been doing nearly everything in their power to avoid demons since St. Louis, but this discovery and their proximity demanded their attention, even if Ruby wasn’t feeling one hundred percent.

"That does seem like too much for a coincidence." She conceded to the idea of investigating the demonic activity.

"If the demons are on holiday, we can probably sneak by the outside groups a bit easier and hit the center. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does.” Ruby pushed her half-eaten burger and barely touched fries a few inches away from her. “Sounds like we're going north. At least it won’t be so fucking hot."
ground, he also found himself grateful that his plywood coffin had only been buried two feet below ground.

The mile walk down the two lane road to a closed gas station started as one of the greatest experiences of his life. His cut up hands stung and his throat was parched, but he was free and the world had a comparative softness. But as he walked, some of the joyous shock began to fade.

He still remembered Hell, the sights, smells, and sensations. The memories made his step falter and he felt a faint uneasiness grow in him. When a bird flew out of a tree suddenly, Dean flinched, tossing his hands up defensively. It was second nature for him to expect pain coming from all sides. Every moment that he felt anything less than agony was both wonderful and also strangely unsettling. He couldn't help waiting for the other shoe to drop, after all he had no idea why he was free.

The gas station provided some supplies and a car for him to steal. He had promised himself that if he ever found a way topside, his first meal would be a massive cheeseburger with a cold beer, but it ended up being a bag of hard black licorice and a bottle of water. After bandaging his hands, he collected two grocery bags full of bottled water, snacks, petty cash, and some porno mags.

He tried called Sam, but his phone number wasn't working anymore. Calling Bobby was only slightly more successful because he was able to hear the old hunter's voice before being threatened and hung up on. It made sense. He'd been dead for about nine months according to a newspaper he'd found while digging through the magazine rack. It would be silly to think Bobby would believe him over the phone. So Dean hopped in the hotwired Toyota Corolla and headed straight for Bobby's house.

It took some grappling and nearly an hour of testing before Bobby began to warm up to the idea that Dean might actually be himself. Dean drank holy water, ate salt, held iron, cut himself with silver, and more. By the end of it he was emotionally worn, having received a slow let down that Bobby wouldn't just take him on some level of faith. Rationally he knew it had been too much to hope for, that Bobby would be able to see the truth in his eyes and know it was him. It was true that Bobby loved him like a son, but a hunter doesn't get to break fifty years old without being careful as hell, even with loved ones. It wasn't the hug he'd hoped for, right on the porch the moment he saw family again, but when Bobby finally embraced him, Dean shed a few silent tears.

Bobby poured two tall glasses of whiskey neat while Dean took a seat on the living room couch. Bobby watched Dean touch one of the bandages that had started peeling back on his left knuckles. He noticed Dean stare at his own cut flesh for several seconds, color draining from his face before he snapped out of his brief trance long enough to reset the bandage. Bobby handed Dean a glass before sitting down in a nearby chair.

"What do you remember?" Bobby wanted to know what he was working with before deciding how to proceed.

"Well, I was a hellhound's chew toy." Dean's eyes didn't meet Bobby's and his leg rocked restlessly. "Then I woke up in a pine box, not a scratch on me."

Bobby face didn't betray his doubt. He'd seen Dean in dozens of awful situations and the boy had bounced back like nothing. This was different though, he was trying to keep up a strong exterior, but Bobby had seen enough trauma survivors to know when an ocean of pain was bubbling just below the surface. Dean remembered something from Hell, but it'd be nearly impossible to pry anything loose for the moment. If there was one thing Winchesters were good at it was pretending that everything was fine when it was anything but.
“Why was I buried anyway? Not that I’m complaining.” Dean sipped his whiskey slowly, savoring it and a little fearful that his tolerance might have gone down after ninety years… or maybe just nine months.

“I wanted to burn you, the whole hunter’s pyre, but Sam insisted that you be buried. He said that you’d need a body when he got you back.” Bobby looked up from his own drink. “You think he did this? Made a deal?”

“That’s what I’d do- Stupid son of a bitch. He’s probably in deep. You should’ve seen the area around my grave, it was like a bomb went off. There was definitely some bad mojo involved.” Dean threw caution into the wind and took a long swig from his glass. "Well, I need to see Sammy, his old number's not working. Can I get his new one from you?"

"Sorry Dean, I can’t help you there. I haven't talked to him since just after you died."

"What?!" Dean was caught between standing up in outrage and collapsing further into the soft couch from some unseen punch in the gut.

“He took off shortly after…”

“You just let him go off by himself?” Dean shouted, making his slightly raw throat hurt. His heart was hammering and he felt a little lightheaded. He knew that he was overreacting, but he couldn’t help it. Sam was supposed to be here, but he was gone and possibly had just done something supremely stupid to save Dean.

"I didn't 'just let him' do anything. He's a grown man- I can't really stop him from doing anything short of chaining him up in the basement." Dean rubbed the bridge of his nose and took a few breaths to calm himself down.

"Well, what happened?"

"After... After we buried you, he was fixated. He kept talking about hunting Lilith and getting you back. I didn't want to hear it. I'd just lost one of you and he was pushing for some suicide mission. I tried to talk him out of it, but he just took off one night. I tried reaching out to him for the first few weeks, but he wouldn't return my calls. After awhile he ditched his old number." Bobby didn’t want to meet Dean’s eye. He’d regretted not going after Sam for months, but now it was worse. If Sam had done some dark dealing to get Dean back, then finding Sam was all the more important than ever and the trail had gone cold long ago.

"We need to find him."

Bobby started making calls to various hunter networks, trying to get word on Sam, while Dean contacted Sam’s cell phone carrier. Sam had canceled service to all phone numbers associated with his known aliases, including his most private lines under the names Wedge Antilles and Garven Dreis. Bobby’s search had almost zero luck. A hunter out of Madison, Wisconsin thought she’d spotted Sam buying shotgun cartridges at a hunting shop five or six months earlier. He had left before she could figure out a way to make a casual introduction, but she seemed pretty confident that she recognized him from a picture Ellen used to keep on the wall of The Roadhouse. A single possible sighting that was at least five months old within a two month window wasn’t much to go off of.

"Every single one of his old phones is dead and his email address just bounced." Dean returned to
the couch after refilling his glass with whiskey.

"Don't bother trying to track your dad's old phones, he left them here with me." Bobby opened a desk drawer and retrieved three old cell phones to emphasize the point.

"He took Baby, right? Maybe we can get a hit off a traffic cam or something?"

"Well, I guess it's better than nothing."

It took a week for Dean and Bobby to swing enough pretend federal authority to get most of the major metropolitan police departments and larger counties’ sheriff’s offices checking their records for sightings of a black '67 Impala. It was a delicate game trying to convince each law enforcement office not to arrest Sam on sight or treat him as a wanted criminal. It ended up proving extremely difficult when Bobby spoke with the St. Louis police department. After a very stressful phone call, Bobby found Dean in the living room and filled him in.

"We may have a hit on the Impala. Five months ago in St. Louis, a tall man with medium length brown hair was seen leaving a crime scene in a black '67 Impala. The license plates don't match, but that doesn't count for squat if Sam's trying to stay off the radar."

"What was the crime?" Dean wasn’t too phased by the idea of fleeing a crime scene- the year before, Hendrickson had compiled an impressive list of apparent crimes committed by Dean that were really nothing out of the ordinary to a hunter.

"Slaughter at some nice hotel. nine dead- eight stabbings and one was thrown out a sixth story window, also five injured." Fourteen casualties was incredibly high, even for a hunter as well trained as Sam. There was so much off about the scenario that Bobby and Dean couldn’t even begin to come up with theories.

"Fuck." Dean started hoping that maybe the St. Louis lead wasn’t Sam at all, that maybe this was some sort of awful coincidence. “Fancy hotel, there's got to be security footage. Any chance we can get a look at it?"

"Doesn't look like it. Freak accident or something, the hotel's computer was out of storage and didn't record anything from that week."

"Great. If we didn't have bad luck we'd have no luck at all." Bobby raised a bottle of beer at Dean’s comment. "That scene sounds a little hairy for Sammy, right?"

"Maybe he was investigating?" Bobby asked, echoing Dean’s attempt to rationalize the evidence.

"Maybe."

They kept turning over every rock they could think of to find Sam, but after another week they were running out of ideas. It seemed like every possible lead was over five months old. St. Louis was the most recent and most promising account, but nothing turned up after that. Dean was becoming more agitated as their avenues for investigation started drying up. Bobby dreaded the coming talk, but one morning over a simple breakfast of coffee and grits, he took the chance.

"Listen Dean, I tried doing five different locator spells- Hell, I even tried a 17th century Portuguese summoning spell, but everything's coming back nil... I don't want to say it, but somebody's got to: He might be dead." Dean put down his cup of black coffee, swallowing hard.

"Bobby-" He only got the one word out, but his voice still managed to crack.
"Things have gotten damned hairy since we buried you. Demonic omens are popping up everywhere, hunters are getting killed or broken every week. Sam's a damn good hunter, but even the best have bad days."

"What about the whole him bringing me back-"

"We don’t know that that was him, and even if it was how do we know he didn’t make the deal months ago or that he even survived it?” There was a long silence while they both humored unpleasant visions.

“I can't just write him off and just give up. If it’s really so bad out there he might need me. I need to find him Bobby.” Dean knew he was getting dangerously close to chasing a ghost, but he’d spent his entire life taking care of his little brother and the thought of giving up on him made his heart break.

"I just- we might not like what we find, if we find anything at all. We both know that a lot of hunters end up named John Doe.” Bobby started to step back his suggestion of stopping the search, instead adopting a more stoic outlook for the future.

"He's not dead."

"We can't know that. It's not like we can just ask a demon if they've seen him around the pit."

"Trust me, I can make a demon talk, but it won't help. This is Sam we're talkin' about- the kid's a 6'5" puppy. No way he'd end up in the pit…” Dean looked at Bobby with a weakly hopeful smile. “But maybe we don't look at the destination, instead we talk to the transportation. Let's go have us a chat with a reaper.”

Chapter End Notes

Eagles of Death Metal - Flames Go Higher: http://youtu.be/8sZlqHypL_o
Reaping

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this chapter.

It took eight hours, including a three-hour detour to avoid the defensive demon groups, before Sam and Ruby reached their destination. There weren't any motels nearby, so they pull off to the side of a dead-end road a mile from the old church. Sam set up a small tent for Ruby to perform the locator map spell in, so that the wind wouldn't disrupt its components. Instead of going about his own business, he sat on the ground next the the tent door and waited for her to begin.

Ruby began by naming all the materials and showing him how to prepare the different pieces. She very briefly touched upon some of the theory behind the spell and how it fit into the bigger picture of magic. It surprised her that he seemed to sincerely listen to everything she was saying and even asked informed questions to clarify several points. She knew that he'd always been the brother to cast spells on hunts, but it hadn't occurred to her that he might have an interest in or even talent for the craft. It was true that he was using physical combat less and less, but using innate powers was far from the art and chemistry of witchcraft.

The demonstration process drew out the casting time to three hours long, but when they were done the floor of the tent was covered in a map displaying about two dozen tiny dots of light. Sam leaned closer to examine the map and unconsciously rested his palm on Ruby's thigh next to him. In weak reassurance, she placed her smaller hand over his. The spell had drained her of slightly more energy, but at least they were in a cooler climate and it was nighttime.

According to the map, there were fifteen demons at the church and small groups of three or four demons patrolling the surrounding area. They decided to approach the area from a safe distance, then get a look with binoculars before trying to settle on a plan. After a half-hour hike through thigh-high brush using only the light of the moon, they came to a small hill overlooking the scene.

The church was little more than a ruin. Three of the four stone walls had fallen in allowing a relatively unobstructed view of the inside. Demons worked to set up an altar in the center of the former building. In one corner, six people were bound and guarded by three demons. It definitely looked like a sacrifice was going to occur in the near future. Sam pointed to a three-demon patrol that was walking in his and Ruby's general direction.

"I think I can hold all three," he whispered. "If you can kill two, then I can drag them all out of view no problem and we can question the last one."

"You sure we want to be grabbing a patrol? If the others notice they might bolt or call in reinforcements."

"If this really is one of Lilith’s tasks, I want to make sure we're doing enough to mess it up. The last thing we need is to get in a big fight and not break the right urn or something. And... we'll just have to act fast once we grab them." Sam looked at Ruby in the dim light and hesitated. "Are you okay? If you're not ready for this…."  

"I'm fine. Let's do this." She started to take a step forward, but he put a hand on her arm stopping
"Leave the woman in the green jacket; she's alive in there. The other two are too far gone."

They were several hundred yards away from the patrolling demons with their prisoner a few minutes later. Sam had kept her silenced and trapped inside the meatsuit to avoid any attempts to call for help. Ruby cuffed the demon’s hands, but left her ankles unbound. It was a calculated risk that they were willing to take. Should they be captured or killed in their assault on the church Sam would hate to leave a recently exorcised woman bound almost half a mile from the nearest road.

Pressed for time, Sam began the interrogation. It proved much easier for him to torture demons than humans. All he had to do was focus on squeezing or tearing at their smoke-clouds and demons were in agonizing pain. He made sure to keep the demon silent when he tortured it, but he could tell by the contorting limbs and face that it was working. After a minute, he stopped and spoke to the demon quietly.

“I am going to ask you some questions, then I will let you speak. If you try to scream or don’t answer my questions I will torture you to death. Nod if you understand,” he instructed, causing the demon to nod vigorously. “Did Lilith order you to do this?”

“Yes.” Sam only allowed the demons voice to come out as a hoarse whisper.

“What do they need to do?”

“We—” The demon was shaking, seemingly terrified. “—They need to sacrifice the surviving descendants of the original massacre on the altar before daybreak.”

“Why is Lilith making you all sin during the High Holy Season?” Ruby asked in an almost-sympathetic voice. She may not have cared about religious holidays, but Lilith’s crowd was generally very devout and ordering them to do that seemed like its own form of torture.

"The rite can only be accomplished on a century-anniversary of the massacre and during the High Holy Season. The next time that it could happen is in about three hundred years."

Sam and Ruby stared at each other, eyes wide. "We need to stop this."

Sam and Ruby had managed to quickly and quietly subdue the other patrols as they had with the first, but they still had to deal with fifteen demons in one large room that provided very little in the way of cover. Sam guessed that he could probably only immobilize four or five at once, but he’d be unable to do anything else at the same time. Ruby had retrieved several flasks of holy water and the corrosive grenade-like potion she had accidentally been hit by a few months earlier. The holy water would be a fast-acting way to keep demons distracted, hopefully until the other potion took effect. As much as Ruby didn’t like the idea of them throwing or splashing liquids that could harm her, they would cause a massive distraction and prevent some of the demons from smoking out to get reinforcements.

There wasn’t enough time and advantageous terrain for them to develop a complex plan of attack. Sam and Ruby would both be carrying three of the holy water and corrosive flasks. They would throw the flasks into the room, then Sam would enter followed by Ruby. The corrosive flasks would lock any demons it hit into their meatsuits and start a one-minute countdown until those demons would be immobilized in pain. That meant that if they could fight relatively defensively for sixty seconds the tide of the battle would turn in their favor. Unfortunately, they couldn’t just
tag the demons and run away because the humans would almost certainly be sacrificed immediately.

They briefly humored the idea of flanking the demons by approaching from opposite collapsed walls, but Sam was concerned that would increase the odds of Ruby being hit by one of the harmful liquids. Ruby tried to argue that she could risk a little holy water if it made sense tactically, but Sam rationalized wanting to protect her by pointing out that a flanking maneuver would leave the church’s doorway unblocked. With the doorway blocked, the demons would have to climb over an at least three-foot high pile of stone that had once been a wall in order to escape on foot.

"I have an idea and you're not going to like it," Ruby commented as they watched the terrain, but she didn’t turn to face Sam. "All of the humans need to be sacrificed on the altar to complete the ritual. So if we used a rifle to kill one while they were still in the corner…"

Sam looked at the six humans bound and crying in the church. If they killed one with a long gun, there would be no need for him and Ruby to get within eyesight of the fifteen demons below. The task wouldn't be able to succeed for at least three hundred years, if at all. But the demons would probably kill the other five prisoners rather than let them go. They could kill one human and let five die in order to have a nearly certain chance at messing up Lilith's plans, and they'd be safe while doing it.

Ruby watched Sam think over her suggestion for longer than she had expected. She knew he considered himself rational enough to at least humor any suggestion, but putting others before himself was Sam’s nature. It would have to be a horrific situation for him to justify the deaths of innocents. She hadn't quite expected this situation to qualify, but there they were seriously considering it.

"I'm not letting the demons sacrifice them," he said after a long while. "And we aren’t going to sacrifice them either."

She had mixed feelings about his decision. As much as she would prefer to take the easy way out, the idea that Sam would agree to let six people die was probably more unsettling.

Knowing they were pressed for time, Sam and Ruby snuck down from the hill where they had been observing. They approached the church from its front, which was the only wall still standing tall enough to provide any cover for Sam’s imposing stature. They stood on either side of the doorway leading into the main room holding their targets. Sam raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the doorway, silently asking if Ruby was ready. She nodded and started mouthing a three-second countdown.

They both threw their flasks through the doorway at the same time, then Sam ran in first with Ruby right behind him. Seven of the demons had been hit with holy water, causing them to recoil or collapse in immediate pain. The binding corrosive potion had hit nine of them including several of the demons who had been hit with holy water. The four demons farthest from Sam and Ruby were untouched by either liquid, making them the largest flight risk and they were closest to the human prisoners.

Sam reached out with his powers and grabbed the untouched group of four. He had never attempted to move four demons at once, but his adrenaline was pumping and he instinctively pulled trying to get them away from the humans. Three of the demons flew forward in a jerking motion, slamming into another demon and the backmost pew. The remaining demon’s grip on its meatsuit proved to be weak because his smoke-cloud was ripped clean from the body, which fell
limp to the ground.

Sam hadn’t expected to be holding onto three possessed bodies and a smoke-cloud at the same time. Manipulating or otherwise dealing with a demon outside of a meatsuit was entirely different than one inside a body and he’d never tackled a mixed group before, let alone in a room full of pissed-off demons. As he tried to learn on the fly, Sam took a punch to the face. He fumbled the four demons briefly while he dodged the second swing. Sam focused on killing the demon attacking him with a swift psychic hit, then returned his focus to the smoke-cloud, which had started trying to fly away. He grabbed the cloud and killed it in seconds.

While Sam was working his way through the four untagged demons, Ruby started working through the other demons based on their proximity. She moved past Sam, slitting two holy-water-soaked throats on her way. A demon on the opposite side of the altar started cocking a pistol so she threw herself over the altar, knocking off as many idols as she could think to in the heat of the moment. She landed on her feet, then sprung forward stabbing her knife up into the demon’s jaw and skull. The demon had managed to get a shot off before dying, but it only caught the outside of Ruby’s left arm. She kicked the dropped gun under one of the pews.

She had managed to take a potentially lethal weapon out of the fight, but in the process put herself about ten feet away from Sam with five demons between them. She and Sam may have technically been flanking the handful of demons, but that didn’t count for much. They were still outnumbered five to one, Ruby was surrounded, and Sam wasn’t prepared to engage in a physical brawl while trying to use his powers. To make matter worse, the five surviving demons that had been hit with holy water were starting to recover.

Sam was struggling to finish off the three demons that he had thrown moments earlier. He wanted to kill them before they could escape, but two demons next to him tackled him to the ground. He landed hard on the stone floor, but managed to lift his head enough before impact to avoid a nasty concussion or worse. The two demons punched at his chest and face. He attempted to shield his ribs and head before gaining enough composure to hurl the demons backward with his powers. One was launched into a four-foot-high wall with a loud snap of broken bones; the other flew clear over the opposite wall landing in the dirt twenty feet from the church. Sam pulled a salted iron bar from his belt, preparing to club any demons that tried to attack him while he used his powers.

Ruby started cutting at the demons in an attempt to get back to Sam, but he yelled for her to focus on the prisoners. A demon had decided to make an attempt at the sacrifices even under the chaotic circumstances and started dragging a bound woman toward the altar. Ruby began moving for the woman and mostly dodged a dagger, only receiving a shallow cut on her right cheek and earlobe. Ruby plunged her knife into the dagger-wielding demon as she was slammed from behind and her chest collided with the altar. After a second to recover from the hit, she rolled against the side of the altar to face a demon in a very large meatsuit. One massive hand grabbed her wrist and attempted to shake her knife free, while the other punched her in the face, breaking her nose sending blood pouring down her face. Ruby kicked the demon hard in the crotch and his grip on her wrist loosened. Then, pushing off from the altar, she kicked him with her full force in the stomach, knocking him backward. His loose grip on her wrist was enough to send her tumbling forward after him, but she was able to plunge her knife into his chest as she fell.

Sam found it difficult to focus on anything other than the group of demons immediately around him. He swung the iron bar in his main hand and raised his offhand both to block attacks and help him control his powers. It was easier for him to grab a demon when his hand was physically grabbing in their direction. Three of the five demons surrounding him decided to attack at once. The outside two tried to hold his arms while the middle one came at him with a knife. Old reflexes took over and he wrenched his body to the left, trying to free the arm with the iron bar. Twisting
his wrist in the demon’s grasp, his arm came free and he hit the knife-wielding demon in the head with the bar. The demon screamed and his skin burnt from the contact with the iron, but not before his knife cut a long gash along Sam’s shoulder. He followed through on the swing and hit the demon holding his left arm.

Sam kicked the third demon away from him and started to regain some of his wits. He switched tactics to faster, more focused bursts of powers rather than trying to divide his attention over multiple targets. Enduring several punches from the two demons who had sat out the last attack, he finished killing the downed demon, then knocked back the two that had just been pummeling him.

He saw that Ruby had been pulled or knocked down next to the altar, which a demon was dragging a sacrifice onto. Sam raised his hand to stop the demon who was about to slit the bound woman’s throat, and noticed another demon coming up behind Ruby with a large stone brick. Sam used his powers to throw the demon with the knife away from the altar, then focused his attention on killing the demon with the brick before it took a swing at Ruby.

Ruby looked up to notice the demon with the brick behind her as it fell dead. She pulled her knife from the chest of the large meatsuit she had just dropped and ran for Sam. By the time she got to him he had four demons grappling, punching, and kicking at him. The iron bar was knocked from his hand as he was swarmed. She stabbed two of the demons in the back, killing them, by the time Sam had killed one with his powers. Ruby pried the last one off of him, allowing Sam to focus on grabbing and exorcising the three injured demons at the back of the church. Ruby killed her demon, then went to go finish off the demon Sam had thrown over the fallen church wall. It was writhing in the dirt from the corrosive potion by the time she got there so Ruby cautiously braced it with her boot before stabbing it in the heart.

Sam limped over to the human prisoners and began cutting them free with one of the discarded daggers. He reached out to grab the woman on the altar’s rope bindings, but she flinched away from him. He held up his hands and assured her that he was there to help them. She continued to shake, but didn't resist him cutting her ropes. When he was done with the woman’s binding, he moved around to begin freeing the other humans as Ruby returned.

She was slow moving from fatigue, but wore a broad grin on her blood-smeared face. Instead of hopping over the stone half wall, she circled around through the doorway. Sam finished cutting the last prisoner free before standing up to meet her. He held the back of her head in one hand and kissed her. After a moment, she pulled back just an inch.

"Watch the nose, Romeo. It's completely fucked." Her voice was thick and nasally from the blood clotting in her nostrils. She went back in for another kiss, pulling him toward her by his shirt.

He grimaced and then said, "Careful on my ribs. I think there might be a few breaks."

Ruby released him, then peeked around his body to look at the humans. They were in a state of shock, but physically fine except for a few bumps and bruises. Sam found two car keys on the dead demons that corresponded to a van and truck that were parked nearby. While Sam was checking bodies, Ruby tried to explain what had just happened to the freed prisoners. After a few minutes, Sam had identified five of the demon meatsuits that were still alive. The freed prisoners helped them load the unconscious bodies into the van and headed back toward town after thanking their mysterious rescuers.

When Sam and Ruby got back to the Impala they took two bottles of water and a rag out of the trunk to wash off all the blood and grime from the fight. Sam cleaned some of the corrosive potion off the back of his left hand, careful not to contaminate anything Ruby might touch. Then he
bandaged the glancing bullet wound on Ruby's arm. She patiently waited for him to tie off the bandage before cleaning the cut on his shoulder.

Fueled by adrenaline and a victory high, Ruby hopped into the driver's seat and started queuing up some music. Sam settled in shotgun and cradled his aching rib cage. The sun was just starting to rise, illuminating every cut and forming bruise on their exposed skin. Sam looked down as he buckled his seatbelt and noticed a very faint pinkness on the back of his left hand. He frowned slightly, but decided not to mention it when he looked over at Ruby. She was singing along to Dead Kennedys' “Too Drunk To Fuck.” It was the happiest he'd seen her in days and he planned on enjoying it.

"Hello, Dean."

She stood in the chalk summoning circle. Her shoulder length straight black hair matched her simple, black knee-length dress. Seeing her again, it all came flooding back. Dean stared, unblinking at her hauntingly familiar face. She greeted him like an old friend and in a way he supposed that maybe to her he was.

"Tessa?" Dean exhaled her name, shocked that he even remembered it.

She had expected to see his true death twice. The first time he'd been saved before she could help him move on. She hadn't even bothered to reap his soul while the archangel was killing him for fun; it was obviously a temporary situation and not worth being involved in. But the second time he faced true death, she watched helplessly as a hellhound sunk its teeth into his soul and pulled it down to Hell. Dean could've sworn the last thing he saw before he died was her in the far corner of the room, a look of devastation on her face. She thought that that was the last she'd see of him, but there they were.

"Dean, you're the one that got away. Do you realize how special that makes you? And to do it twice. I've never seen a soul come back from Hell after so long. There's something about you. I can't put my finger on it." She smiled at him like he was a puzzle for her amusement and torment. "It figures that you'd be alive now. Everything has become so... unsettled."

"What do you mean?"

"Something strange is going on. We've been reaping more than usual and—I probably shouldn't be telling you this.... There are new reapers, for the first time in centuries. And there are a lot of them. I'm not sure what's happening, but it feels like we're...." She hesitated. "We're preparing for something big."

"You mean like lots-of-bodies big?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know why else so many of us would be needed." Tessa avoided their eyes, clearly not wanting to be the bearer of bad news. She changed the subject. "But that's not why you summoned me here."

Dean allowed her to end the discussion of some unknown looming threat. She had betrayed some confidentiality telling them what she had and if she didn't know or was incapable of telling them any more, he didn't want to push her. He was trying to ask a favor from her and she was a powerful enough creature that it was daunting enough even without pissing her off first.

"My brother, Sam, is missing," Dean explained. "I need to know if he's alive."

"He's not one of my souls," she replied, seemingly indifferent to the entire concept of Sam’s life,
but her lips thinned tellingly when Dean’s shoulders sank.

"Please, Tessa. I don't know who else to ask. I don't know if it's even worth looking for him." He didn't want to beg, especially in front of Bobby, but for any firm information on Sam he was prepared to. Luckily, she succumbed.

"Dean, I like you. I really do. I'll check with Sam's reaper, but if he is dead...." She pressed her lips together again, cutting off her plea. A look of sadness and pity overcame her naturally content smile. "I wish I could tell you to let him go and accept the natural order, but I know that you won't. You'll fight Death itself for your family and if it kills you, so be it. I don't have a dog in this fight; I just reap the losers. But I don't want you to suffer, Dean. So please, be careful."

Tessa closed her eyes in concentration and her body flickered out of sight. Dean and Bobby stood next the the summoning circle they had drawn in one of Bobby’s upstair bedrooms. After several minutes of waiting, Bobby was about to suggest that she wasn’t coming back, but he was interrupted by her reappearance.

"Sam is alive. I don't know where—" She held up her hand to preemptively silence Dean.

"Before you ask, I didn't ask his reaper when his time is up. That's something we can never share.... I need to return to my duties, but I hope you find him." When she spoke of hope her voice had a sincerity that Dean found reassuring.

"And I hope I don't see you for a long time," Dean joked, but he had to admit that Tessa felt like a strange source of stability and comfort that had always turned up when things were most dire. He wondered what it would be like to be her friend; but maybe reapers couldn’t have friends? Maybe they were too eternal and unfathomable to have casual interactions?

She stepped forward, reaching a hand out to touch Dean's cheek. He hesitated ever so slightly, fearing for a moment what the touch of a reaper could do. Her thumb caressed his cheekbone, and she leaned in, kissing him on the lips. For a fleeting moment, Dean felt a sensation of timelessness and tame power. He kissed her back, even parting his lips slightly in invitation, but she cut him off, then smiled at him.

"Was that for good luck?" he asked with a sad smirk.

"I’m an agent of fate, Dean. I don't believe in luck. No, that was for you.” She took a step back and then vanished.

Dean stood unmoving for several seconds looking where she had just been standing. She was more or less his guardian angel of death and it strangely hurt to see her go. Tessa’s familiar face had reminded him how much he needed to regain contact with his friends and restore his family. He glanced over at Bobby, the only person he had left in his life. The old hunter patted him on the shoulder and started walking out of the bedroom.

“If something big is coming, then I need to make another round of calls.” Bobby was back at work.

"Who to?" Dean was distracted, as his gaze lingered briefly on the summoning circle before following Bobby from the room.

"Every single hunter I know. We gotta get the word out if we're about to go all hands on deck."
Ruby rolled off of Sam. They were both out of breath and tacky with sweat. She stretched slightly before settling into a comfortable position, lying on her back with one arm tucked under her head. Sam rolled onto his side to get a better view of her.

He had been worried about her for the past few weeks, but she seemed to be doing better for the most part. He had learned how to perform the alarm spells along with a dozen other useful tricks. That had helped take some of the load off of her. She hadn't been as interested in eating, but Sam suspected that that was from the stress and strain of the constant running and fighting. That lifestyle wasn't too far off from his time hunting—there was lots of travel and frequent occurrences of life-threatening combat—but Ruby didn't have the hunting background he had. She seemed to be worn thin at times. It even looked like she had lost a little weight... but only in her arms. She still retained the gentle curves of her breasts and hips; if anything they seemed ever so slightly bigger.

"How long before we need to get back on the road?" she asked.

"We can probably afford a few hours," he speculated. "There weren't many demons around where we broke the line yesterday. Seems like we'll get a good head start. Maybe take off in the late afternoon?"

"In that case, I'm gonna grab a shower and you should probably get some beauty sleep," she teased him, flicking his chin-length hair with her fingers, then she stood up to stretch some more.

Sam liked watching her naked body move, seeing the muscles flex or the tattoo on her back contort with activity. She bent forward, extending her arms toward the ground. Then she arched backward while rubbing her lower back. He admired the little dimples above her ass, then glanced over to look at her hip bones, but they weren't as visible as normal. When she bent backward it was fairly clear that her abdomen had become a bit fuller, but only her lower abdomen... and her hips... and her breasts.

Sam felt like the bottom of his stomach had fallen out. His brain filled with a nearly-static noise of shock that left him unable to think for a moment. He must have turned pale because Ruby immediately stopped and gave him a worried look.

"Are you okay?" she asked. When he didn't answer right away she sat down on the bed again and put a hand on his shoulder. "What is it?"

"I—um, do you feel—have you gained weight?"

Ruby looked a little annoyed at the question, but shrugged. "How would I know? These motels don't exactly come with scales... but yeah, maybe. I guess my pants have been a little tight lately." Her brow lowered suspiciously. "...Why?"
"It's just, the way you've been feeling sick and tired lately... and I noticed you stomach sticking out a little…. There isn't any chance you're... pregnant?" He barely got the word out.

She just stared at him completely blank-faced for several seconds. When she finally confirmed that she had indeed heard him correctly, she blinked several times in rapid succession and shook her head in confusion.

"What? No. That's impossible."

"Are you sure?"

"It doesn't work—demons can't—it doesn't work. Not with two demons. Not with a human. Stuff doesn't mix right." She emphatically moved her hands to mimic two objects that didn’t fit together properly.

"What do you mean?"

"Demons, we're toxic. Way back when, some of the archdemons ran some experiments on breeding with humans, and it doesn't work. Best they could figure, the demon half was too toxic for the human half so nothing ever took." She was getting more uncomfortable by the second.

"Except demonic stuff isn't toxic to me. It actually seems to make me stronger. So... is it possible?" he asked, but Ruby didn't move at all. She was processing the implications of his statement for so long that he had his answer. "We need to find out."

Ruby got up and began pacing next to the bed. Sam had never seen her pace nervously before, which he found alarming, but that seemed like as good a time as any to adopt new nervous tics.

"I'm not entirely sure that a home pregnancy test is gonna work," she pointed out. "I'm a creature from Hell animating a brain-dead body, not sure how that affects the hormones."

Sam considered her concern. When it came right down to it, if they used one and the results came back negative, he just wouldn’t feel confident in the results. The last thing they needed was to get tricked by a false negative and go another however-many weeks oblivious to the problem. They needed an answer in black and white—literally. He suggested, "An ultrasound should work. Mechanically everything should be normal, right? Either there’s going to be something there or not."

"Yeah. That makes sense, I guess." She chewed on her lip while she answered, then stopped mid-stride and looked at him. "You know this is insane, right?"

They found a nearby clinic that could fit them in an hour later. The drive and wait had been one of the most agonizing experiences of their lives, which was saying a lot. After parking the Impala, Sam hesitated, unsure if he should go in with her, but Ruby circled around to the driver’s door and silently dragged him from the car.

She checked in at registration under her alias, Kathy Anderson, while Sam stared awkwardly at the waiting area that seemed ominously full of infants. It took a little finagling and lying about already having taken a positive pregnancy test for her to avoid them making her pee in a cup. The last thing she needed was to be refused an ultrasound based on a false-negative. They both just wanted to get the damn thing over with. When she was done strong-arming her way into an appointment, she sat down next to Sam to wait in their shared uncomfortable silence.

After fifteen minutes, a nurse called, "Ms. Anderson?"
Ruby stood up and exchanged an uncertain glance with Sam. She was wavering in her conviction to drag him along and he didn’t know if his presence would be supportive or stressful. The decision was made for them when the nurse stepped forward and inserted herself into the previously wordless debate.

"Are you the father?"

Sam’s ears became hot and he was sure he blushed. The nurse’s voice was cheerful in a way that made the situation worse somehow. He could tell that she was just trying to be friendly, but a sunny disposition was a trigger for Ruby when she was already stressed and Ruby’s unnaturally quiet behavior was telling. So Sam decided to take on the responsibility of holding up their end of interaction with the nurse.

"In a way. That's what we're here to find out," he replied.

The nurse’s eyebrows rose briefly and she glanced at Ruby, then leaned a bit closer. "Oh. This was um... unexpected?"

"Understatement," muttered Ruby. "I was told that I couldn't have kids. We just want to know if it’s...."

The nurse put a hand on Ruby’s shoulder in reassurance, but it just made Sam internally cringe with concern for the nurse’s safety and Ruby’s sanity. "Don't worry, my dear. We'll take a quick look. You'll know in a jiffy!"

The nurse lead them down a hallway and into an exam room that was decorated in pastels, then hummed some cheerful tune while she prepared the ultrasound machine. Ruby stared at her, then looked over at Sam with a weak glare. He shrugged, helpless to improve the situation, then pretended to find an informational poster fascinating. After readying the machine, the nurse had Ruby get onto the exam table, and uncover her abdomen. The nurse applied some gel to the exposed belly and began scanning.

Sam and Ruby couldn’t see the monitor from where they were seated so they both watched the movement of the handheld scanning device instead. It took a few minutes of moving the device a little, then pushing a button or two, then scanning again, but the nurse kept coming back to the same point. Each time she came back to that spot Sam held his breath. On the fourth pass, the nurse held the scanner still.

"Congratulations!" she exclaimed in a sickeningly happy squeak and turned the monitor around so that they could see the black and white image. It was a fetus. Hell, it looked kind of like a baby. It had a head and visible arms; one of the arms even moved. When it moved Ruby’s eyes widened, but she was otherwise motionless. The nurse didn’t seem to notice Ruby’s startled expression. "It looks like you're maybe 14 weeks along, but it can be hard to tell when the dad is so tall."

"Does everything look normal?" Sam managed. He didn't know what he expected to see from a half-demon fetus. Would it just be human or like a demon? What did demons even look like? He had only ever seen them as black clouds riding humans.

"Oh, yup! It looks healthy. You can even see the heart beating there."

She pointed to the monitor where a little area was fluttering. The nurse then pushed a button and the machine began emitting a tiny, rapid heartbeat. At that point, Ruby looked like she was so uncomfortable with the situation that Sam suspected she wasn't capable of retaining any information that the nurse said going forward. He decided to get Ruby out of the clinic as quickly
"I think we’re going to need a little time to process this. Do you have any brochures or information that we could take with us?"

"Of course! Oh! And, since everyone wants to know, you have another four to six weeks before you can tell if it’s a boy or girl. I’ll go get you some materials to take home."

The nurse smiled at Sam, who managed to awkwardly smile back. She stood up and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her. Ruby turned to look at Sam, she was aghast.

"You okay?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

She squeezed gently. "I’ll let you know."

They retreated to the Impala after the nurse gave them a large folder full of reading material and a roll of eight ultrasound photos. Sam got into the driver’s seat since Ruby was in no state to drive, but he didn’t start the car. Instead he ran his fingers through his hair in an attempt to clear his head a bit. To his relief, Ruby was looking around and shaking her head in a similar attempt to start to process the new information.

"Holy fuck," she exhaled.

"Yeah." Sam flipped through the handouts before carefully tossing the folder onto the back seat. He then put the ultrasound photos into the glovebox. "You seem really— Are you okay?"

"I was not prepared for this."

"Yeah, we both weren't," he said sympathetically.

"I mean like, at all. When I was a human having a kid was never even remotely imaginable."

He had forgotten that Ruby had had another life as a human, when she could have faced this sort of thing before, but apparently pregnancy was not something she’d had experience with.

"You didn't have any kids when you were human?" He unconsciously skirted the looming conversation, but she didn’t provide enough of an answer to take them off on a sufficiently distracting tangent.

"I died young."

There was a long silence that neither quite knew how to break. Sam sighed, shutting his eyes and pressing his lips together.

"This is unbelievable. The timing…" he muttered without knowing how to finish the thought.

"Was there ever gonna be a good time?" Ruby joked halfheartedly. The shock had started to wear off and she was beginning to really think about what was happening and how to proceed. His statement had surprised her.

It was true that having to deal with a pregnancy while they were chasing Lilith and being pursued was a horrible inconvenience, but she wasn’t prepared for Sam to juxtapose their current situation with some scenario involving more feasible timing. In a glancing sort of way, he’d accidentally brought up the idea of having a kid independent from their immediate circumstances. She may not have ever thought about having kids, but it seemed that he had. It wasn’t clear if those were old
feelings brought to the surface or if he had continuously been carrying a secret hope for someday having a family.

But, in spite of his hopes, with everything that they were going through they still had to keep their wits. Even if it turned out that they wanted to give having a kid a shot—and that was a big if—they needed to know their options and consider the risks. She offered an easy out to the situation. "You know, I could just smoke out for a few minutes. That would probably end it."

"It probably would…." Sam sighed again and leaned forward, resting his forehead against the steering wheel.

"What are you thinking?"

"When I was at Stanford, I thought I was out. I wanted a normal life and family. After…. Afterward, when I started hunting again I figured that my chance at having a family was over. I didn't want my kid to grow up the way I did, into the life. I tried to make myself not want…." He almost finished the sentence with ‘this’ but hesitated. That was not the life he wanted to bring a child into. It was barely the kind of life he could stand living himself.

Yet, there was a big part of him that wanted to make things work. He didn’t know if it was fear or hope that moved him. Since the motel room, he couldn’t help but notice a small voice in the back of his mind that wondered if demonic essence was incompatible with humans. Could he even have a kid with a human? Demon blood ran in his veins, enough that he had reacted slightly to Ruby’s demon-only potion in Colorado. That combined with his attunement to all things demonic had definitely put him into a grey area. The idea that he might lose some fundamental aspect of his humanity, like being able to breed with his own species, worried him. Not that he’d been planning on having kids at all, let alone having sex with anyone other than Ruby for the foreseeable future…. He couldn’t help but have a small, but legitimate concern that maybe having some fluke kid with her was his only chance. But as much as he feared the idea of a lost opportunity, he was slightly comforted to find that he felt even more wistful.

"Do you want to keep it?" she asked frankly.

"Maybe?" It wasn’t a good answer, but it was honest. After a thoughtful pause he continued, “But it doesn't make sense; not with us going up against Lilith."

The rational side of him had resigned itself to ending the pregnancy, but he still didn’t like the decision. If things had been different, if they weren’t being chased all over the country until they killed Lilith or were killed themselves…. Throughout his life, the what-ifs always had had a way of hurting him.

Ruby could see that he was disappointed with his conclusion, even if he didn’t mean to telegraph his feelings so clearly. For the last few months she’d watched him act more in his own self-interest. Not to the exclusion of others, but in the pursuit of some level of personal happiness. He wasn’t doing anything bold, but there was a growing habit of enjoying simple pleasures, like hijacking the iPod to play something soft like Aimee Mann or stopping the car to stargaze. She liked to see him seek out things that made him happy because it meant that he was finally starting to live again instead of merely surviving. She could see that conflict on his face: the debate between living and surviving.

"You once told me that you wanted to kill Lilith in order to get closure and move on with your life," she said, breaking the bleak silence. “We screwed up her ritual thing. We've killed dozens or maybe a hundred of her minions. Maybe that's close enough to closure? Maybe moving on means doing something that you really want, finding something else to live for. Like looking to the future
instead of dwelling on the past.”

His body tensed with uncertainty. "You'd—you mean, you'd consider doing this?"

"If you want this kid, then I'll support that decision—if we can figure out a way to not get ourselves killed in the process." She wanted to make this situation work, but if they didn't have some sort of a plan to keep them alive it was going to be a moot point.

"What do you want?" he asked as he turned to look her in the eyes for the first time since they had gotten into the car.

Ruby had been going along with his crazy whims for so long that he hadn't stopped to think about her feelings. In a lot of ways she had more say in the decision than he did. She would have to endure being pregnant for another six months, which would be an ordeal. Also, Sam realized that Ruby didn't age, which meant that barring any untimely deaths, she would potentially have a longer relationship with a hypothetical kid, possibly even outliving it. He didn't expect her to have strong feelings the way he did because she hadn't thought about the subject as much, but surely she had some opinions, no matter how new they might be.

"Maybe?" She shrugged slightly. "It's hard to picture myself being much of a mom. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

He thought that that was an understandable reaction. It seemed like half the time she was about ten words shy of starting a bar fight. But the truth was that she wasn't as two-dimensional as she thought. After spending a year with her, he had seen her at her most vulnerable and sincere. She enjoyed poetry as well as punk rock. She dispensed words of wisdom and gentle reassurances. She appreciated good, but intimately understood evil. And she made those she cared for better by her company.

"From what I saw, you're great with the kids at your coven... and you rebuilt me from the ground up over the last year. I think you'd be fine, but that's just my opinion." Sam was noticing the turn in the conversation. It had gone from trying to decide whether to have the baby to finding a way to justify having the baby. "And, honestly, if it turns out that taking care of a kid isn't for you, if there was a way to make sure things were safe, then I think I could make it work."

He'd been raised by a single dad—well, two single dads if you counted Bobby—and while John Winchester was far from a model parent, Sam had never felt like he was supposed to have a mom. As much as everyone else had felt Mary's absence, Sam hadn't known any better and didn't expect more. And he was committed to being a much better father than his own.

Ruby raised an eyebrow at his offer. "You'd really be fine rocking the single dad status? You must really want this kid."

"I guess I do." He smiled slightly. "Maybe you're right, about Lilith and finding something else to live for."

Ruby smiled back at him. She moved the conversation forward, away from the touchy feelings to more practical matters.

"If we're gonna do this we need to have a longer-term plan than just traveling every day. We seemed to be off the radar with the coven. We could go there, at least until we figure out something better."

Sam nodded for a second, then clenched a fist in annoyance. "Fuck. You can't get through the
barrier until after the kid is born. Pascoe told me that the barrier doesn't let pregnant women through, some sort of design flaw involved protection against parasitic monsters."

"Parasitic monster sounds about right." Ruby rubbed the back of her neck. She had been tired before the whole pregnancy panic and now that they were staring down another six months of that she felt even more fatigued. "I guess we run for six more months and then after the kid is born make a break for the coven."

"Even if we can't get through the barrier, can the coven help us?" Sam asked hopefully.

"We can't stay with any of the expat-witches without putting them in danger, and I doubt they'd be able to offer more protection than we've already got." She shot down the idea. "It'd be good to let Gabin know what's going on, but I can't think of anything he can do for us while we're stuck moving all the time."

"The two of us—we're really going to do this?"

"Well, we're already doing crazy stuff. This is just a hair crazier," Ruby said, then suddenly pointed at Sam. "Just don't start touching my stomach or I'll break your hand."

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to give you a little reassurance/explanation of this turn in the plot. It’s not necessary to the plot for you to read my notes here, but I thought it might offer a little insight.

Warning: There’s a very vague spoiler for seasons six and eight of Supernatural in my mini-meta-rant below.

I started thinking about this story last year. I was rewatching The French Mistake, when I wondered whether Sam would feel differently if the episode happened in early season eight. Sam was struggling with getting back into hunting after getting out for so long and at that point Jared & Gen had their first kid. I felt like I could see Sam be really tempted to take the out of staying in our world and having a “normal” life. I found myself really liking the idea of Sam actually wanting something for himself in life, rather than just trying to put out fires. So this story grew out of exploring Sam trying to have something resembling a normal family when all the shit was hitting the fan.

Now don’t get me wrong, I enjoy fluff and happy stories as much as the next person, but I really love it when characters evolve over time as the result of struggle. I need characters to suffer a bit and question their understanding of the world. So, yes there’s a somewhat romantic relationship and I’m introducing a pregnancy to the plot, which obviously will get a fair amount of attention (especially from Sam & Ruby). But I’m not about to abandon any of the building apocalypse stuff, the politics/culture of Hell (and eventually Heaven), or any of the potential violence. The world will not stand still for Sam & Ruby.
After deciding to have the child, Sam and Ruby changed their strategy to be entirely defensive. They were trying to run out a six-month clock and didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. They didn't bother going after Lilith or any of her task, even when Sam had the occasional vision, though he would post on an online hunter message board with anonymous tips in the hopes that someone else would oppose her. They tried to limit combat as much as possible, but it would still happen at least once a week.

Ruby had beaten Sam to the punch on the whole 'fighting while pregnant' debate. She had insisted that as long as the pregnancy wasn't affecting her ability to fight, or visible and putting a target on her back, that she should still be in the fights. Her argument was that there was a risk of getting hurt whether she was in the fight or if she was sitting out and Sam lost, so she might as well help. He tried to argue with her, explaining that it had been dumb luck that she wasn't seriously injured at the church in Colorado where she had been shot in the arm at point blank range and pushed into an altar, but she just assured him that she'd be more careful.

In the end they agreed that she would try to find ranged spells that could be useful in a fight and avoid melee at all costs. Going forward, Sam would try to run interception and engage in the close-range fighting style that Ruby had previously specialized in. This role reversal was a little awkward at first, but they eventually got the hang of it. Sam even began combining his hand-to-hand combat skills with his powers in a much smoother fashion than when he had first tried it in Colorado.

Aside from the changes in their fighting style, they also made a few lifestyle changes. After two stubborn weeks, Ruby conceded to buy some more comfortable clothing. She didn't look pregnant, but she did have a slightly fuller abdomen than she used to, a fact that only she and Sam noticed. Another change was that Ruby started eating regular meals and taking prenatal vitamins. They theorized that whatever supernatural quality allowed demons to survive without food or sleep was also helping make up for the lack of nutrition, but Sam worried that relying on the demon qualities might somehow increase exposure or reliance on the demonic nature. It was also evident from her mild weight loss and fatigue that she was, in fact, not going to be able to function on demonic powers alone.

Around the time that she traded in her slim-fit jeans for something with a stretchier waistline, Ruby finally let Sam touch her belly. She found the whole thing a bit silly and slightly dehumanizing, but she knew it was considered some sort of rite of passage. It would have been different if she had been further along and he could feel a kick or something, but he seemed content to just make the hopeful gesture. Sam had also been consistently happier than she had seen him in a long time, and she found herself enjoying the goofy grin he would get while touching her belly.

Around week twenty, Ruby felt the baby move for the first time. She had been driving when it happened and pulled over to the shoulder. Sam was working through a book of New York Times crossword puzzles and was chewing his pen over the author of 'Little Essays Toward Truth' (seven...
letters), but stopped to look around.

"Something wrong?" he asked while putting down the book.

"I think it just moved."

"What? Oh!" Sam sat up in his seat and glance at her small belly. A little smiled formed on his face. "Do you think I could feel it?"

"I could barely feel it and it's probably kicking at my guts. Give it a few more weeks or months to get some strength, then I’ll be happy to share the abuse." His expression was happy, longing, and a little disappointed all in one. She took his hand, placing it on her belly, and waited for some movement. “Can you feel that?"

“I don’t think so.”

He was very briefly tempted to try reaching out with his powers to see if he could sense the baby, but decided against it. He didn’t know if the baby would have enough demon in it for him to sense or whether it would risk hurting the baby. It took almost no concentration for him to sense demons under normal circumstances, but trying to parse the baby from Ruby would require more concentration. And while he was getting better at subtly using his powers, intense observation could easily accidentally turn into interference, which could be dangerous to the tiny baby of many unknown qualities.

As much as she knew that it was unlikely for him to feel anything so minor, Ruby had hoped that he would surprise her. She knew that he was eager for more of a connection or interaction with the baby. She wanted to give him some sort of consolation.

"We could probably find out if it's a boy or girl at this point. Do you want to find another clinic when things slow down?" she offered.

Sam hesitated. He was curious, but at the same time he had an overwhelming aversion to getting another ultrasound. Every once in a while he would take the roll of photos out to look at and his mind would fill with uncomfortable questions. The grainy black and white photos conjured all sorts of strange interpretations of the shadows in the image. The nurse had said that it looked normal, but what if the dark patches in the picture hid something unnatural?

Yet, strangely, those thoughts didn’t bother him by themselves. He was so excited for this kid that he didn't care if it was part demon. It was possible to fight against the darkness inside; he and Ruby had both proven that. But as much as he didn't care what the baby would be, he didn't want the issue to be forced. If they found out that there was something off, then they might have to really acknowledge the implications. There wasn’t anything he could think of that they would find in an ultrasound that would demand action, but the recent years had brought so many unforeseeable events that he was scared to get bad news.

He was committed to the baby and he didn't want to feel like he had to justify their decision to have it to the ghost of his father or brother. Once the baby was born everything would be set in stone and he would make it work no matter what. He had met all sorts of creatures that managed to pass for human; he had even dated a few. And he was comforted to know that if worse came to worst, the baby could grow up with the coven where it would be accepted. But until the baby was born there would be the unspoken questions of 'what if...' or ‘how could you be so selfish?'

Apart from his own anxieties over seeing the baby before it was born, he knew that the situation was unheard of and that made its discovery dangerous. Ruby had to be more careful than ever not
to flash black eyes or use her somewhat enhanced demonic strength. She had to appear as human as possible in order to go unnoticed by hunters and demons alike. What if a nurse saw something on the ultrasound? Would they have to wipe her memory and destroy the evidence? The whole scenario sounded awful.

On the one hand there was a lot to be said for checking on the baby, but there were risks and fears associated with it. Now that Ruby could feel the baby, Sam hoped that its activity would help reassure them that the baby was doing alright. So far the pregnancy had proved very resilient and they had even gotten through the critical first twelve weeks without taking any of the precautions they had since implemented.

"I don't want to know what it is," he answered in a not-very-casual tone.

She eyed him, knowing that he had taken an awfully long time to come to such a simple conclusion. His phrasing had also been slightly telling in its ambiguity.

"Are we just going to keep pretending that this is a normal human kid?"

"Between us, I don’t care what it is. But when I think about everything out in the world—I don’t want to worry about whether others would judge us. We’ve both been called monster….” He could hardly bring himself to voice his fear. “I don’t want to hear that about my kid. If it can’t pass for human, then we’ll make things work, but for right now I just….."

“That’s fine.” She put her hand on his in reassurance. “We’ll just roll with the punches like we always have. If it makes you feel better though, I don’t think it’s gonna look weird or anything. I mean I couldn’t imagine how it could look like an actual demon.”

“What do you mean? What do demons look like?” Everytime he had imagined Hell it had been full of people, but he realized that that was just because he was used to seeing demons inside meatsuits.

"All sorts of things. There’s no standard mold. That’s why it’s so hard to imagine what about the kid could look different. Demons, we’re just a manifestation of our old broken soul. There are some trends depending on how they broke you, but it's mostly dependent on personality and history. The self-loathing ones are generally scarred and bloody messes. Torquen—the torturing asshole demons—they tend to look like that big guy in Fantasia. They're pretty full of themselves. But demons could be nearly anything that shows their nature. So, I mean, how could a baby be a manifestation of anything other than itself? It’s not going to have any history to warp its appearance and the whole manifesting appearance thing only works in Hell for normal demons. So why should the kid look demony at all?"

He spent a few seconds considering the idea of one’s appearance reflecting the self. "What do you look like?"

"I try to look like my old self as much as possible; a lot of demons do. It's normal to try to hang on to parts of your old life. But it's tough. Over time it can be hard to remember the details…. I don't remember what my face looked like." She gripped the steering wheel and frowned for a moment. "Down in the pit I'm not a pretty sight."

"If you’re a reflection of your—I guess ‘soul’ isn’t the right word.” He tried to be sensitive to the fact that she didn’t technically have a soul anymore, but he never knew how to holistically describe Ruby’s life force, moral character, and personality. “Anyway, how bad could you be?"

"I remember the worst qualities of myself as a human, mental, but also physical. I had burns on
my face, neck and arms, and some scars—" She cut herself off, wanting to spare him the gorey details. "I don't look like that all the time down there. The more experienced or magically-attuned demons can mimic meatsuits that they've used for long stretches. A lot of Hell’s aristocracy have favorite meatsuits, so they look the same even though the body doesn't actually go to Hell. I can't mimic exactly, but I can at least take features. Try to fix my face, but it's not really my face."

"I never thought I’d be wondering what a half-demon looks like."

"Well, in four or five months you won’t have to wonder anymore."

The decision to have a child together had made Sam reconsider the nature of his relationship with Ruby. If someone had asked him what their relationship was, he would’ve responded that they were just good friends… with benefits. But he internally acknowledged that his little crush had grown into legitimate affection. He wasn’t prepared to say that he was in love with her, but mostly because his relationship with Ruby was so different from his with Jessica, the last person he could honestly say he had been in love with. He never thought of Ruby as his girlfriend, but they had occasionally been mistaken for a couple while on the road and both of them just rolled with that cover.

It felt like they had an unspoken agreement to not label what was happening between them. In a way that made a lot of sense to Sam; there were so many facets of their relationship that didn’t conform to a stereotypical dating couple, friends, or mere professional partners. But the lack of a label had given a slight uncertainty to it. If they had been dating there would have been an illusion of commitment or long-term thinking. Before finding out about the pregnancy, they hadn’t been thinking very far ahead at all since there was the ever-present risk of death. But with the baby, they had to think ahead and expect that on some level they would be in each other’s lives for the foreseeable future.

The acknowledgement of a long-term relationship continued to be left unspoken for the most part, until Ruby began to show and strangers began pressing the issue. On two occasions, they were denied service at small establishments on account of having a child out of wedlock. The third time, Ruby yelled at the waitress some bullshit line about how they had been mugged and their wedding rings were stolen. Dinner was on the house that night and afterward they decided that maybe wearing rings in more conservative areas might simplify their lives. He ended up wearing a fake wedding ring with his demon not-quite-girlfriend who was expecting their unprecedented baby, but it was the most solid thing in Sam’s life and he had to admit that he was happy.

Tessa’s warning of some coming threat was transmitted through every major hunters network that Bobby could think of, and it was generally received at face value. Ellen and Jo even utilized some old Roadhouse connections to help spread the word. Within a week, Bobby had established a twenty-four state hunter support chain that continually updated each other on regional omens and happenings. After word came through that several North Carolina hunters from a different hunters group had their recent memories wiped by something, Bobby’s network implemented a policy of backing up hunt research and logs with other nearby hunters.

The result was that Bobby was able to compile the most comprehensive set of data on supernatural activities across the country. In general, the patterns indicated a large swell in demonic activity. Half of the demons seemed to move in strange ripples across two-or-three-state regions at a time. The remaining activity seemed to cluster randomly before it resulted in some bizarre event or massacre. There wasn’t any obvious pattern to the attacks, which was worrying because they seemed to be coordinated.
The biggest clue supporting the idea that they were planned events was that within the first month after Tessa’s warning, there had been three warnings about the demonic attacks prior to them happening. The warnings appeared on an online hunter message board that Bobby monitored and always came at least one day before the attacks. Bobby didn’t think much of it when he saw the first warning because a whole lot of crazy ended up on the boards, but after it had proved to be right, the anonymous user had Bobby’s attention.

Dean had been relieved to find out that Sam was still alive, but beyond that he didn’t have much to go on. He spent most of his free time searching online for any news articles that contained someone matching Sam’s description, but that was basically scraping at the bottom of the barrel. After several days of no luck, he had agreed to help Bobby with setting up and orchestrating the hunter network. Ever since he began hunting without his dad, Dean had always been the leader in whatever small group he found himself in, but now he was starting to gain some small amount of command experience. He’d assess threats and coordinate the hunters in the area. More than anything he wanted to get out on the road and find Sam, but without a lead he knew it was better for him to help Bobby.

On a particularly quiet morning two months after Tessa’s visit, Dean decided to go into town on a beer run. Just outside the driveway he noticed a woman in a plum-colored hijab and charcoal grey business suit. She was standing by the roadside staring at him. Her professional attire looked completely out of place by the dirt road. Dean pulled over and got out of the rundown ‘72 Ford Capri he had borrowed from Bobby.

“Can I help you?” Dean asked as she took a few steps toward him into the middle of the road.

"As a matter of fact you can. I'd like to discuss a new transaction, Dean." She smiled politely and flashed red eyes.

Dean straightened slightly and looked around. Bobby's driveway was located right up against a three way intersection, creating a sort of crossroads. The demon had been waiting out there for who-knew-how-long to talk to him. That was surprising. He couldn't recall hearing about a Crossroads demon seeking a person out like that. He'd only ever known them to be summoned. For a second he thought of beginning the exorcism incantation, but he wasn't entirely sure he could remember the whole thing off the top of his head. The demon wasn't in a trap and both the Colt and Ruby's knife were long gone, leaving him relatively defenseless.

"I'm not here to hurt you," she continued, sensing his alarm.

"Somehow I find that hard to believe." Dean inched closer to the Capri.

"I'm here to make you an offer." He was almost to the driver's side door when she added, "It's about Sam."

She had caught Dean's attention. He hated demons more than ever after the trip downstairs, but the situation with Sam was desperate. His hand moved away from the car door and he took a defensive but listening stance.

"I don’t get it. I made a deal, but I'm out of Hell," he observed. “Why aren't you dragging me back down? What's with the pleasantries all of a sudden?"

"You stopped being our concern as soon as Lilith took your contract from us.” Dean thought he heard some bitterness in her voice. “As a rule, why should we care if Lilith loses her souls?"

"We?"
"The Crossroads," she explained. “It's despicable that she would take your contract, but when she let your soul slip through her fingers…. Well, it serves her right.”

Their discussion was starting to move beyond Dean’s pay grade and they both knew it. He had always assumed that Lilith was in the same chain of command as the Crossroads demon that he had dealt with, especially after hearing that she held his contract. But it sounds like they were venturing into something political and in spite of all his time in Hell, he had never notice nuanced interactions between demons.

She redirected the conversation. "Anyway, you want to kill Lilith, but it’s not your main priority until after you find your brother.” She looked at him with an extra measure of seriousness to emphasize her upcoming point. “The Crossroads is not obliged to get in your way. It would of course be unseemly for us to take any direct actions against an archdemon, even if she is... problematic. But we're inclined to expedite anything that is delaying you taking direct actions."

"You want me to kill Lilith?" he asked, causing the demon to smile, but she didn't say anything. It was incredibly tempting to dive into negotiations, but ninety years of torture was enough for him to learn his lesson. "No dice. You're not getting my soul."

"We don't want you back," she replied coolly. “Not for the foreseeable future at least."

"What?"

That was the last thing he had expected to hear. Crossroads demons only ever wanted souls. It was what they were known for. He had never heard of one settling for anything less, let alone angling for something else in the first place.

"Something pulled you from one of our deepest pits, killing over seven hundred demons and one thousand souls in the process."

He had been hoping for details on his escape, but that sort of destruction was not something he was prepared to process.

"Something? It wasn't Sammy making a deal?"

"Your brother has been cut off from the Crossroads ever since he killed two of us." That was news to Dean. "Anyway, the Crossroads is currently working on a temporary ban on your soul re-entering Hell. It might take a little while to go into effect so try not to die in the next few days."

He shifted his weight, then crossed his arms in front of his chest. "If you don't want my soul, what do you want?"

"Information. I would like to examine your soul and memories. Just a quick peek and you’ll be done with your end of the bargain.” She tried to charm him with a warm smile, but that only clued Dean into how badly she wanted the deal.

"You wanna know what freed me.” The deal was suddenly making more sense. “It scares the crap out of you and you guys have no idea what it is either…. Honestly, the thought of you evil sons of bitches running scared in the dark kind of makes me want to take a pass."

"One thousand human souls were destroyed; does that mean nothing to you?" She switched tactics, deciding to appeal to his guilt and duty.

"As long as they were in Hell, that sounds like an act of mercy,” he countered.
"It's not just Hell. This thing has been to Earth."

"What?"

The Crossroads demon hesitated briefly, debating how much of her hand she would tip in order to persuade him. "It left four human bodies in Hell—not souls, bodies. We don't deal in flesh. Those were the first bodies in Hell in millennia. This thing must have grabbed them from Earth and dragged or rode them down. So, ignoring the massacre on our... residents, four humans died so that you could live."

Dean didn't know what to say. He thought of his completely scarless chest that had been torn into ribbons of meat just about a year earlier. He'd assumed that it was Sam who had paid the price for his resurrection, but it looked like it was four random humans... at least four.

"You know firsthand the power demons have in Hell," she continued. "If this thing could do so much damage in Hell and doesn't give a second thought to human casualties, then I don't think you're about to let it go completely unchecked."

He hated that she wasn’t wrong. "And I'm supposed to believe that Hell is going to stop the big bad?"

"Hell is going to do nothing. I represent the Crossroads," she corrected him. "And we are prepared to help you find your brother in exchange for helping us find a killer."
Sam woke up to find himself sitting on a cold concrete floor. He was stripped to his underwear with his arms uncomfortably handcuffed around a steel I-beam behind him. His head was pounding and it was hard to concentrate on anything for a long while. He could hear voices talking quietly, but couldn’t make out the words.

He and Ruby had stopped in Sidney, Ohio for a day to rest. Ruby had opted to stay in their motel room while he walked down the street to get some takeout food for dinner. On his way back he felt something sharp hit his chest and then he fell unconscious. Now, with his shirt off, Sam could see bruising around an injection site on his right pec. He had been hit with a tranquilizer dart.

He tried shifting to look at his surroundings. His muscles ached from the extended contact with the chilly floor and metal beam, as well as the negligent position he had been left in for was must have been at least an hour. He was on the main floor of a small warehouse that had been stripped of its machinery and abandoned years ago.

Three men were talking quietly in a small group about thirty feet away on the ground level. Above them he could spot two other men watching from catwalks. They were all armed with various types of guns. His powers were strong enough that it didn't take any effort for him to recognize that all the men were human.

Sam's stomach dropped when he realized that he had almost certainly been captured by hunters. He imagined they were connected to the mysterious Clare, the possible psychic with some sort of ax to grind in North Carolina. In the four months since he and Ruby had found out about the baby, they had fought and wiped part of the memories of twelve hunters. Two of the hunters had actually gone up against them twice and lost both times. Also, in addition to the twelve that were fine, four hunters had ended up severely injured or incidentally killed. In a way Sam regretted their deaths or grievous injuries, but he and Ruby had only been defending themselves.

The previous hunters had only tried to kill him, but the ones that he was dealing with right then had kept him alive for some reason. He didn't know if that was more or less concerning than the idea of being killed outright. He tried to listen to the group of three, who were talking amongst themselves. He was able to make out a discussion going on in hushed tones:

“"The room was empty."

“Are you sure about this?”

“I don’t know about killing a human.”

“We can’t take the risk.”

The group of three men saw that he had woken up and approached him, stopping about five feet away. Sam noticed that they were trying to stand tall and imposingly around him. He was seated
on the floor, which put him in the unusual position of looking up at others. Using height as a tool for intimidation was something Sam was very familiar with, mostly because he often had to consciously try to make himself look smaller to put others at ease. These hunters were clearly going to try to get something out of him.

"What do you want?" Sam asked, trying to put them on the defensive by taking away the opening question, but they didn’t bite.

He identified the taller man in the middle as the leader when he stepped slightly forward and spoke. “Why are you in town?”

Sam weighed his options. He could try to stay silent, probably be tortured, and almost certainly not learn anything from being asked the same question over and over again. Or he could feign cooperation and hope that the hunters revealed more secrets than him. The hunter to Sam’s right stepped forward and punched him in the face, but was waved off by the leader.

“Just passing through. Let me guess: you’re all here on a hunt?” Sam could taste blood as he smiled up at them.

None of them acknowledged being called out as hunters. The leader just continued his line of questioning. “Are there any demons or anyone else in this town who’s helping you?”

“No,” Sam lied, immediately earning a kick in the gut that knocked him back into the steel beam.

“What about the woman you’re staying with?”

So they had been watching him for at least an hour before grabbing him; otherwise they only would have seen him running errands alone. This was a different modus operandi than the usual hunters who would have gone after him at the first opportunity. Maybe it was because he and Ruby had arrived in town during the day and were staying in a more populated part of town, forcing the hunters to wait until it was darker and Sam was more isolated. Thanks to a scarcity of vacant rooms, the two of them had been forced to take a motel room that faced onto a fairly active street, which was not ideal for subtle escapes, but was equally problematic for daytime raids. But as much as the idea of being stalked was unsettling, the sudden realization that the hunters might not just settle for him in their hunt was worse.

He had hesitated a bit too long.

“We saw her.”

The hunter’s words were both distressing and relieving. They hadn’t taken her, but he couldn’t tell if that was because they hadn’t tried yet or if they had failed. So far, they didn’t have any reason to think he was lying, apart from any pre-existing biases. He decided to lie and hopefully talk them out of involving Ruby.

“She has nothing to do with this,” Sam told them. “I’m just working a job and she needed protection.”

“You’re sharing a room,” the leader said flatly.

“It’s not like that—”

He took another kick to the ribs before the the designated enforcer on the right was waved off.

“Really, because I think it’s a little hard to believe that some little pregnant lady is going to be fine
sharing a room with some big guy she just met who happens to be armed to the teeth. I don’t care if you’ve got puppy dog eyes or a charming smile.”

“I was just protecting her.”

The leader squatted down to be at eye level with Sam, who didn’t know how to interpret the gesture. “From what?”

“Demons. There were some in Bowling Green, Ohio. I’m sure you saw the omens.” Sam was scrambling to make up a convincing lie and had managed to anchor it in a little bit of truth. “It was a deal gone bad. I was just trying to get her out of the area. That’s all.”

“Tell you what, how about you tell us where she is, and we can handle that for you.” The lead hunter smiled in an unnerving way. He wasn’t playing nice; he was baiting Sam and it was obvious. “You know, a favor. One hunter to… whatever the hell you are.”

Sam could see that they were dancing around acquisitions—probably a fight… well, an argument—involving him getting kicked a few more times. “You don’t know where she is.”

“She ditched the motel room. You wouldn’t happen to know why?” the leader asked accusingly.

“Maybe she thought you were demons?” suggested Sam.

The hunter to Sam’s left was visibly losing his conviction. He had appeared nervous in general, but each time Sam said something reasonable he seemed to like the situation less and less. The guy shifted uncomfortably as he glanced to the other hunters looking for their own reactions.

“How long have you known her?”

He decided to lie quickly, hoping that it would be convincing. “One week.”

“Is that so?” The lead hunter pulled Sam’s cell phone from his jacket pocket. Sam felt like an idiot for not seeing that coming. “So you’re saying that if I were to go through your call history, none of the phone numbers more than a week old would be hers?”

It had been three weeks since they had switched their burner phones. It wasn’t common for the two of them to split up long enough that they would need to call each other, but it did happen. He couldn’t remember if they had called each other on those phones earlier than a week ago, but even if they had he couldn’t think of a convincing lie to explain it. He just decided to roll the dice and flatly deny that her number would be in there.

“Yes.”

The hunter started working through the call history. The first few numbers were motels, a police station, and a hospital. On the sixth call, he smiled at the sound of a concerned woman’s voice. The hunter shook his head at Sam, who felt his heart sink a few inches.

"Is this the woman staying with Sam Winchester? ...Nice try, sweetie, but I'm not buying it for a second." He put his hand over the phone and told the other hunters that she insisted she was with a guy named Keith Ness. Sam understood from that that Ruby was still trying to work their main cover, or was at least trying to confuse the situation. "Listen, if you want to see Sam or Keith again you'll come alone to 2471 Michigan St. in two hours."

Sam tried not to let his expression change. It didn't make any sense for the hunters to all of a sudden be fine with letting him live. The hunter hadn’t asked Ruby to bring anything so all they
wanted was her. He felt sick.

The hunter listened to something Ruby said, looked at Sam, then held the phone out so that it was two feet from Sam's face. "Say ‘hi,’ Sammy," instructed the leader.

She had asked for proof that he was alive. Sam didn't say anything at first. He knew that Ruby was smart enough to already suspect it was a trap, but she was also just crazy enough that she might try saving him in spite of it. If circumstances had been slightly different he might have given her fair odds, even against five hunters, but almost everything was stacked against her. The hunters held a probably-fortified location, outnumbered her at least five-to-one, and had him as a hostage. Not to mention the fact that at seven months pregnant, Ruby wasn't in any condition to get into a fight. Probably the only thing that she had going in her favor was that the hunters appeared to know nothing about her.

When the overzealous hunter to the right kicked Sam in the gut, he decided to try cluing her into the hunters' ignorance. "She doesn't even know what's going on. She’s just a civilian—" Sam started loudly pleading, before taking a hit to the head, knocking him out.

When he woke up the phone call was over and the hunters had changed positions. The leader and the feisty one had pulled up folding chairs so they could wait for him to regain consciousness in comfort. The anxious hunter had retreated to watch from the far wall of the warehouse, and the two other hunters weren’t in view.

“You’re awake.” The leader leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You know, I thought we had a good rapport going and then you had to go lying to me.”

“Yeah, well…. I get the feeling that you wouldn’t believe me even if I told you the truth. I might as well tell you something you would believe.” Sam was tired of playing around. At that point, Ruby would either be on her way or not and he wasn’t going to be able to do anything about that. The most he could do was to try to understand what the hunters wanted and that meant talking frankly. “What do you even want?”

“To stop you, demons, your kind.... A war is coming and there’s a lot of talk about the Sam Winchester. I happen to have it on good authority that you’re supposed to lead an army of demons.”

Sam thought back to the whole Azazel fiasco and wondered if he would ever live that down. “That didn’t happen—”

“Yet. But my group has been tracking you for awhile. I think you’ve met a few of them.” He glared down at Sam. “Something that we’ve noticed is that you’re always right in the middle of a whole bunch of demonic activity—”

“Because I’m fighting them,” Sam interjected.

“The problem here is that I don’t believe you, and you don’t seem to have a problem lying to me.” Sam could feel his opportunities to escape melting away as the hunter spoke. “I think it’s more believable that you’re actually a demonic psychic or witch or whatever and you’re helping to bring down this massive Hellstorm that’s starting. I mean it’s your lying word versus my group’s year of research.”

“Fine. But I don’t get it. You have me. Why do you want the girl?” Sam tried to sound unattached to Ruby, but he doubted his subtle lies were even registering.
“Like I said, we’re trying to stop your kind. That means the kid too.”

Sam straightened up and his eyes widened. He had assumed that they were after Ruby for some reason that had to do with her being an accomplice. The baby hadn’t even factoring into his thinking. Fear must have painted his face because the hunters looked like they could see his vulnerability.

“The kid isn’t even mine!” He was grasping at the last straw.

“But the problem is,” the leader said with a shrug, “that that’s just what a dad would say.”

Sam leaned his head backward against the steel beam. He couldn’t think of a way out of the situation. His credibility was ruined with that group and they were taking the conservative approach to hunting, which called for not leaving any possible survivors.

The hunters silently watched him as he sat quietly on the floor, defeated. Occasionally, he would shake his head and say that the baby wasn’t his, but the hunters were unmoved. He tried to use his powers, but against humans they were weak and unreliable. The most he was able to manage was lightly tussling their hair and jackets—and they might very well have been correct in dismissing that as the wind. As time passed, he wondered if the two-hour mark was going to be soon, hopefully passing without incident, but it didn’t.

Sam heard some commotion outside of the main room and looked up. Two hunters came in, each holding one of Ruby’s arms. She had a purse with her, which she almost never did. As she got closer he also noticed that she was wearing a gold cross necklace. The irony of an atheist demon wearing a crucifix would have amused him, but he was too busy panicking over their predicament.

Ruby walked awkwardly, being lead by the arms and trying to keep up with their pace while waddling from her very large belly. She still had at least a month and a half to go, but for two weeks she had looked like she was ready to pop. At least once a day she would make a joke about wishing that Sam was a foot shorter. The nervous hunter on the far wall and the hunter holding her left arm looked visibly uncomfortable with her being there, betraying doubts about their moral high ground.

When Ruby was in front of the lead hunter, who had stood to meet her, she was released. She started to reach for the purse and began pleading with him.

"I couldn't find much money, but please—"

"This isn't about money," he said while grabbing the purse from her shoulder and tossing it to the side.

His quick motion made her instinctively raise her hands up defensively, but she forced herself not to attempt a punch. The hunter seemed to have expected a fight and hit her in the face, causing her to fall down. She broke her fall with her knees and hands, saving her belly from slamming into the floor. For several seconds Ruby continued to face the floor with her eyes closed, partially to recover from the fall, but more to calm herself enough to keep her eyes from turning black. The two uncomfortable-looking hunters rushed forward, ready to help her up, before the lead hunter shook his head at them.

Sam had jerked forward when Ruby fell, fighting frantically against his handcuffs without luck. "Leave her alone!” Sam yelled. “I’m telling you, she has nothing to do with this!"

“Yes, she does,” the lead hunter snapped.
Ruby had raised herself up into a kneeling position on the ground a few feet in front of the leader. He drew a sawed off shotgun, pointed it at her chest, then lowered the barrel to aim at her belly.

"Please." Her voice was trembling and she started to tear up. "Please. Don’t kill my husband and baby."

The two wavering hunters seemed to be pained by her words and moved closer uncertainly. Sam was too blinded by fear that he didn't even notice her lie about them being married.

She was crying and clutched the crucifix necklace. "Please, if you’re going to kill us—just give me one prayer for our souls."

One of the two sympathetic hunters stepped forward and looked pointedly at the leader. The leader scowled, but relented.

"Fine," he agreed, but kept the shotgun fixed on her abdomen.

Sam was completely confused. He didn't understand what was happening. Ruby was clearly getting at something, but he couldn’t tell what. All he knew was that the leader was still armed and threatening his baby. The scene was equally bizarre and terrifying so he kept struggling instinctively against his restraints.

Ruby folded her hands in prayer and began speaking quietly… in Latin. After a few seconds Sam started actually listening to what she was saying. He recognized the words for 'blood' and 'incineration.' She was casting a spell under the guise of last rites.

As she spoke, the lead hunter's brow furrowed and he tilted his head warily. "Alright, you're done," he said, but Ruby kept reciting the incantation.

The hunter took a determined stance and made to fire. Sam had finally hit a sufficient level of panic for his telekinesis to kick in, hurling the lead hunter backward. The hunter fired his shotgun mid-flight, but missed. Ruby rolled forward, using her arms to protect the baby as much as possible while she said the last word of the spell.

The purse, which had been lying forgotten on the floor, ignited in a brilliant flash of red light, temporarily blinding him. Screams cracked and faded into silence. His eyes started to recover as the smell of burnt flesh reached his nose. The hunters were all crumpled heaps on the floor.

After taking a second to recover, Ruby searched the leader's pocket and found the key to Sam's handcuffs. When she went around to uncuff him she cringed. He had been struggling against the metal handcuffs so forcefully that the skin below was swollen and bleeding. As she gently took off the cuffs she realized how lucky he had been to not slit his own wrists. His shoulders were so sore that she had to help him move his arms to be in front of him. Ruby tore off two strips of fabric from her shirt, which she used to temporarily bandage his wrists.

He was quiet from shock, still sitting on the cold concrete floor. Ruby knelt in front of him and placed his hand on her belly. She held his jaw in one hand and push some stray hair behind his ear with the other.

"You're okay." She spoke softly. “I'm okay. The baby's okay. We're all okay,"

He hugged her weakly with his forearms, unable to use his wrists or hands easily. His head lowered onto her shoulder and he started crying as she ran her fingers through his hair.
For a week after the incident at the warehouse Sam wouldn't leave Ruby's side. He spooned her when he slept, holding her for comfort. The baby was moving normally, even after the stress and Ruby's fall, but he still asked her how she was feeling at least once an hour.

Ruby had been similarly upset by the whole experience. When Sam had disappeared she had fled the motel and watched it from afar. She saw two hunters check the motel room looking for her and followed them back to the warehouse. She had actually been one block from the warehouse when the lead hunter had called her, which meant she was able to use the entire two hours to prepare her rescue instead of having to spend forty-five minutes finding and scouting out the location.

She hadn't known how many hunters were in there, but she had suspected around seven. Instead of trying to fight them individually, she'd opted to use a purging spell. It would kill everything within a specified radius. She had never bothered using that sort of spell against demons because it only would've killed their meatsuits, but against humans it was very effective. When preparing the spell she had created an exception to its damage where it would not harm anything that shared Ruby's blood. That way the baby would be unharmed as well as Sam, who she had given blood to roughly a year earlier. But in spite of having a plan, the entire process of walking into a trap to save Sam had been exhausting.

By some random chance, a few days after the encounter at the warehouse, demonic activity came to an abrupt halt. At first they were worried that Lilith had found a way to hide her demons from scrying spells, but after a week of relative peace, Sam and Ruby realized that they weren't being followed. Their alarms were active and all the normal demonic omens were absent. Ruby couldn't think of any Holy Days or similar reasons why the demons would leave, which to her knowledge had never happened before. They were both grateful for the reprieve, but concerned about what it might mean.

They took the opportunity to slow down slightly and get some rest. Ruby was well into the third trimester, which made traveling for long stretches more difficult.

She had also started sleeping. The first time it happened had been frightening for both of them. They had been lying in bed together in Sam’s favorite sleeping position, him spooning her with one hand on her belly, when she started shaking and screaming. Sam rolled her over to look at her and her eyes opened. She had fallen asleep and had had a nightmare about Hell. A few days later it happened again. After the fourth nightmare, she had stopped by a magic shop and bought a pendant of dreamless sleep, which she took to clutching in her hand while she rested. Over time her need for sleep had increased until it was an hour or two each day.

They were both asleep when the demon proximity alarm sounded for the first time in almost a month.
Dean didn't like the idea of being on a first-name-basis with a Crossroads demon, but Shola asked that he contact her directly in the future. She was very concerned about keeping their interactions secret, which he initially found a little suspicious, but considering the nature of the information she had wanted from him he supposed it was understandable. She seemed nice enough; every Crossroads demon he had ever met was charming, but he suspected one wouldn't steal very many souls with a poor bedside manner. In the end they reached a deal that was helpful to him, but predictably not as much as he would have preferred.

The Crossroads would help him find Sam, but it wasn't going to be as easy as telling Dean where his brother was. Shola explained that Sam appeared to be using some sort of anti-detection magic specifically designed to block demons from finding him; possibly some sort of high-powered hex bag. What Shola could do, though, was have all of the demons and humans under contract with the Crossroads watching for him, which would add nearly 400,000 eyes on the ground in the continental United States alone. Whenever Sam or the Impala was spotted, the information would be relayed to Dean immediately. Shola was firm on the point that Dean would not be teleported directly to the location where Sam was spotted. The Crossroads was insistent upon protecting the identities and physical safety of their assets in the field, but after a little while Dean would close Sam's lead and eventually catch him. Dean was unsure how effective that approach would be, but since he didn't have any other opinions or significant bargaining power he went along with it.

One week after the deal, Dean got a hit in Aurora, Illinois, near Chicago. It took ten hours to get there, giving Sam a moderate head start. Dean checked the local motels, but couldn't find him. With no lead to tell him which direction his brother was heading in, Dean just waited in the area. A few days later he got another hit.

It went like that for a month or so. A few times Dean thought he was getting close, but the tip would turn out to be false. He would see an Impala, but it would belong to some woman or all the rooms in the only motel were booked by couples and families. He once got a motel manager to confirm that Sam had been there a half hour earlier, and he had just left heading east, but the next tip via the Crossroads placed Sam west of the motel.

It was an incredibly frustrating process made worse by the fact that Dean could tell that he was close. He cynically kept expecting to find a half-drunk, still-warm cup of coffee in the motel rooms he checked. But as frustrating as following the tips was, it was even worse when Hell suddenly went radio silent.

Dean was in Wichita, Kansas waiting for the next tip when Bobby called. Without any warning or tapering off, all demonic activities had stopped. More than that, the demons had left. There weren't any omens on the maps at all.

Dean tried summoning Shola, but she didn't show. Then he tried summoning any Crossroads demon, but only found himself standing alone in the middle of the street. He couldn't tell which was worse, losing contact with his informants or the realization of how much he had been
dependent on demons lately.

The thought made him feel sick. He had spent ninety years taking the worst kinds of abuse from demons and now he was pacing anxiously like a dog waiting for scraps. But as much as they might have been using him, he had been using them to help him track Sam. To find his brother he was willing to swallow his pride for a little longer, but once Sam was found it would be hunting season on all demons, Crossroads or not.

Almost an entire month had passed before the demons came back, but when they did it was in force. Bobby’s omen maps were covered in pushpins indicating activity. Their hunter network was completely outnumbered so Bobby called Dean back in to help prioritize the threats. After a few hours of mapping all the new data, Bobby noticed a change in the behavior of the demons. There were still groups moving in waves around different regions of the country, and there were still clusters prefacing some weird event, but there was also a lot of chaotic activity. The bulk of the newcomers didn’t seem to be organized in any way, and some seemed to not be causing much trouble at all.

The whole thing didn’t make sense. Hell had just unleashed hundreds of demons upon the Earth for no apparent reason. Yet, as much as Dean wanted answers about the new demons, he was more interested in getting an update on Sam. So he decided to try summoning Shola again. He drew the summoning sigil on the floor in the study and began the ritual. Bobby sat on a nearby chair to join in the discussion.

Shola appeared in the center of the summoning circle. She wore a dark red hijab and tailored black suit. Dean was thrown by the hijab. At their first meeting he had assumed that it had belonged to the body she had been possessing, but seeing one for the second time struck him as more than a coincidence.

“The, um—scarf thing—” Dean said while gesturing around his own head. “You don’t just have a thing for possessing Muslim girls, do you?”

“No, this one is actually Unitarian. I wear a hijab,” Shola replied, causing Bobby to lean forward in his chair, eyes wide with interest. She looked over at him and he stood up to insert himself into the conversation.

“As-salamu alaykum,” Bobby offered as a greeting to her.

“Wa ‘alaykum al-salaam,” she said in polite response.

Bobby’s eyes lit up as his mind filled with questions. He’d never met a demon that followed a human religion. He had heard that demons worshipped the devil and had their own faith based on that, but the idea that there might be multiple religions in Hell was a complete revelation.

“I don’t understand.” Bobby jumped right in, halting Dean’s line of questioning before he’d even begun. “How can you be Muslim if you’re a demon? I thought all demons worshiped the devil.”

“Why would what I am or where I reside change my faith?” She gave a small, rhetorical shrug to her question and his presumptions. “Hell has followers of every religion. Sometimes they convert to follow Lucifer or lose their faith entirely, but a significant number of us hold onto our faith, at least to some degree. It’s one of the things they try to take from you while breaking your soul, but often enough it’s too much a part of you to really be destroyed. It was the one shred of beauty that I could remember from my life so when I became a demon I continued to practice.”
She spoke with a soft confidence that came from having a profound understanding of herself. It was a quality that Bobby recognized from some of the veteran hunters he knew, who had reached old age by virtue of wisdom alone.

“So, you didn’t bet on the wrong horse?” Dean asked, drawing a sidelong glance from Shola.

“As far as I can tell, there’s no ‘right horse’ for evading Hell. This may surprise you, but a lot of good, devout people end up in Hell.”

“I’m a walking example of that.” Dean smiled smugly. “Well, maybe not the ‘devout’ part.”

Shola grinned back at Dean. “The good part is also debatable.”

“So, what, you’re some kind of saint that was sent to Hell by mistake?” Dean asked.

“I was far from a saint, but I don’t think I was evil. I made a deal and the Crossroads demon that negotiated with me saw my potential. I was lucky. The Crossroads doesn’t care about your personal life as long as you can close deals. If I had ended up in a more conservative caste, my faith may have proven… problematic.” She trailed off thinking about unpleasant alternatives to her current existence, but then she looked at Dean with new focus. “But speaking of deals, I imagine you didn’t summon me here to talk theology.”

“I want to know where Sam is and also, what was with Hell going quiet for four weeks?” Dean crossed his arms to emphasize his determination.

“I don’t know Sam’s location, but our assets are watching for him. Now that things have…..” She chose her words carefully. “The channels between Earth and Hell have normalized,” she amended, "which means that information should begin flowing as usual in the next day or so.”

“What do you mean normalized? What happened down there?” Bobby asked.

“It is an internal matter and I am not going to discuss it.” She kept her soft tone, but stood taller.

“It’s an internal matter? I know about your mystery monster that killed hundreds of you guys and this is too secret to even hint at?” Dean threw his hands up.

“I can’t discuss it.”

“Well, what if I make you discuss it?” Dean not-so-casually threatened, but she didn’t visibly react.

“You won’t, because I’m not a fool, Dean. Every contract I make is provisional on my existence. You can threaten me, but you can’t kill me without losing the intelligence on your brother. Also, don’t forget that I already have what I want from our arrangement. You've lost your bargaining chip and killing me will guarantee that the Crossroads never deals with you again.” Dean and Bobby were both a little taken aback by her laying out the facts so coldly. “Here’s what I can tell you, and hopefully you find some comfort in it: we’re going through a period of… damage control, but the Crossroads will actively attempt to reduce the demonic presence on Earth as soon as possible.”

“Why?” Dean asked as his brow furrowed.

“Many of our dealings work better in the shadows. Our entire system would have to be revamped if suddenly the world knew demons were real. I don’t think anyone is looking forward to overhauling all of our procedures right now. The short-term losses would be staggering.” Dean and Bobby just blinked at her. “Well, if that’s all for now—"
“One last thing!” Bobby blurted out before she disappeared. “When we aren’t up to our necks in
demonic omens, could I summon you?—I have a million questions about Hell.”

She smiled at him. “If you make it worth my while, I’ll tell you everything I can.”

“I don’t suppose instead of my soul, you’d settle for a bottle of—” He stopped himself short of
offering her alcohol.

“Keep your whiskey, and your soul. I’m not allowed to disclose any of Hell’s secrets that approach
that value. Let it never be said that Shola of the Crossroads makes deals that are unconscionable.
If you think of something else I might like, we’ll talk.” She actually winked at him. “As-salamu
alaykum.”

“Wa ‘alaykum al-salaam,” Bobby returned, then she disappeared.

Dean was staring at Bobby with a look of confusion. “Did you almost just ask a demon over for
drinks?”

Bobby turned a little pink. "Blow it out your ass."

"You know I think she might be the only woman in existence that's too old for you," Dean joked.

"I was just trying to get some information. How often do we really get to find out what it's like in
Hell?” Bobby asked, making Dean's smile fade as his lips thinned and he waved his hand up and
down his body indicating himself. Bobby cringed at the oversight. "Ok, poor choice of words. But
I'm talking about the view from the ranchers, not the cows."

"Thanks. Thanks for that."

"You know what I mean. She seemed a bit less vicious than your average demon."

"It might be a Crossroads thing.” Dean suggested. “Every one of them that I've ever met seemed
like they'd rather talk you to death than stab you to death."

"Makes sense. They're basically the lawyers of Hell."

"That sounds redundant."

Shola was right that once communication was established again the search for Sam sped up
quickly. Dean was able to get right on his brother’s trail within three days and after that Sam's
lead was never more than a day.

After another two weeks Dean hit a lucky break. Sam took an abrupt swing north along Highway
29 out of western Iowa during winter. Through some miracle there was a large stormfront coming
through the area, which meant that smaller roads would be shut down and Sam would likely need
to stop somewhere. If he was trying to find a place to hide where the streets were likely to be
cleared as quickly as possible, then he'd have to head for the biggest city in the area. That would
place him in Sioux Falls, South Dakota between then and the end of the storm.
"If you're gonna play Bowie at least play Ziggy Stardust."

Ruby leaned across the motel room bed to see what music Sam was selecting on the iPod. He glanced up at her, a little taken aback by her disparaging comment about David Bowie.

"Don't act like Bowie is some ordeal. You like 'Under Pressure.'"

"'Under Pressure' is Queen; Bowie was only featured." She smiled smugly.

"It was a collaboration," he pointed out, “and you're not getting off on some technicality. Anyway, we've been listening to your music all week. I get at least a day criticism-free."

"Fine, but if you play that 'Major Tom' song I will break—"

He silenced her with a kiss as he turned on Ziggy Stardust. She inched closer to him on the bed and started sliding her fingers along his chest, lifting his shirt up. Sam raised a mischievous eyebrow.

"It's snowing out and we're in a good-sized city,” she purred. “I think we can afford a little break. Anyway, the alarms are set so it's not like we'll get caught with our pants down—so to speak."

For the last two weeks they'd been scrambling to stay ahead of the demons that had returned to the earth's surface in force. According to the demonic omen maps that Sam had quickly drafted there were probably twice as many demons roaming the country as before they had all disappeared. Their presence was so oppressive that occasionally he would sense groups of them from a mile or two away. It was like the more there were, the more his awareness of them pushed in on him.

One night while they'd been driving through Iowa the feeling became so strong that he got a migraine, like he used to get when he first started using his powers. In order to avoid the mob of demons they were forced to turn north into South Dakota. It was one of the last places they wanted to go during winter, but the alternative was facing enough demons to overwhelm Sam’s senses from miles away. With Ruby over eight months pregnant they couldn’t afford to have him incapacitated, so they’d opted to brave the snowstorm.

The alarm sounded while they were both asleep. Ruby propped herself up on one elbow, but didn’t expend the effort to get out of bed since Sam was already moving to check the alarm. It was around three in the morning and a small opening in the curtains showed that there was a break in the snowfall. Seeing the array of glass spheres, Sam ran a hand through his hair while puffing out a sigh in frustration. Ruby decided to get up when he immediately started getting dressed. The alarms indicated that there were demons within a mile to the west, north, and east.

“How’d they get past the five-miles alarm?” Sam asked while lacing up his boots.

“They could’ve just blinked in,” she speculated. “They might just be guessing you’re in town. It’s
not like they’re likely to catch you on the road right now, so why bother coming in via the highways?”

“We should’ve just stayed in a smaller town and dealt with the snow.” Sam pulled out a map of Sioux Falls to get an idea of where the demons might be and the safest route out of the area.

“You don’t know that they aren’t checking the small towns too,” she replied, earning a head-tilt of acknowledgment.

"The roads south were closed when we came in—probably still are. We could skirt the southeastern area here and get a clear shot at the highway. If we try to go any other direction we'll have to move through a lot more of the city or face other, smaller road closures." He rechecked the alarms against the map and his shoulders slumped. "I can feel it; this is going to be a fight. At this point they're too close for us to just slip by."

"Well, let's get rolling," Ruby suggested. She had somehow managed to get dressed while he had been looking over the map.

"You aren't going." Ruby opened her mouth to protest, but he shook his head. "You aren't fighting and you aren't going to get seen. I'll go clear the way real quick and come back. You get our stuff together and be ready to move."

She tried to cross her arms in front of her chest, but her belly made it difficult. "You know I'm not a fan of the whole splitting-up thing."

"I'm not either, but you're in no shape to fight and even if they're looking for me I'm sure they'll happily take a shot at you if you're around."

"Well, be careful. You can't count on me to swoop in to save your ass if you're making me warm the bench."

"I promise. I'll be careful." He kissed her lips and then knelt down to kiss her belly. "I'll be back within a half hour."

Sam only drove three blocks before he started sensing the demons. They were covering large stretches, but he managed to locate a weak point. He could feel a group of maybe four moving down a nearby side street. After parking at the opening to the side street, he got out of the Impala and drew Ruby's knife.

He saw three demons coming out of a building, probably having just searched it. They were watching him, but keeping their distance even when he started to approach them. The whole thing confused him for a second until he realized they were waiting for something. His instincts had been right, there had been four demons down that street, but one of them had left.

Sam immediately felt the dizzying presence as a dozen demons teleported in around him. He held his arms up defensively to try to block what seemed like an endless number of incoming punches. He pushed outward with his powers, knocking most the them backward several feet, but there were just too many. The demons fought him as a group, coming at him in waves so that he could not avoid every attack. He began to lose track of the fight. He had stabbed and thrown so many demons that surely they must have brought in more reinforcements.

After an unknown amount of time in the chaotic brawl, Sam took a knife to his right side. He staggered forward a step and was hit hard in the back of the head. Falling to the ground, he saw headlights approaching beyond the mob. He lost consciousness to the sound of car doors and a
Dean was out in the yard loading up one of Bobby's junk pickup trucks when Bobby got the call. It was Sheriff Mills calling in on the local line. After a run in with a zombie a few years back, she had agreed to clue Bobby into any strange happenings in the Sioux Falls area. A few minutes earlier, one of her subordinates radioed in that he saw some people with black eyes before she lost communication with him. She was afraid to send one of her own people in on what was looking like hunter business so she gave Bobby the last known coordinates of the deputy.

Bobby checked the latest data for the storm and demonic omens. Sure enough, there was a surge of activity in the last hour right near where the deputy had disappeared. With so many demons in the area and a missing deputy, Bobby and Dean decided to stick together instead of splitting up.

It took twenty minutes for them to reach the neighborhood where the deputy went missing. They found his body ten feet from his squad car, neck snapped and halfway sunk into the fresh snow. There were faint tracks in the snow from at least four attackers. The footprints led away from the body, down a street, occasionally fanning out to check doorways and alleys as if they were searching. Yet the footsteps moved with intent in one direction before abruptly disappearing halfway down the block.

"What do you think that means?" Dean asked pointing at the final footprints.

"Either they started walking backwards or they were definitely demons and they wanted to be somewhere else fast."

Dean looked at Bobby with an eyebrow raised. "Yeah, but were they running away from something or to something?"

Bobby shrugged, then glanced back at the dead deputy. "We should probably look around the area; there might've been more attacks."

"Yeah. And if Sam's hunting in the area he'll probably be around here somewhere," Dean added hopefully.

They climbed back into the truck and Bobby began cautiously driving around the neighborhood. Dean loaded their sawed off shotguns with salt rounds and began readying two large, plastic jugs of holy water. It was the middle of the night in the middle of winter so they had the advantage of there being almost no civilians around. Everybody walking around was suspect, which meant they could take a quicker pass through the area.

"Four demons on one civilian…." Dean sighed and shook his head. "How many do you think are around?"

"At least four."

"Real helpful there, Bobby." The old hunter just shrugged. "This is a hell of a time to not have the knife or the Colt. I can’t believe we—"

Bobby slammed on the brakes so hard that Dean jerked forward, hitting the dashboard. He looked up to yell at Bobby, but didn’t say anything. Out the driver’s side window he could see the Impala two blocks down a side street. Bobby reversed, then started down the street towards the car. When they got about a block away they could make out a group of people on the opposite side of the Impala.
“Oh, fuck—no!” Dean gasped as he saw that it was a fight, and, collapsing in the middle of the mob, was Sam.

Bobby stopped the truck, grabbed a shotgun from Dean, and the two hunters were out of the truck within a second. The scene was unbelievable. Sam had been fighting eight demons when they arrived, but there also appeared to be at least half a dozen bodies on the ground. Taking on more the three demons with just the knife was basically suicide, but that…. Dean had no idea how Sam had managed to get himself into that situation, but he put the thought out of his mind.

“Get away from him you evil sons of bitches!” Dean yelled while swinging the jug of holy water, splashing most of them.

Bobby fired two salt shells into the remaining demons, making them crumple and scream in pain. While the demons were temporarily distracted by their own agony, Dean and Bobby ran for Sam’s unconscious body. They lifted his upper body and Dean realized how long it would take to drag him back to the truck, then started digging through Sam’s right jacket pocket. He immediately found the keys to the Impala and rushed to unlock the doors. Bobby didn’t bother trying to move Sam on his own. Instead he used the time to throw his gallon of holy water over the screaming demons. Dean returned to help Bobby drag Sam into the Impala. Bobby ran for the front passenger's seat and Dean made for the driver’s seat, but stopped short.

He saw the demon-killing knife in the snow where Sam must have dropped it when he’d lost consciousness. Dean dove for the knife, grabbing it as a demon feebly tackled him. He rolled with the attacker, putting himself on top and then drove the knife into the demon’s chest before looking up to see that the other demons had started recovering. His heart was hammering and he could start to feel a slight combat high as he sized up the demons. The thought of killing every last one of them made a small, menacing grin curl his lips, but he was shaken out of the strange daze by the sound of Bobby yelling for him. Dean tumbled for the Impala, ducking briefly as Bobby fired two more salt shells above him, out the open driver’s door. Dean had barely closed his door by the time that he was speeding away recklessly through the snowy streets.

They laid Sam down on the living room couch. Dean kept pressure on the stab wound while Bobby ran to grab the first aid kit. Sam had been unconscious the entire drive back to Bobby's and only seemed to be getting worse. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth as a bruise began forming along the left side of his face.

Dean started silently crying as he pushed the shoulder-length hair out Sam’s face with one hand, while pressing on the wound with the other. He had spent over eight months trying to find his lost little brother, and the moment they were reunited had been horrific. He had thought that he would find Sam at a motel or checking out a haunt. Sam would have been surprised and confused, but they would’ve soon hugged and been a family again. Instead Sam was lying there, bruised and bleeding on Bobby's couch.

Bobby returned with the first aid kit and began working immediately. He cut up the side of Sam’s jacket and two shirts to access the wound. Luckily, it wasn’t as deep as in had first appeared and after some work Bobby managed to get the bleeding under control.

"Help me get his shirt off,” Bobby instructed as he started cutting up the center of Sam's shirts. “We need to see if there's any more damage that needs patching.”

Pulling the fabric back offered several discoveries for the two hunters. The least surprising was a collection of fresh bruises forming all over his torso. In addition though, they found a large number of new scars and a teardrop shaped tattoo in the center of his chest. Not stopping for very
long to analyze the situation, Bobby cut up both sleeves, revealing his arms, which also contained
new scars.

"Holy fuck, Bobby." Dean took Sam's hand that was closest to him and raised it up to examine the
wrist. There was a very fresh and ragged half-inch wide band of scarring around the wrist. "I've
never seen this kind of wound. What do you think? Maybe a whip or claw?"

"I've seen it before." Bobby’s face had lost a little color. He pointed to Sam's other wrist, which
bore a matching scar. "Handcuffs. They can cut a person bloody if you try to get out of them bad
enough."

Dean closed his eyes and absently squeezed his brother’s hand. Sam must have been through
something awful for him to voluntarily do so much damage to himself.

"Dean, look at this." At Bobby’s words, Dean opened his eyes to see the older hunter staring at the
tattoo. Upon closer inspection it was pretty clearly a magical tattoo, like their anti-possession
tattoos, but the style was entirely different. "I'm no expert, but that looks like hoodoo. I'll have to
check my books to know for sure. Hell, maybe I can decipher some of the pictographs in it."

"Great. So Sammy goes off the grid, gets chained up, tatted by some hoodoo witch doctor,
and...." Dean frowned and pointed to what was an unmistakable gunshot wound scar on Sam’s
right middle torso. Sam had been shot in the arm previously, but it was still unusual for a hunter to
get shot on the job. Monsters preferred to use claws and fangs to handguns. "And gets shot.... The
kid has had one hell of a year and a half.

"You think the shot was a through and through?" Bobby asked from professional curiosity making
Dean shrug. "Help me lift him up. We can at least pull out the shredded clothes while I take a
look."

They carefully lifted Sam's upper body off the couch and the ruined clothing.

"Sweet mother in Heaven...." Bobby muttered when he saw Sam's back tattoo. It was massive,
covering nearly the entirety of Sam's considerable back and shoulders. The line work was horribly
complex and unlike anything Bobby had seen before. When Dean saw it, his mouth hung open
slightly.

"So maybe he got more than a little tatted up," Dean observed, then took a picture of the tattoo with
his phone before removing the bloody shirts and jacket. He helped Bobby gently lower Sam back
down into a comfortable position.

Dean started going through Sam's jacket and jeans pockets looking for any clues as to what he’d
been up to. He immediately found Sam's wallet, which contained fifty-eight dollars, a Wisconsin
driver's license for a Keith Ness, a few receipts, and a simple silver ring. He picked up the ring
and examined it for magical engraving; the way things were shaping up it was probably enchanted
or something. He slipped the ring back into the wallet and starting looking through the receipts.
Two of the receipts were for restaurants in the last few days, both listed enough food for two
people. Other receipts were for gas and some indecipherable purchases at a drugstore. Taken as a
whole, they indicated that Sam had recently been traveling with someone in northwest Iowa.

When Dean went to check the Impala's glovebox and trunk for signs of another person he was
surprised to find that neither opened for him. The key would fit into the lock just fine, but it
wouldn't turn. Upon closer inspection, Dean could see a small set of runes carved into the stainless
steel ring around each keyhole. Sam had magically locked them. It occurred to Dean that they had
been very lucky the Impala's ignition wasn't similarly locked; otherwise they would have been
stuck in a dead car while trying to escape over half a dozen demons.

Dean returned to the living room and sat down in a chair near the couch. Bobby had settled at his desk, already at work researching the tattoos.

"Find anything?" Bobby asked without looking up.

"Receipts look like he was traveling with someone a few days ago and he was using the name Keith Ness. Other than that, I’ve got squat. I couldn’t even get into the trunk or glove box. He’s got some sort of spell on the locks. He actually scratched runes or some shit into Baby…." Dean scowled. “He seems to be using a lot of magic."

Bobby looked up from his pile of books. "Huh….<u>Well, Sam always was a bit more magic-savvy. He’s been out on his own for awhile; it would make sense that he’d dabble in the stuff to give himself an advantage. It might not be standard in the hunter handbook, but it ain’t exactly unheard of either.”</u>

Dean had to admit that they’d used a fair number of spells on hunts, but they’d been used sparingly. Sam had been more into casting the spells, probably because his Latin was better and Dean was always busy standing ready, weapon drawn. It made sense that Sam would play to his strengths, but all that seemed a bit much.

"Yeah. Well, I don’t—" Dean was cut off by a buzzing noise.

He and Bobby both looked around for a few seconds before realizing that it was coming from Sam’s far-side jeans pocket. Dean felt like an idiot for forgetting to check the remaining pockets after finding Sam’s wallet. He rushed over, quickly withdrew the cell phone, hit answer, and held it to his head. He could hear breathing on the other side.

"Hello?" he answered, but the caller hung up. Dean wanted to call them back, but Sam's phone was locked with a PIN. "Dammit! They hung up."

"Wrong number?" Bobby suggested, not believing it for a second.

"The caller ID said K.A. It was probably whoever he was traveling with…. You know any hunters with the initials K.A.?" Dean asked, but Bobby shook his head.

Dean started trying PINs that Sam had used in the past, but none of them worked. He tried birth dates, death dates, familiar addresses, important zip codes. He was locked out of the phone ten times in two hours. On the last attempt, he nearly threw the phone against the wall before placing it down and kicking the chair he had just been sitting on instead.

"For fuck’s sake, Sammy! It’s like he’s trying to make this shit impossible."

Dean was beyond annoyed at the situation and Bobby was getting tired of his huffing. "Of course he is, ya’ idjit. It's not like he was expecting you to need to access his stuff. Boy's been off the grid for a while and it looks like he was doin' a damn good job of it."

"You're right." Dean collapsed into a lumpy armchair in frustration. “I just wish I knew what he's been up to. I mean he got shot, and with the tattoos, and handcuffs…. I just want to know he's okay."  

"Well, you can ask him when he wakes up. In the meantime, you should probably tell Shola to call off the bloodhounds."
Dean summoned Shola while Bobby continued researching Sam’s tattoos. She wore a brown suit with a matching brown and olive green hijab. Her meatsuit appeared to be of south pacific descent with skin that beautifully complimented the brown and green tones. Dean fleetingly wondered how she chose who to possess and whether demons ever tried to coordinate meatsuits with their clothing. Clearly, she put some level of intention into her appearance.

“What can I do for you Dean?”

“Nothing actually, We found Sam,” he told her, then waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “You can call off the search.”

“I’m glad we could be of service.” She smiled warmly. “Please keep me in mind if you find yourself needing to make a deal in the future.”

“What, do you guys get paid on commission or something?” Dean shifted his weight and crossed his arms.

“I’m nowhere near at risk for getting the literal ax, but it always helps to get the big name deals, and since we have this lovely rapport already you might as well work with someone you can trust.”

“Oh, I don’t trust you.” Dean smiled snarkily.

“Well.” She shrugged halfheartedly. “Maybe you don’t trust my intentions, but I hope that you at least trust my reliability.”

“You left me hanging for four weeks!”

“That’s all covered under the force majeure clause.” She waved her hand as if physically brushing aside his compliant.

“I honestly have no idea what you’re saying half the time. Whatever. Now, if we’re done....” He gestured for her to exit.

“Actually, I’d like to speak with Robert for a moment if he’s around.”

Bobby heard his name from the other room and called out an invitation. Dean followed Shola into the study where Bobby was going through tomes on hoodoo and magical pictographs. Shola immediately became distracted looking through the books and started commenting about how Pali magical tattoos were superior to hoodoo tattoos. Dean decided he was done with the conversation and left to check on Sam. Once Dean had left the room, Shola turned to Bobby with a serious demeanor.

“I would like to talk to you about Dean.” Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

Bobby glanced at the doorway and considered calling for Dean to come back, but decided to hear her out. “What about him?”

“Has Dean told you about his time in Hell?”

“No,” Bobby answered, suddenly having a better appreciation for why she’d waited for Dean to leave. “He said he doesn’t remember it.”

“Well, he does remember. I saw it while I was searching his memories…. Dean was being groomed for the service of Hell by an archdemon. I know firsthand that that can be an incredibly profound experience,” she warned. “His master was the Archdemon Alastair, known for his
ruthlessness and manipulation. I think it's fair to assume that Dean was almost certainly changed by the experience, more than he’s showing.”

Bobby sat up straight in his chair, leaned closer to her, then quietly asked, “What do you mean?”

“Some people learn to love their tormentors, while others fear or hate them. I don't think that Dean would love him, but fear to the point of non-opposition... maybe.” Shola glanced to the door where Dean had left the room. Her expression wasn’t that of someone expecting to be found out, but rather something closer to concern.

“This is interesting, but I'm not sure I see how this is relevant. With you guys banning his soul from Hell, I don’t think Dean is taking a trip downstairs anytime soon.”

“Alastair is on Earth.” Her expression was very serious. “He has been called up by Lilith to serve as her second in command. For a while we thought that he had been killed by the thing that took Dean, but he was spotted in Wyoming a few weeks ago.”

Bobby nodded, beginning to understand that she was warning him to watch out for Dean. “Why do you care so much about what happens to us?”

“You're my assets in the field. You’re my responsibility.”

“You sound like the spymaster of Hell.” Bobby chuckled at the thought.

“The Crossroads,” she corrected as a small smile returned to her lips. “And I'm not a spymaster, but I am a liaison for many of our contracts. My specialty is dealings that involve things that are less fungible than souls. It leads to the more interesting cases.” She waved her hand around the room indicating their current predicament.

“I’ll bet. Thank you, for the warning”

“Good luck, Robert. Maybe I’ll see you again.”

“Call me Bobby,” he invited. “And you should probably count on it considering the messes those boys get into.”
The Reunion

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this chapter.

Sam woke up to the late afternoon sunlight shining on his face. His head and torso ached with the unmistakable pain of a fight gone wrong, but otherwise he was surprised he wasn't in worse shape. It took him several seconds to realize that he was lying on a couch, and then a bit longer to identify Bobby's living room. He had a moment of dumbfoundedness, trying to figure out how he had gotten there and what was going on.

The last thing he remembered was being attacked by a mob of demons. It didn't make sense for him to be resting in the closest thing he'd had to a childhood home. Sam pulled a blanket off of him, revealing the healing ward on his chest and the scars on his wrists. They confirmed that he hadn't dreamt the last year and a half—His heart started hammering in his chest as panic set in.

He sat up painfully and looked around the room. He had no idea where Ruby was or what had happened after the fight. Digging through his pockets didn't turn up his phone. He clutched his bandaged side, preparing to stand up, when Dean walked into the living room. Sam froze. His eyes widened in shock and a not-inconsiderable amount of fear. If he had been thinking clearer, he would have known that Dean probably wouldn't look like himself as a demon, but Sam still raised his hand trying to keep him away.

"Before you start, I'm not a demon or a monster or anything like that. Bobby already checked me out," Dean told him.

Perfectly timed, Bobby turned the corner into the room, having been attracted by the sound of voices. "Damn, boy, it's good to see you." Bobby didn't have nearly as many social obstacles to get through, like explaining his resurrection, so he stepped forward to give Sam a very gentle hug. They embraced, but Dean noticed that Sam never stopped looking at him. Bobby pulled back from the hug, holding Sam by the shoulders at arm's length to look at him. "Are you cold or having a fit?"

Dean stopped, but only because he could see that Sam was freaked out. Sam's face was pure confusion and his hand was held up as if to say 'stay back'. It was an understandable reaction; it wasn't every day that your dead brother walked in on you. After Bobby had taken a swing or two at him upon their reunion, Dean thought maybe the only thing stopping Sam from charging him was Sam's injured state. Though, now that he thought of it Sam wasn't nearly as hurt as they had expected him to be.

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Dean realized that Sam was shaking slightly. He stepped forward to grab the blanket on the couch and hand it to Sam. After a moment’s hesitation, Sam accepted the blanket and wrapped it around himself.

“I think a little of both,” Sam managed. “Dean…. I…. It’s you?”

“Yep. It’s me, Sammy.” Dean moved in for a hug and Sam awkwardly allowed it. Dean’s arms held Sam like that moment was something he had been waiting decades for, because he really had.
Sam’s hug, though, was still shaking and confused. His fingers clenched Dean’s shirt in some desperate attempt to find some stability.

After the hug, Sam returned to sitting on the couch. Dean could see some of his shock wearing off, to be replaced by happiness, but there was something else. Sam fidgeted slightly and seemed on edge. It was like he was forcing himself to hold still, instead of getting up and running away. Dean worried that maybe Sam was more startled by his resurrection than they had anticipated. To Dean’s surprise though, Sam’s first question had nothing to do with his miraculous return from Hell.

"How long have I been out?" Sam asked.

"Almost a day."

The tiny amount of color Sam had left his face and he gripped his knees to stop his trembling. "Where's my phone? I need to call someone."

Dean raised his eyebrow, but pulled the cell phone from his pocket and returned it. "Last night a K.A. called, but he hung up when I answered. I would have called him back, but your phone was locked."

Sam stood up awkwardly. He was still weak, but he seemed determined to have some privacy as he staggered quickly toward the back of Bobby’s house.

"I’ll be back in a minute," Sam said while he walked out of the room without giving any further explanation.

Sam rushed into Bobby's study, closing the door behind him, and leaned against the wall. It had been emotionally exhausting seeing Dean again. He was thrilled that his brother was alive, but it didn’t make sense. And as much as he wanted to know what had happened with him, he needed to know that Ruby and the baby were alright. He called Ruby's cell and she picked up on the second ring.

"It's me. Are you okay?" Sam asked frantically. He heard a sigh of relief.

"I'm fine," Ruby answered, though her voice was stressed. He felt some of the tension leave his body as he slumped down along the wall a few inches. If anything had happened to her or the baby while he was gone, he wasn’t sure what he would have done. "What happened to you? I tried calling, but some guy answered your phone. Where are you?"

"I was jumped by a group of demons and knocked out, but Bobby and Dean showed up to pull my ass out of the fire."

"Dean's dead." Her voice was uncertain and cautious.

"Turns out he hasn't been for awhile. I don't know how though."

There was a long pause from Ruby's end before she spoke. "With Dean back, are you gonna…. I mean, this changes things."

"What?" Sam didn't understand what she was trying to say.

"Are you gonna go back to hunting?"

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. She was asking if he was going to leave
her and the baby to go off with Dean. He felt like an idiot for not thinking about how Ruby would take the news of Dean’s return. It made sense that she would see Dean as competition for his attention. For the last year and a half she had been his constant companion, but for most of Sam’s life before that Dean had filled that role.

He was a little pained by the idea that Ruby thought he might just abandon them to go back to hunting. It wasn’t that he was offended, but maybe she thought he wasn’t as committed as he was. Sam loved Dean and wished he could find a way to make things work between them, but he wasn’t going to just skip out on Ruby and the kid. And he wasn’t going to get back into hunting. He was done with looking for danger. He was done with running all over the country. He was done with the idea of hunting being a noble profession. He was even done with the word ‘monster.’

"No. This doesn’t change things between us…. I’ll just tell him…. I’m going to have to tell them I’m done hunting anyway, so this should probably be dealt with at the same time…. I just need to figure out how to tell them." It was one thing to quit hunting with the vague explanation of exhaustion and new responsibilities. It was another thing to figure out a way of keeping Dean and Bobby from investigating the mother of his child enough to reveal that she was a demon. That whole explanation needed to be planned in advance; trying to improvise that sort of thing could quickly turn into a disaster. "Maybe you could pretend to be human?"

"That’s still not gonna explain the whole plan to hide out with a coven."

"You’re a witch." It was equal parts suggestion and statement.

"I’m sure that’s gonna go over real well." Sam and Ruby both had had several opportunities to hear Dean complain about how much he hated witches. Unfortunately, the need to be protected from Lilith came before Dean’s feelings.

"We’ll figure something out. Anyway, they’ve already seen my wards, so I’m sure they know I’ve been dealing with witches."

"Yeah, let me know how that conversation goes." She huffed slightly when she spoke and Sam could tell she rolled her eyes.

"Where are you? I’ll come as soon as I can sneak away." He wanted to see her to make sure she was alright. She said she was fine, but he knew he wouldn’t feel right until he saw her.

"I changed rooms at the same motel; room 17 on the end," she replied. "I didn’t want your alias on the registration, but I thought I’d keep an eye out in case you or a hunter came to the old room."

"Any demon activity in the area?" He cracked the door make sure Bobby and Dean were not secretly listening, then checked the window compulsively.

"There have been a few groups moving around the neighborhood. I warded the doors and windows of the room. It’s not as good as salt, but it’ll let me get out if I need to."

"How’s…" He turned back to the door, which he didn’t remember closing, then lowered his voice in spite of the apparent privacy. "How’s the baby?"

"Still kicking and royally pissed. It’s been driving me crazy the last day, but not nearly as much as you."

He chuckled briefly at the idea of the baby kicking Ruby relentlessly, but he felt a little choked up at not being there. "I’m sorry. I just woke up a few minutes ago."
"I know if you could've you'd have called sooner. But not knowing was just…"

The thought that she had been alone without word from him for almost a whole day made his heart feel tight. He decided that when he saw her next he would hold her and kiss her tenderly. He didn’t care if she teased him for it. Though, thinking about it, she hadn’t teased him for being affectionate in the last few weeks.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, promise."

"Keep your phone on you, and be prepared to buy my forgiveness." Her tone had become playfully commanding, which made him smile.

"What kind of fries do you want?"

"All of them."

"I'll see what I can do."

Sam hung up and turned to face the door leading back to the rest of Bobby's house. He was not prepared for the situation. His instincts told him to sneak out the side door and haul ass back to Ruby, avoiding any awkward conversations. But they had been looking for him for who-knew-how-long and he finally had his brother back. He couldn't just run away from Dean because he was scared. Anyway, Dean would kill him if he took the Impala.

Sam walked back into the living room to find Bobby and Dean quietly arguing about who would ask him something. They immediately stopped when he entered, having clearly been caught red-handed. Bobby tried to act casual, but Dean decided to jump right into the interrogation.

"So, who's K.A.?

Having foreseen that question, Sam already knew that he would try to stick as close to the party line as possible. "Kathy. She's a civilian. She was being chased by some demons. I was protecting her. I was out investigating some omens when I got jumped."

"Is she okay?" Bobby sounded concerned.

"Yeah, she's holed up nicely."

"She could come here," Bobby offered and Sam kicked himself for not thinking of Bobby’s helpful nature as being a factor.

"No, she's about to meet up with some friends who'll get her out of the area fast. It's all done," Sam improvised, hoping that that didn't come off as stupid as it sounded to his ears.

"Okay…" Bobby and Dean both looked at him a little suspiciously, so Sam decided to change the subject away from ‘Kathy’. 

"So, I get the feeling there’s something else that neither of you want to ask me?"

"What the hell happened to you? I mean the tattoos, scar-cuffs, putting magic on Baby?" Dean held up his hand slightly while asking and counted off the points on his fingers.

Sam sat down on the couch. Tiptoeing around Ruby and the baby was going to take some effort, but it was the kind of thing he could gloss over and summarize better than talking details of Ruby’s cover.
"After you died and I left." Sam glanced at Bobby apologetically. "I tried making deals with Crossroads demons, but they wouldn't deal. So I decided to get some revenge and tried hunting down Lilith."

"You, hunting down Lilith, alone. Real smart Sammy." Dean was less than thrilled.

"I found out in New Harmony that her powers don't work on me. That's how I survived. So I figured with Ruby's knife I could take her in a fight."

"If you could even get to her. The whole country has been swarming with demons the last year or so." Bobby added.

Sam could see the gears turning in the old hunter’s head. Bobby was the one person that he could always count on to be if not one step ahead of him, then to be at most only one step behind him.

"I almost got her once, but it's been hard. Lilith sends demons after me pretty frequently, trying to find me before I find her. But it hasn't been so bad as long as I move every few days."

"That's why you've been trying so hard to stay off the radar?"

"Yeah." Sam looked down at his hands, which he rubbed together self-consciously.

"So what's with the tattoos?" Dean asked pointedly.

"Well, about a year ago I stopped an attack on a woman, but got shot." He pulled open the blanket he had wrapped around him and pointed to the scar over his liver. "Turned out that she was a witch. She patched me up and put this healing ward on my chest."

"Healing ward?" Bobby asked.

"It doesn't work miracles or anything, just speeds up healing a little and helps prevent wounds from getting infected. It's a way for witches to convert normal magic into healing magic." Sam could have sworn he saw Dean's lips thin when he said 'normal magic'.

"Hoodoo?" Bobby clarified.

"Yeah." Sam knew Bobby had a lot of experience with magic lore, which made Sam nervous. There was a chance that Bobby would understand just how impressive and unusual the ward on his back was. "When I told her about Lilith's minions looking for me, she took me to another witch that tattooed my back so that I'd be harder to track."

"You just let some witches put who-knows-what on you?" Dean was his protective big brother, but he was also a hunter with a strong dislike of witches.

"She saved my life," Sam pointed out. "They weren't about to turn around and kill me."

"They wouldn't happen to be a coven?" Bobby asked, undoubtedly curious about the nature of the ward.

Sam was getting a bit offended. He knew that Bobby wasn't trying to start anything, but Dean was quietly getting worked up by the mention of witches, like a shark struggling to pretend there wasn't blood in the water. In the past Sam might have lied in an attempt to appease Dean, but he was standing firm against the anti-witch prejudices. He would have to deal with it sooner or later if he was going to let Dean know where he was planning on going once the baby was born.
"Yes, they were." He didn't add 'Do you have a problem with that?' but did turn to look Dean in the eyes.

"You were at a coven. Where?" Dean asked curtly.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm gonna send them a fucking fruit basket. You know." Sam knew, but he'd wanted Dean to say it because deep down he refused to believe that Dean could have no qualms with killing the people that had saved Sam's life. That was why Dean wasn't just coming out and saying it. He wasn't in the clear right and he knew it. He might even feel guilty. "They're witches. They rock the bad mojo and make deals with demons."

"Look who's talking," Sam jabbed.

"I dealt with a demon to save your life," Dean shot right back at him.

"Yeah, and they used their demon deal powers to save my life. The only difference is that you're still dealing."

Dean stopped, mouth slightly open. That had been a direct strike to the nerve. He was taken aback by being called out, but that was quickly overcome by simple confusion. He had no idea how Sam could have known about Shola. He had been unconscious earlier when Dean had summoned her to let her know that Sam had been found, and neither he nor Bobby had mentioned any sort of deal to find Sam.

"How'd you know?"

The truth was that Sam could faintly sense her and he hadn't even been fully aware of his knowledge until he'd said it. It was a strange feeling, almost the way a familiar scent could trigger old memories. He could tell she was female and could almost imagine the way she had moved around the room, stopping briefly to lean against Bobby's desk, probably to look over some books. Sensing a demon after they had left was a new manifestation of his powers and he wondered if sensing her was made easier because she was powerful.

"I saw some sulfur," he lied, apparently satisfying Dean, who would have had to reach pretty far afield to come up with an alternate explanation.

"That was different." Dean turned his attention back to defending himself. "She was just a means to find you, but now she's gone. Those witches are still out there—"

"She's gone, back to Hell where she operates her soul-stealing business. Meanwhile, the coven isn't hurting any—"

"You can't play fast and loose with evil." Dean was starting to raise his voice. "Just because I fucked up doesn't mean that you should be fine doing the same."

"But I—"

"Dammit, Sammy! You're not going to Hell!"

Bobby and Sam just stared at Dean, who hadn't realized that he was shaking. His skin felt flush and unshed tears pooled in his eyes before being suppressed. The thought of Sam experiencing even a moment of Hell's torment was agonizing to Dean.... It was its own form of torture when Dean had been in Hell. Alastair would tell him that Sam would kill himself or make a deal to save
him. That Sam would find his way down to the pit, destined for the rack. Alastair had plans for
Sam: a whole host of rare pain merely because it was the fastest and most complete way to destroy
Dean. He refused to let his little brother suffer that. He refused to let him go down that slippery
slope.

"You didn't sell your soul again, did you?" Sam had stopped being defensive and was visibly
concerned by Dean's quick turn.

"No!" Dean was a little offended, but mostly was trying to restore his usual carefree air.

"They wouldn't take it," Bobby interjected.

"Hell wouldn't take your soul…. Spoiled goods?" Sam smirked, breaking the tension slightly.

"Ha ha, smart ass." Dean smiled sourly, but was grateful for Sam letting him off the emotional
hook. "Some big and powerful pulled my ass from the fire. It killed a bunch of demons in the
process and they don't want to risk a return visit until they have things under control."

"You don't know how you got out?" Sam was surprised, but when he thought about it, short of
another deal he couldn't imagine a way of Dean getting out.

"I don't remember it. Honestly, I thought you made a deal until Shola, the demon, told me it was
something else."

"So if you didn't trade your soul, what'd you give?" Sam asked. The idea of a demon trading for
something other than a soul was intriguing. Ruby had once told Sam that souls were the coin of
the realm in Hell, but apparently there were other things of value as well.

"My memory of what happened and a peek at my soul," Dean confessed. "They're trying to figure
out what did it."

"You gave Hell intel on the thing that might be able to kill demons en masse?"

Dean was visibly conflicted on the subject. "It wasn't that much information really. They still have
no clue what they're dealing with."

Dean excused his aid to the Crossroads by telling himself that he had gotten the better end of the
deal, but he still felt a bit sick. He wanted to stop whatever it was from harming humans, but the
idea of something wiping out hundreds of demons made him feel hopeful for once. As much as he
didn't entirely hate Shola, he would be delighted if something tore Hell apart. After ninety years of
torture, he just wished that he could watch.

Bobby's phone rang, causing him to be pulled away on hunter network business, which interrupted
the reunion. Taking advantage of the pause and wanting to avoid dealing with Dean one-on-one so
soon, Sam excused himself to go take a shower. Dean agreed that Sam would probably feel better
after cleaning off some of the small amount of dried blood still on his torso.

Sam fetched a new shirt from the Impala and took a quick shower. He still had bruising on his
chest and left cheekbone, but it only hurt when touched. The stab wound was healing nicely and
he suspected that he could take the stitches out in only a day or so. He felt a strange mixture of
feeling almost at home again, but desperately wanting to run out the door to see Ruby. It made
sense for him to wait until after things had quieted down for the night to sneak back to her. They
needed some time to figure out their story and the last thing he needed was Dean asking to tag
along on a run into town.
After getting dressed, Sam was brushing his hair when his phone rang. The caller ID showed it was Ruby, so he picked up immediately. He looked down the hall, to see if Dean or Bobby were within earshot, but it ended up not mattering. Sam didn't have a chance to say anything. He could hear rustling. Ruby cursed loudly and then said something in Latin. There was a strange hissing sound followed by a man screaming, then the call went dead. Sam was already running out of Bobby's house, and hopping into the Impala before he let go of the phone.

Dean was looking out the kitchen window sipping a beer when he saw Sam burst out of the side door. The look on Sam's face was a level of fear that Dean hadn't seen since New Harmony. Sam had been pinned to the wall, helpless to save Dean from being shredded by hellhounds. He had no idea what was going on but Dean knew that whatever had spooked Sam must be dire. Dean grabbed the keys to the Capri and raced to keep up with his brother.

It was inevitable that Sam would lose Dean. Dean didn't know where they were headed, though he wasn't surprised when Sam turned toward Sioux Falls. Worse was that the Capri couldn't keep up with the Impala, especially the way Sam was driving. Dean was by far the more skilled driver, but Sam made up what he lacked in experience with desperation. Dean lost track of Sam near the same neighborhood where they had for him the night before. Figuring that Sam was returning to some familiar location, Dean decided to patrol the streets.

After a few minutes, he was certain that he had found where Sam had been headed. The Impala was parked hastily across two spots in a cheap motel's parking lot. He could guess where Sam had been staying. The last room on the left side of the building had its door kicked it and smoke billowed slowly from it. Dean parked, grabbed his pistol, then cautiously peeked inside the room.

It looked like a small bomb had gone off inside. One of the beds was on fire, scorch marks covered the ceiling, and there was a smoldering corpse laying on the floor. The walls of the room had large magical symbols drawn onto them in marker. A flimsy table had collapsed, probably from the explosion, spilling a few bottles and random objects onto the floor. While examining the floor Dean spotted several drops of blood that seemed to form a sparse trail out the door.

The street had been plowed clear since the snowstorm of last night, but part of the curb still had piles of snow. Dean could see where the blood trail crashed through the pile of snow and proceeded across the street. Following the trail down an alley, Dean could hear yelling. The sounds were coming from a rundown building that had probably been an apartment building in a previous life. A flicker of movement in an upstairs window told him that there was a fight up there, but Dean didn't make it to the building. It was dark in the alley, but he saw a woman stagger out of an exit about twenty feet away. She was holding a knife that was dripping dark liquid. In spite of the poor lighting Dean could see that her eyes were black.
Ruby sat near the window of the motel room watching the clock. It had been an hour since Sam had left to clear a path through the demons. He had said that he would be back by a half hour ago. Under normal circumstances she would be pacing the room, but she was too sore to do it justice so she anxiously tapped her foot instead. She wanted to go out after him, but hesitated.

As much as she hated to admit it, at that point she was more of a liability in a fight than an asset. The obvious pregnancy made her a target for anyone looking to cause trouble and her mobility was severely impaired. She could still use magic, but casting spells usually required the kind of attention that left one vulnerable to attacks. Going out alone with groups of demons roaming the streets would be asking for trouble.

Not to mention the fact that Sam had taken the car to who-knew-how-far away. She could try hotwiring a car, but that wasn't something she was super proficient in. Most of time that she had wanted to travel alone before she would just teleport, but she hadn't attempted it while pregnant. The magical mechanics and strain that teleporting put on a meatsuit were just the sort of thing she had been trying to avoid exposing the baby to. So, for the moment she was limited to human forms of transportation and with no idea how to hotwire a car, her options were further reduced.

She decided to call Sam's phone, hoping that it wasn't going to loudly reveal his location or cause some other problem. On the sixth ring the call was answered by someone who wasn't Sam. Ruby's heart started pounding as she panicked and hastily hung up.

She thought back to Sam getting grabbed by those hunters a little over a month earlier. It had been terrifying then and the current situation was quickly resembling that horrible day. Last time, the hunters had come for her when she had fortunately stepped out of the room for a few minutes. She decided to change locations, but still be able to watch that room should anyone come looking. But what should she do after that?

Sam wanted the baby to be safe above all other priorities. He had made that clear to her after the warehouse incident. As much as he was grateful for the rescue, later he had begged her not put him before the baby. She had agreed, but mostly to comfort him in a time of distress. She hadn't thought it through at all and now she was faced with the very real implications of that still-unsettled debate.

Ruby cared about the baby, far more than she had thought she would, but Sam was the only person that she considered herself committed to. It seemed likely that once the baby was born she would feel closer to it, but for the moment she didn't have an intense bond with it the way Sam did. He would willingly die to protect the baby and possibly even just Ruby, but at the moment she only really would make that sacrifice for Sam.

The real question was whether she should attempt to locate and save Sam or attempt to honor his wishes by making the baby's safety her top priority. In the past she could definitely see herself
blowing off Sam's feelings as childish or dumb, but now she wasn't so sure. She might disagree with his priorities, but she had gained a lot of respect for him over the previous eighteen months. But did respecting him mean letting him die if that's what he would have wanted? Would she risk her own life to protect the baby that he cared about more than anything, or if push came to shove would she smoke out to save herself?

She felt like she might throw up. It was all too much to think about and the flood of hormones in her system certainly weren’t helping her. So she decided to tackle something more approachable, but almost certainly helpful: preparing for a fight. One way or another she was likely going to have to search for Sam, rescue Sam, or attempt to flee. All of those scenarios involved the risk of a fight; even staying in a motel room was potentially dangerous with the demons roaming the neighborhood. If they were still searching for Sam, then they would likely come through the area. She could hide inside with the curtains closed, but that wouldn't necessarily help. If the demons were being thorough enough as to check every room, then they could just smoke or break into her room and find an already-possessed body—and not just that, but a pregnant already-possessed body.

If she was spotted by demons while pregnant it would raise a major red flag. A demon would have to be both an extreme sadist and a masochist in order to voluntarily be in such a pregnant meatsuit. It would look strange and probably warrant further investigation, especially with her being found so close to Sam, an oddity unto himself. And if she was spotted by a demon, she would have no good way to prevent it from fleeing to tell others, aside from a binding potion, like the corrosive grenades, but those would take time to prepare.

She knew that there are ways to kill demons without her knife, the Colt, or Sam, but they were incredibly impractical when outnumbered and often took a long time. With a little preparation, she could probably kill one demon, but she couldn't count on killing more than that if they came as a group. Instead it made sense to bind the demons and then attempt to damage their meatsuits beyond function. Ideally, she could knock off a leg or something. In a perfect world she could construct a bomb, but she didn't have the materials to create a blast strong enough to really take off limbs. Regardless, immobilizing demons wouldn't be a long term solution, but it would enable her to get past the ones in the immediate area... and then what?

She had a while longer before the baby was due, so it wasn't quite like she could just go drop it off at the coven and then pop back to search for Sam. By the time she got back, if he hadn't yet contacted her it would mean he was probably dead. If she was going to go after him the first twenty-four hours would be the most critical and she needed to prepare for things to go sour fast.

Ruby decided that the first thing to do was establish a safe place for her to work. She switched motel rooms and only put the room under her alias. Once she had relocated to the new room, Ruby began warding the door and windows. Then she warded the air vents to prevent any demonic smoke from getting through. It wouldn't be an absolute form of protection, but it would make it harder for an intruder to get in. She positioned the curtains so that she could sit at the table and watch their old room without being seen from the parking lot or street, then she got to work.

The first major bit of witchcraft she performed was a demon locator map spell. Unfortunately, she didn’t have several hours to kill on it so she cut a few corners to speed up the casting time and reduce the amount of energy it required from her. The resulting map of the greater Sioux Falls area didn’t show individual demons, but there were hazy spots indicating some demonic presence. It would have to do. She anticipated having to use a lot of magical energy if she was going to properly defend herself in a fight so she started drawing on her connection to the coven to give her more power.
She was mixing the binding potions when the baby woke up. It had surprised her to discover that the baby had its own sleep cycle. At first she found it interesting, but sitting at the motel table trying to construct an arsenal she found it incredibly distracting. It seemed like every few seconds she would feel a kick or jab, sometimes strong enough to make her stop what she was working on and hold her belly. She had previously talked to the baby, but it was always as a joke and was for Sam's amusement. Now though, she was alone and nearing her breaking point.

"Listen, if you can just leave me alone for a few hours—I'm going to try to save our asses and maybe even find your dad. So please just give me a fucking break."

The kicking didn't slow down, but Ruby wasn't really angry. It made some small amount of sense that the baby might be agitated. She was legitimately scared about Sam and it was taking a lot of willpower on her part not to freak out. There must have been a huge amount of adrenaline and other chemicals pumping through her system. She wanted to entirely blame her state on hormones, but suspected that part of the issue was some lingering trauma from the whole warehouse incident. Sam had needed her to be strong and comforting because of the emotional number it had done on him, but the truth was that it had terrified her in a way she hadn't known in decades, or maybe centuries. Aside from Sam, she could barely remember the last time she had feared for the life of someone that much.

She eyed her cell phone and thought about calling again, but she thought back the warehouse. She couldn’t quite bring herself to move. Last time she had been ready, having accidentally gained some advantage over the hunters, but she did not feel ready now. Her hands patted her belly while she rocked slightly in the chair. She still hadn't yet decided to call…. But she needed to have some way of defending herself no matter what. The kid kept kicking her, but she went back to work.

While the binding potions were setting, Ruby began working on more offensive grenades and other tools. She had a good knife and a shotgun with salt shells, but not much else for weapons. While the shotgun could come in handy, the knife would obviously be a tool of last resort since it would require her to use melee combat.

She also started working on a locator spell for Sam. It was a long shot to try working through a loophole in the protective warding, but she figured it was worth an attempt. She decided to try locating the fake wedding ring that Sam occasionally wore. When it wasn’t on his hand, he would always keep it in his wallet or the glovebox of the Impala. Better yet was the fact that she had the matching ring, which would help narrow the search. She could start the spell and let it run while she continued working. Once the spell was completed she could cross check that against the demon locator map to find out how to arm herself in a rescue attempt. She realized that she was decided. She had sworn to protect him, no matter what.

A few minutes later, her phone began ringing. She saw it was Sam’s cell and answered right away. She held her breath wondering if it would be the same person who had answered early. When she heard Sam's voice she could breathe again and smiled weakly. The relief she felt was overwhelming, sending tingles and fatigue throughout her nervous system. In that moment she wanted nothing more than have Sam back, sleeping next to her, like they had been before the demons had drawn him away.

But that wasn't going to happen for a while... if at all. Dean was back. The one person in the world that Sam had been dangerously codependent with was back in his life. Ruby bit her lip at the news and nervously rubbed her belly, which continued to pulse with tiny kicks. She knew Sam was a good man with a strong sense of duty, especially to his family, but Dean had been family longer. It didn't seem like Sam to just take off, leaving her and the kid, in order to return to his old life, but she knew it would be asking a lot of Sam for him to put anything before his big brother.
It was a huge relief when Sam assured her that he wasn't going to rejoin Dean, but they still had to figure out how to explain Sam's departure. Ruby personally couldn't care less about hurting Dean's feelings. He had treated her like shit for the year leading up to his death; she couldn't even count all the times he had called her a bitch… But Sam still cared about him and she didn't want to burn bridges that didn't even belong to her. So they would find a way to make things work, even though she had a lot more doubts about it than Sam did.

By the end of the call she felt considerably better. Sam was safe and would be returning soon. Ruby placed her small arsenal into a duffel, set a demon alarm with a radius of 100 feet, and then crawled into bed without even bothering to undress. The baby was still too active to let her sleep properly, but it would be good to rest her body at the very least.

After an hour or so, the proximity alarm went off. Ruby got out of bed and checked the window. She saw a group of half a dozen demons crossing the parking lot and fanning out to check rooms. Even if she could instantaneously tell Sam what was going on, he was still at least ten minutes away. She would have to be prepared to defend herself so she readied a few of the grenades that needed time to warm up, then grabbed her phone to call Sam.

Ruby had barely picked up the phone when she heard someone try the motel room door. The handle jiggled, then the demon tried slamming into it. The warding around the door was designed to reinforce the door and injure anyone attempting to force their way inside. The demon that had hit the door was probably writhing on the ground, but that was almost more harmful than helpful since it was undoubtedly drawing the attention of the other demons. The warding would have been more effective against a lone hunter or fewer demons, but with five able-bodied demons converging on the motel room it wouldn't be good for much longer.

She slung the small duffel containing her weapons over her shoulder and backed towards the bathroom while dialing Sam. On the first ring, one of the stronger demons used telekinesis to knock the door in. Ruby fumbled the phone and cursed while drawing a grenade potion as two demons rushed into the room. She said an activation keyword for the grenade, threw the potion into the center of the room, then quickly ducked back into the bathroom. The glass bottle broke on floor creating a scorching blast, followed by a scream and the hissing of burning flesh.

Ruby looked back into the room. Her phone had been dropped and was fried in the blast. One of the demon’s meatsuit was burning on the floor while it slowly smoked out, possibly injured. The other had retreated out of the room, but was probably just outside the motel room door with the others. She grabbed a binding grenade and threw it just pass the doorway, splashing the group of demons. As soon as the grenade hit she started running—as best she could—towards the door. The demons had recoiled at the sight of another grenade, allowing her a few seconds to rush between them. One of the demons had the presence of mind to swing a knife at her, but it had only cut her arm, spilling a little blood.

She had managed to get forty feet ahead of them before they had realized that the binding potion wasn't doing any damage to them. Despite her head start, they caught up to her quickly because of her physical state. When they were within ten feet, she ducked down slight and held a charm a above her head, roughly four feet off the ground. She said a keyword and a shockwave spread out from the charm parallel to the ground. The shockwave hit the demons in the chest, knocking them backward at least thirty feet and breaking some nearby windows. Ruby stood back up and continued running for a nearby-abandoned building.

She rushed inside the building, activating and gently placing another scorching grenade behind the door, then ran down a hall. It took the a little while for the demons to figure out which building
she had entered, but she hadn't been able to find a backdoor or any barless windows like she had been hoping. Instead, she would have to work her way back through part of the building to avoid being cornered. The grenade she had left at the door exploded, telling her that the demons would be entering the building shortly.

Ruby climbed a set of stairs to the second floor. She checked out a window on the back side of the building for a fire escape, but didn't see one. At that point the demons were searching the building and she just hoped that they had spread out, allowing her to take them one at a time. She poured a small vial of liquid over the blade of her knife and whispered a short incantation as she heard a set of footsteps coming down the hallway. She pressed herself against the wall next to the door to the room she was in and waited.

A male demon entered the room and walked passed her. She leapt forward covering his mouth with one hand and slitting his throat with the other. With his throat slit the demon was unable to call for help, but he thrashed around louder than she would have liked and elbowed her in the face. Ruby shook off the hit and lunged at the demon while he was still turning to face her. She rapidly stabbed him in the chest seven times, hoping to pierce the heart at least three times before the demon flickered and died.

She had used up the one demon kill that she had been able to arrange on such short notice. The coating she had put on the knife was only good for a single kill, but in such close quarters it offered a much stealthier alternative to the shotgun. Until the numbers were more in her favor she decided to avoid using the noisy firearm if possible.

Ruby headed in the direction that the demon had come from hoping that, all things being equal, there would be one fewer demon in her path to the exit. She had made it halfway back to the stairs when she heard another demon ahead. Ducking into a room that looked like a stripped bathroom, Ruby saw a pile of rusted metal fixtures. She touched one with the tip of her finger and it burnt like iron. Ruby placed the duffel on the floor, then pulled her sleeves down to cover her hands.

When the demon came into the room she swung the long iron towel bar as hard as she could into his throat, crushing his larynx with a sizzling pop. On instinct he reached up to grab at the rod, but when he touched it his hands hissed and he choked on a scream. Through sheer force of will he held onto the metal and jerked it out of Ruby's hands. He swung wildly at her, once connecting with her left shoulder. She stumbled forward and to the right, but managed to regain her footing and used the newly closed distance to her advantage.

Swinging the knife up she cut across the interior of his right wrist, severing the tendons that controlled that hand. His sudden loss of dexterity distracted the demon long enough for Ruby to slice downward, severing the same tendons on his left hands. Unable to yell or use his hands for much of anything, the demon lunged at her. She dodged for the most part, but lost her balance and fell down behind him. Ruby scrambled to sit on top of him and then started using the knife to cut the tendons on the back of his knees and along the outside of his shoulders, effectively pinning him to the floor on his stomach.

She could hear noises coming from the far end of the second floor, but she was not sticking around to find out what was going on. Over the course of a few minutes she had taken several good hits and felt like she might just collapse from a strong breeze. She nearly fell on the stairs, but made it to the exit without running into any more demons.

She staggered out the door and saw a man about twenty feet from her. Stepping forward she recognized Dean. He looked her over with confusion and disgust, then Ruby remembered what she must look like. Dean wouldn't recognize her because she had changed meatsuits since the last time
they had seen each other. To him she was just some pregnant or fat woman, covered in blood, holding a knife... and in the frenzy of combat she had forgotten to keep her eyes from turning black. She dropped the knife and raised her hands.

"Wait—"

But Dean started reciting the exorcism incantation.

Sam got to the motel in only six minutes. He was beyond panicked. His fight-or-flight response had been triggered and he had gone way past the fight-end of the barometer. Every movement was rapid, and he had lost his ability to be delicate. If he had been thinking a little clearer, he might have noticed the occasional obstacle on the road being pushed out of his way.

He could barely think when he saw the state of the motel room. At a glance he knew that the corpse wasn't Ruby, but the burn marks throughout the room were absolutely her style. She had put up a fight and likely made a run for it.

It took him no time to find the blood trail and instinctively knew it was hers. Sprinting along its path he quickly sensed the presence of seven demons in a nearby building; one of them was Ruby. Sam charged straight in the front door without assessing the situation at all. He ran down the left hallway, using his powers to grab and kill a demon as almost an afterthought. The majority of activity was upstairs, but it took him a minute to find a staircase.

Once he had gotten upstairs, Sam killed another demon and then moved on, searching for Ruby. He could sense that she was on the far end of the same floor. As he was crossing the second floor he ran into a third demon, which was stronger than the other, but it only slowed him down slightly. He passed a room that contained a body that had been stabbed in the chest multiple times. The sight made him feel a little sick and uncomfortable, but he moved on without a second thought. Another room held a demon that was wriggling on the floor with its tendons slit. It surprised Sam that the demon hadn't just smoked out from its incapacitated meatsuit until he realized that it seemed to have been tagged with a liquid reminiscent of the binding corrosive grenade. By the time he got done with the demon, Ruby had descended to the bottom floor and was rushing for the exit.

Sam ran for the stairs, then glanced out a window on the staircase’s landing. He saw Dean approaching and Ruby exiting the building. Sam’s heart was pounding at that horrible culmination of his fears. Ruby dropped the knife she was holding, but it looked like Dean was starting an exorcism. She fell down to her hands and knees, then started gasping trying to fight being forced from the body. All of Sam’s fear, tension, and power had hit his limit.

Dean looked like he had been hit by an invisible truck. He flew several feet and fell to the ground, unconscious. As soon as Dean had been knocked out, Ruby finished collapsing to the ground. Sam stood frozen in complete shock for a moment. Being brothers, Sam and Dean had hit each other plenty of times, but that was something else entirely. He had unintentionally knocked Dean completely out—or maybe worse—with his powers. It was undeniable that he had been getting more powerful lately, but power wasn’t any good if he couldn’t control it. Yes, he had wanted to stop Dean, but there were gentler ways of going about it. He was upset, but he had never meant to hurt his brother. He would have to try to calm down, focus himself, and get them to safety. Once things were more stable he could try to figure out what was going on with him.

Sam exited the building and went straight to Ruby. She was barely awake, curled up on her side with her arms wrapped protectively around her belly. Her eyes didn’t quite follow his movement, which was disconcerting. He quickly looked her over for serious injuries, found nothing obvious,
then glanced at Dean. Sam was thankful to see that Dean was breathing and in a position that
didn’t necessarily mean broken bones.

Sam scooped up Ruby and then walked over to Dean. He needed to get them both out of there
before more demons arrived. Two were unaccounted for and had likely gotten away while he was
distracted by the attempted exorcism.

Unfortunately, he couldn't carry both Dean and Ruby at once. Sam decided to get Ruby to the
Impala first, then he could come back for Dean. But as Sam took a step or two away from Dean,
he could have sworn that he felt a strange tugging sensation in his mind. He realized that he had
unconsciously established a bit of a telekinetic grip on his brother. Sure enough, when Sam tried to
pull him along, Dean dragged behind him. It was the first time that Sam actually felt in control of
his telekinesis rather than it just bursting out. Sam focused a little harder on picking his brother's
body up off the ground so that he wouldn't suffer any road rash. Using his telekinesis caused a
substantial headache, but saved precious minutes.

As he was finishing loading Ruby and Dean into the Impala, Sam turned to see that a new group of
demons had arrived on the scene. Several of the demons attempted to chase after him, but they
were far enough away that he was able to finish getting in the Impala and take off without any
further trouble.

Driving away, he had a weird realization as he replayed the scene in his head. A few of the newly
arrived demons didn't run to attack him like the others. They just stood there watching him, talking
to each other. It was eerie the way they had looked at him. One had even put her hand to her
mouth in surprise. Sam didn't know what to make of it, but there wasn't time enough to wonder.
He had to get Ruby and Dean back to the safety of Bobby's house and his mind was too wracked
trying to figure out how he was going to explain the situation.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that my depiction of Ruby's reaction to Sam's disappearance didn't come off as
uncaring. I was trying to portray her as experiencing some of the classic avoidance
symptoms of a person with severe anxiety/fear resulting from a traumatic event, but I
didn't want to slow down the narrative even more by including an explicit/clinical
explanation. The point is that she cares about Sam even if she wasn't quite capable of
launching into a rescue right away. Her actions should not reflect negatively on the
strength of their relationship.
We Have An Announcement

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

Dean woke up with a headache and a strange dizzy-falling sensation that made him nauseous, indicating that he probably had a concussion. Lying on his side in the back of what appeared to be the Impala as it sped along a bumpy road was not helping. The last thing he remembered was exorcising a woman in an alleyway, then being hit hard by something he hadn’t seen coming. Sam must have found and saved him. Dean tried to talk, but he was still too groggy from being knocked out. He instead settled for trying to regain his motor skills and wits, but mostly spent the drive failing to exert any strength with his arms.

By the time that he was starting to feel well enough to try sitting upright, the car had come to a halt. He heard Sam rushing out the driver's door. Dean expected his little brother to try to assist him, but instead Sam was opening up the front passenger side door and picked up a small woman that Dean hadn’t realized was riding shotgun.  It was the woman who had been possessed in the alleyway. Thinking about it, Dean could understand Sam wanting to make sure that she got some help—she had looked pregnant—but for some strange reason Sam had taken her to Bobby’s instead of a hospital.

Without saying a word to Dean, Sam turned, then rushed to get the woman inside Bobby’s house. Dean hurried after him, a little less sure-footed than usual. Sam had yelled for Bobby to open up before he ran in the door past the confused-looking Bobby. He took the woman straight up the stairs without explanation. Dean's head was still spinning slightly from being knocked out so he lagged behind Sam by several long strides. As Dean reached the doorway Bobby touched his arm, stopping him briefly. Dean looked at Bobby, who eyed the stairs.

"Who's the woman?"

"Hell if I know," Dean muttered as he started toward the stair and Bobby followed. "She was possessed. I got knocked out. Sam grabbed us both."

Dean found Sam and the woman in one of the second-floor spare bedrooms. Sam had laid her down on the bed and was kneeling on the floor next to her. He was carefully looking her over for injuries. Her palms and knees were scraped up, she had a cut on her upper right shoulder, and a bruise on her cheek, but that was all that Dean could see in the way of injuries. She seemed fatigued or disoriented, head slumped to the side with her eyes only partially open. What was most striking about her appearance was just how pregnant she actually looked. Earlier Dean had seen her from a distance in dim lighting. She had looked large and probably pregnant then, but up close and in good lighting there was no doubt about it.

Dean shifted uncomfortably. The last thing they needed was to have some ex-meatsuit go into labor. They weren't equipped to deal with that situation. He glanced at Bobby who also seemed to be nervous about her being there. Dean stepped forward, clearing his throat a bit to get Sam's attention. Sam had been asking her questions to test her awareness, but stopped at the sound of the pointed cough. He turned his body towards Dean slightly, but didn't look up to meet his brother's eyes.
"Hey, Sammy…. Uh... I know that she got banged up a bit, but she should go to a hospital. We can't handle this sort of thing and with the demon out, we're done." Dean was trying to use a reassuring tone because Sam's posture looked like he was upset. He couldn't tell whether Sam was angry, sad, scared, or some combination, but something was definitely off. Dean rubbed the back of his neck and felt his head throb. He thought back to being charged or thrown by some demon that he didn't get a look at, and getting knocked out on the pavement after exorcising—but he was hit before he finished the exorcism. Dean's body tensed slightly. He reached into his jacket pocket and clutched a flask of holy water.

"Sam, you did finish the exorcism, right?" Dean asked cautiously.

"Yeah, she's fine."

Sam turned up to look at Dean. The expression on his face was poorly-masked concern. His skin lost a little color as his eyes darted between Dean's face and coat pocket. Dean couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was an overwhelming feeling of wrongness about Sam's reaction. Maybe Sam was just worn out from a stressful few days... but he had been the one who took off with no explanation and voluntarily ran straight into another brawl with way too many demons. He was hiding something. It was an all-too-familiar feeling, but Dean always hated to concede its existence.

Dean pulled the flask of holy water from his pocket and flicked the cap open with his thumb. Sam had immediately stood up, putting himself between Dean and the woman on the bed. Dean's heart was pounding at the surprise standoff. He took half a step back and splashed a little holy water onto Sam's face. Nothing happened. That didn't make any sense. Sam was trying to protect some demon, and by the new expression forming on his face he was done trying to hide it. All the fear had melted away and now Sam looked pissed off more than anything else.

"So, Sammy. You exorcised the demon?" Dean lips turned up into a sour smile before thinning.

"You've got to hear me out." Sam's statement was half-plea and half-demand. That was rich. He had knowingly brought a demon into their home and then was making demands. Dean felt like he was going to throw up even more than when he was being jostled in the back seat.

"You brought a demon here and lied to us about it!" Dean shouted.

"She isn’t just some demon," Sam shot back. “It's Ruby."

Dean couldn't tell if that made things better or worse. Everyone knew that he and Ruby hated each other, especially Sam. It wasn't just the fact that she was a demon that bothered him. She was bossy, stubborn, and didn't care about anyone but herself. Worst was that she had wiggled her way into Sam's life with false promises of being able to save Dean from Hell, and in the process started Sam's habit of keeping secrets. There had been a time when he and Sam had been inseparable, but then Sam had found his secret demon helper on the side. And now she was back with a whole new bunch of shit that was inevitably about to hit the fan. Dean wasn't sure how the situation could get worse, but with Ruby in the mix it was guaranteed.

"So knowing the bitch that's riding some pregnant woman makes this better? Do you have any idea how much damage she might be doing? All that demon stuff could fuck up the kid!"

As much as Dean wanting to pin some blame on Ruby, he was also legitimately concerned about the woman and baby. The idea of making a meatsuit from a pregnant woman was so perverted that he was honestly a little surprised he didn’t see demons doing it more often.
"The body's dead. Ruby's the only thing keeping the baby alive and you almost exorcised her!" Sam's face was turning red. He was obviously pissed off and not thinking clearly. There were certain standards of decency you did not cross.

"Well, I'm sorry, but demons aren't life support systems," Dean argued. "You don't just shove a demon in someone to keep things ticking. You can't save them all, even some kid, and you sure as hell don't do it by using demons."

As soon as he'd said it Dean realized that Sam was going to call him a hypocrite. Sam would give him shit about selling his soul and probably even working with Shola in order to find him. But Dean knew better than anyone that he wasn't the kind of person that anyone should be looked to as an example. He had signed himself up for an eternity of torment and had only managed to get out of it through blind luck. But Sam didn't call him out. Instead he said something that managed to hit Dean even harder.

"That's not just some kid! That's my kid!"

The silence that followed seemed to be endless. Dean looked at Sam and then glanced at the woman—technically Ruby—then back at Sam. He was struggling to process what he had just heard. The idea that his baby brother was expecting a baby just wasn't quite fitting together. Rationally he understood, but the shock was too much and he was getting dangerously close to throwing rationality out entirely. Thank god Bobby was cool-headed enough to break the silence and even tried to calm the situation.

"Sam, I understand what you're doing with having Ruby keep... her alive, but Dean's right. There's got to be some effect exposing the kid to a demon," Bobby said, causing Sam to roll his eyes in exasperation. Sam's lips moved slightly like he was going to say something, but couldn't figure out how to begin so Bobby tried to give him a place to start. "How long has the baby been exposed? How long has Ruby been possessing her?"

Sam threw up his hands as if he was done with attempting something. He shook his head and an unamused smile flickered on his face. "Ruby's been in the body the whole time. She's been in it for like a year and a half."

"I don't get it. What about the mom?" Dean asked.

"I am the mom, you fuckwit." Ruby's voice was weak, but caught everyone's attention. She was lying on her left side, holding her belly with her arms minus her cut up palms. She looked completely worn out, but her eyes had a venomous quality when she looked at Dean.

It took a minute for Dean to process the new information. Ruby had been in the body for over a year and pregnancies only lasted about nine months. She was the mom. Sam had had sex with Ruby, and he almost certainly knew it was her.... "You and Ruby?" Dean could barely get the words out.

"Yes." Sam stood up to his full height, indicating his determination.

Dean looked like he was going to say something, stopped himself, paced in a small circle, then threw up his hands. "I don't know which is worse: that you fucked a demon or that you spent the whole afternoon lying to me!"

"I was going to tell you—"

"That you're gonna have a kid!" Dean shouted. "I'm your goddamn brother and you just leave that
out of our fucking heart-to-heart reunion. That's kinda a thing you tell people."

"Like I could ever tell you and not have you completely flip out about this. Look at yourself!" Sam’s voice raised to match Dean’s.

"Look at me? You've been running around for a year hanging out with witches and fucking demons. What the hell else have you been doing?!" Dean took a step toward Sam, who just stood his ground and scowled down at Dean in return.

"Don't you dare pretend to know what it's been like—"

"Stop yelling!" snapped Ruby. "Just stop…. You two are exhausting."

"She's right. You two need to cool off before you do or say something you might regret," Bobby added as he stepped forward, ready to forcibly separate the brothers if necessary.

"I think Sam has done enough stuff to regret for the both of us," Dean muttered.

Sam didn't respond, but he looked like it was taking all his willpower not to throw a punch.

"Sam," Ruby said weakly. "We need to get the alarm spell up." She was trying to break up the argument before it turned into a full-blown fist fight by giving Sam something urgent to do.

"Come on, Dean." Sam wanted him to come with him... or more accurately Sam wanted him to not be left alone with Ruby. Spitefully, Dean wanted to say that he'd rather stay there, but he knew that that would almost guarantee him a punch in the face. After the blow to the head from earlier, Dean decided against the comment. Anyway, as much as he hated Ruby he wasn’t sure what he was actually prepared to do. All that information was too new to him. He didn’t know how to feel… other than betrayed.

"Sure," Dean agreed, then asked, "Bobby, you got any salt?"

Sam candidly glared at his brother. "You aren’t going to salt her in here."

"Why not?" Dean prodded.

"Dean, give it a rest," Bobby said, trying to cool the situation. He grabbed the collar of Dean’s shirt like he used to do when they were children and began leading Dean out of the room. Dean almost resisted, but he decided not to alienate the one person that might be on his side. "Come on, let’s go help Sam."

‘Help’ turned out to be an overstatement. Bobby and Dean were mostly following and observing Sam. Bobby had wanted to put some distance between Dean and Ruby while trying to find a way to restart the dialogue with a less hostile tone. That was made difficult by Sam actively trying to ignore Dean and Dean visibly fuming over the smallest things. When Sam opened the trunk of the Impala to retrieve supplies for the alarm spell, Dean became more vocal.

“Let me guess, she’s the one that scratched up Baby?”

“It’s not scratched up; it’s warded. Anyway, it was my car,” Sam said defensively.

“Still is. I mean you locked me out—”

“For fuck’s sake Dean, I’ll add you to the spell!” Sam snapped. “Just stop acting so melodramatic. You don’t need to freak out—”
“Are you fucking kidding me? Of course I’m freaking out. I mean, just take a step back and look at the situation. You’re a hunter! You damn well better start thinking like one!” Dean was yelling, but he immediately regretted it when he saw that he had accidentally struck a nerve.

"I am not a hunter!” Sam shouted as he wheeled around to confront his brother. “This isn’t some job; it’s my life! You can't just take a problem, draw some line in the sand, and kill everything on the other side. You're talking about Ruby and my kid, and you're talking about me. Being a hunter doesn’t mean you have the moral high ground. It doesn’t make you right. It means you have a gun, a fucked up past, and a hero complex. I’m done with hunters and their holier-than-thou bullshit!"

His outburst seemed to be only half-directed at Dean’s comment. Something must’ve happened to make him so sensitive and Dean restrained himself slightly. He was prepared to argue in defense of himself and hunting, but with Sam so upset it’d be dangerous to get into a two-way, heated shouting match… again.

“What the hell happened to you?” Dean asked in a calmer tone.

"You know what happened: hunters,” Sam answered coldly. “They were just doing their job. I wasn't doing anything—fuck, I was killing demons by the dozens—and some hunters decided that I'm the number-one bad. They came after me. They came after Ruby and the baby."

"They?” Bobby asked with worry in his voice.

"Some hunters out of North Carolina."

“How many?”

"Something like twenty.” Sam made a little move alluding to a shrug. “I stopped counting."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Sam had gone back to looking into the trunk, trying to avoid the others' eyes. Dean and Bobby exchanged a look of concern. Neither knew exactly what Sam meant, but it obviously wasn’t good. News had come through their hunter network about a hunting group from North Carolina suffering some bizarre injuries and even fatalities in the last year or so, but neither of them wanted to believe that Sam would really be fighting hunters. Though, if they had been hunting him, that did change things a bit.

"We tried to just knock them out and leave them alone,” Sam explained. “But they kept coming. You wanted to know about the gunshot: hunters. You wanted to know about the handcuffs: hunters.” He pulled back his sleeves to reveal the matching wrist scars and held them out to emphasize the point. "They jumped me, cuffed me to a beam, beat me, and used me as bait to catch Ruby, because they couldn't just kill me. They had to kill the kid too. You don't know—I was chained up and he hit her, knocked her to the ground—"

"Demons are tough,” Dean said. “I'm sure—"

Sam lunged at Dean, but Bobby jumped in between them, grabbing Sam and holding him back. Dean fell backward trying to dodge Sam’s unsuccessful attack and hit the side of a junk car. He had meant to rationalize the hunter’s action, but only ended up pissing Sam off more. He mentally kicked himself.

"Sam, he didn't mean it like that.” Bobby tried to calm the situation. “You're both just pissed off and saying things ya don't mean."

"You're damn right I'm pissed off,” Sam agreed. “Dean's defending some fucking hunter who hit Ruby—"
Dean explained, "I was just trying to say that any hunter worth his salt knows that demons—"

"They thought she was human! She was almost eight months pregnant and he hit her. He held a shotgun to her belly. They were going to kill her and the baby on the chance that it was mine. So tell me again about the nobility of being a hunter."

Bobby and Dean looked like they’d had the wind knocked out of them. Neither had a response. There were plenty of things that they could say to try to convince him that not all hunters were like that, but Sam already knew that. He knew that there were good hunters in the world, but he had also learned firsthand that there were cruel or misguided ones. That was his point, and there was no real way to argue with it.

Bobby and Dean had known this truth abstractly, but they had never been the victim of it. It wasn’t personal to them the same way that it had been to Sam. Gordon Walker’s mission against Sam had been the closest Dean had ever come to being on the prey side of the line, but he never really was prey exactly. He had been the bait and cared about the prey…. Dean remembered the overwhelming helplessness and fear that he had felt, tied to the chair being used to lure his only remaining family to his apparent death. Sam had gone through almost the same thing. No wonder his wrists had been cut up so much. If Walker had cuffed Dean instead of using ropes, he might very well have had matching scars.

"What happened to the hunters?" Bobby asked softly.

"Those ones, they're dead." Sam's expression was almost remorseless. Looking at Dean he added, "I skipped the traditional pyres because of my broken ribs and almost-slit wrists. I hope you aren't going to give me shit for that too."

Dean couldn’t bring himself to argue with Sam. He was upset and still in varying levels of shock over everything that had come to light in barely a half hour, but mostly he was concerned. He was concerned for his little brother, who had somehow become hardened. Sam still seemed like there were soft edges to him, but the Sammy that Dean remembered wouldn’t have been so dismissive of killing people. Dean could try to blame it on Ruby, but after hearing about the hunters…. Maybe it wasn’t having evil as an ally that had changed Sam; maybe it was having ‘good’ as an enemy.

Dean didn’t want to be Sam’s enemy. He wanted to bring Sam in from the cold and the chaos. But he didn’t know how to be supportive when faced with this whole mess. He couldn’t pretend to like Ruby or be okay with some sort of half-demon kid. Maybe with time he could warm up to the idea of the kid, but there were too many of his instincts screaming that that was wrong. He needed to get a little distance so he wouldn’t snap at Sam and make the situation worse.

“I’m gonna go take a walk. I need some time to cool down— Don’t throw a bitch fit; I’m not going near Ruby.” Dean tried to be as diplomatic as possible and then walked off into the junkyard.

Bobby took the opportunity to speak with Sam alone. "Sam, I can see that you've been through a lot, but you're home now. You don't have to fight anyone. I'll bust Dean's ass if that boy says anything out of line, but I can't have you two tearing at each other's throats. You boys need to find a way to be civil at the very least."

"He was about two seconds from suggesting killing Ruby and the baby. ‘Think like a hunter’—we all know what that means." Sam was scowling, but it wasn’t directed at Bobby.

"I'm not defending what he said, but he's not thinking about it as a baby. He's thinking about it as some unknown danger."
"You're right; he doesn't know. So he's just going to assume the worst. He always was fine dropping 'monsters' without a thought to why. It's them or us to him. Well, my kid isn't a monster and Ruby—"

"I'm not saying there isn't some truth there. Your daddy did instill an awful black-and-white view of the world in him, but think about what this is like from his perspective," Bobby suggested. "You disappeared for a year and a half, then show up with a demon baby-mama and talk casually about killing hunters, the people who raised you boys. Of course he's freaked out. And the more you act out against him, the more he's gonna want to try to save you from what you've become."

"I haven't become anything. I'm still me, but I'm done letting him tell me what to do or how to feel. I'm done being pushed around. I just want to live my life."

"Well, if you want to keep your brother in that life, you're going to have to work for it." Bobby put his hand on Sam’s shoulder and gently turned Sam to look him in the eyes. "It seems to me that you've become a man in the last year and a half so maybe you should act like one and forgive your brother.”

Sam rested his forehead against the raised trunk of the Impala. He exhaled slowly. It would be hard, but he knew that Dean wouldn’t really be able to move past that awkward night if Sam kept being offended at everything he said. If Bobby was trying to talk him down, then Bobby would almost certainly talk to Dean too. It had to be a two-way street.

After a thoughtful pause, Sam replied, “I’ll try.”

“Good. Now let me give you a hand with this spell. And you’re gonna explain it to me. You know the rules; no working magic in my house without you telling me about it first.”

Bobby cleared the kitchen table and Sam laid out the supplies to cast the alarm spell. They worked in an uncomfortable silence, except for the occasional explanation given by Sam.

After about twenty minutes, Dean came in the front door. His cheeks and ears were rosy from the cold winter air. He walked into the kitchen without acknowledging Sam’s presence and began making a pot of coffee to warm himself up. After pouring a mug, Dean stepped a little closer to the kitchen table, finally succumbing to his own curiosity. Sam retrieved a small amulet from the cigar box of mementos, which had been placed on the table. As he continued arranging spell components on the kitchen table, Dean walked over and pulled something from the box.

Dean had always known about his little brother's collection of random things. As kids when Sam was sad Dean would ask him what each of the objects meant and Sam would usually be cheered up slightly recalling memories of better times. The last time Dean had seen inside the box was before Sam had left for Stanford. Now Dean didn't recognize half the objects. It was painful for him to see another physical reminder of how much his little brother had changed and experienced without him. Dean picked up a small person made of sticks, glue, and orange yarn.

"Hoodoo totem or souvenir from a craft fair?" Dean asked, turning the figurine in his hand.

"Be careful with that." At Sam’s stern warning Dean suddenly handled the possibly-dangerous object with care. Softening his tone, Sam added, "It was a gift."

Bobby walked over to stand between and slightly behind them, allowing a view of the spell that Sam was casting and the contents of the box. Dean placed the stick man back into the box, then resumed investigating the other keepsakes. Dean skipped a large section of papers, instead opting
to look at the stones, pins, charms, and other random objects. But Bobby spotted something among the papers. He reached across Dean to pull the set of ultrasound photos from the box. Dean stopped playing with an old coin and Sam glanced over at Bobby, but didn't say anything. Bobby quietly looked through all the photos, then returned to the one with the clearest image before speaking.

"So, when's she due?"

"A week or two." Sam self-consciously adjusted some of the spell components and tried not to look at Bobby. He didn't know what to expect from the conversation, but Bobby's voice had lightened in a way that made Sam's heart feel tight.

"Do you know if it's a boy or girl?" Bobby was asking normal baby questions and Sam realized that he was trying to be accepting of the situation.

"We don't know."

"Well, have you at least got names picked out? If you're gonna make me feel old by turning me into a grandpa, then I damn well get to be the first one to know the name."

A choked-up laugh escaped Sam. Bobby gently squeezed his shoulder in reassurance. Within a second Sam had Bobby in a desperate hug and Bobby returned it, softly patting his back.

Dean quietly watched, still processing everything that he'd been feeling earlier and what he had just witnessed with Bobby. It had been no secret that Sam had always wanted to be normal with a nine-to-five job, a wife, and two and a half kids. Dean wanted Sam to be happy, but the current situation wasn't right no matter how he looked at it. If things had been different…. If tomorrow morning there wasn't a single monster left in the world and they had nothing better to do than go domestic, Sam still wouldn't be getting the apple-pie-and-white-picket-fence dream that he deserved.

Instead he was having a baby with a demon. It had upset Dean on several levels. Sam had stopped trying to get him out of Hell and moved on with his life. In a way it made sense, but it still hurt. Then he had lied to Dean about what he'd been doing. He had started fucking a demon—and not just any demon, but one that Sam knew he hated. And now Sam wanted to leave hunting and possibly him, after they had just been reunited, to be with Ruby and some demon baby. That was about as far from what he had wanted for Sam as it got.

But part of the problem was that, it'd be easier if Sam was being tricked or if something mischievous was happening, but so far it didn't really seem like it. Yes, Sam had changed and was acting strange compared with what Dean had known, but the changes seemed almost understandable considering everything that had happened. Maybe that was really the new Sam? Seeing the way Sam talked about Ruby and the baby, his feelings appeared sincere. Maybe Sam had settled or fallen in love, but he was different. Dean had heard that becoming a parent changed people; maybe it had already changed Sam? Or maybe it was being away from Dean for so long? After all, Sam had changed so much after Stanford and he'd had the stability of a normal life then. A year and a half through a gauntlet had to leave a mark or two.

Dean wanted his little kid brother back, but it was clear that that wasn't going to happen. Bobby had already made the gesture of acceptance, even if he didn't necessarily agree with Sam’s choices. But Dean wasn't sure he could do that yet. All he had was hunting with Sam and the idea that his brother would give that up, no matter the circumstances, was heartbreaking. It was only made worse by Sam choosing a demon over him. But those choices had been made back when he’d thought Dean was dead and they couldn't be unmade now.
"Sammy," Dean said as he shifted uncomfortably and crossed his arms in a defensively determined gesture. "I don't like what's going on. I can't even begin to tell you how much I—you know, whatever. I'm not going to fight with you. You’re my brother and I’ll deal."

"Dean, stop being such a hard ass and hug your damn brother." Bobby stepped out of the way and basically shoved Sam into Dean. The brothers awkwardly embraced, but both of them were secretly grateful for Bobby forcing the act. Dean broke the hug first. "Okay, now that that's over you better finish this spell of yours before we’ve got demons at the door."
Sam completed the spell in only a few minutes while Dean and Bobby watched. Occasionally, Bobby would ask about some aspect of the spell and was impressed with the extent of Sam's knowledge. Dean also had to secretly admit that it was kind of nice that someone could finally explain why it seemed like every spell involved drawing a circle or using blood. After activating the glass spheres, Sam laid them out in a familiar pattern to indicate at a glance the direction and proximity of any demons. He started describing what the arrangement indicated, when Ruby started screaming upstairs.

It took Dean and Bobby a moment to realize what was happening, but Sam instantly ran for the stairs, and began taking them three at a time. He nearly missed his footing near the top, but in his panic to get to Ruby he unconsciously gave himself a little telekinetic push upward. Dean and Bobby didn't see the strange save because Sam had already reached the bedroom by the time they had gotten to the bottom of the staircase.

When Dean and Bobby had reached the bedroom doorway Ruby had stopped screaming. Sam was kneeling next to the bed, one hand cupping the side of her face, the other holding onto her shoulder reassuringly. She saw the two of them watching from outside the doorway and avoided making eye contact with them in what looked like an act of embarrassment. Sam whispered something to her, squeezed her shoulder gently, then stood up. He walked out of the bedroom into the hall where Dean and Bobby were waiting.

"What the hell happened?" Dean asked.

"She, um…." Sam hesitated as he ran his fingers through his hair. "She gets nightmares."

"Nightmares? As in sleeping nightmares?" Bobby's eyes had widened and he peered around Sam to look at Ruby through the doorway. "Sam, demons don't sleep."

"Yeah…. Well they don't need food or get pregnant either, but she just likes breaking the rules," Sam joked, but he was too tired to smile.

"What do you mean demons don't get pregnant?" Dean asked as he held up his hands in a timeout gesture and leaned his head forward, eager for an explanation.

"I hadn't ever heard of it before, but I guess there's gotta be all sorts of stuff I haven't heard of…. But you mean this is the first time?" Bobby asked, continuing to eye Ruby, who refused to meet his gaze.

"As far as we can tell…." Sam spoke meekly, betraying some discomfort with the subject.

"Fucking fantastic. Any theories on what that means?" Dean asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sam’s voice rose in agitation.
"I'm sorry. If you hadn't noticed things are kind of going to shit with the demons and right now there just happens to be some half demon—" Dean struggled to watch what he was saying. He could see Sam's posture change, becoming defensive.

"It wasn't anything weird," Sam countered. "It just sort of happened, like any other unplanned pregnancy. It doesn't have to mean anything. It could just be a coincidence. Lilith's doing some big stuff; the demon activity spike is probably just related to her."

If Sam was less tired he might have conceded the point and just let Dean's assertions roll off him, but he was completely emotionally raw and expecting a fight. It was true that the timing was a little odd. On the road he and Ruby hadn't realized just how much the demonic activity on Earth had increased. And yet, getting pregnant after consistently having unprotected sex wasn't exactly a snowball's chance in Hell, especially considering that the whole demon-toxicity thing hadn't seem to be a factor. Maybe there was something to the timing, but there also was a fair argument for it being a coincidence... and being a coincidence was much more likely to mean the baby would be left alone.

"But a demon baby hasn't happened before. I mean, you can't be the only person to fuck a demon. Why would it only work now without it being related to everything else that's going on?" Dean argued.

"We think it's because...of me. I'm the difference, not the timing or anything else." Sam looked incredibly uncomfortable, but not exactly embarrassed.

"What do you mean?"

"I've got demon blood in me," He explained. Dean and Bobby just stared, too shocked and confused for words. "That's why I have the psychic powers and that demon virus didn't affect me. Azazel gave me demon blood when I was a baby, the night mom died. He told me before Jake stabbed me.... So, yeah. It seems I'm just human enough get things going and just demon enough to get it going with a demon."

Dean took a step back and held up his hand. His head shook slightly, for a moment he was unable to look at Sam.

"You knew you had demon blood for a whole year before I died and didn't think to mention it?!!" Dean was starting to yell again, but he couldn't help it.

"It's not like you could've done anything about it and I didn't want you freaking out." Sam had expected Dean to flip out slightly so he was able to brace himself. He was trying to stay calm, to prevent a real fight from breaking their currently eggshell-thin relationship.

"Oh yes, because finding out like this is much better," Dean huffed, switching from yelling to the slightly-less-hostile sarcasm.

"I think you guys are missing the more pressing issue." Bobby tried to redirect the brothers’ attention from hurt feelings to the more important matter. "If Ruby's a demon and you're a little bit demon, then I think it's safe to say that that baby is gonna be a good bit demon."

"It's human too," Sam rebutted.

"But what does that even mean?" Dean interjected. "We don't know what we're dealing with here."

"We're not 'dealing with' anything. This is—" Sam was starting to feel his self-control crumbling
and being cut off by Dean wasn’t helping.

"Sammy, you’re not thinking about this objectively. You've got to take a step back at think about how we'd handle this if it was any other—"

But Dean didn’t get to finish his sentence. Sam had stepped forward, stopping just short of throwing a punch, instead settling for pointing a trembling finger at Dean’s face. In that moment Sam looked painfully tired and hurt, lip quivering and eyes watering.

"Don't! Don't say 'job.' You don't get it. This isn't some thing that needs to be dealt with. This is my kid. We can research and talk about this, but this is not a job. It’s not a job!"

Dean backed off in every sense of the word. He stepped backward, lowering his hands slowly. All hostility left his face, replaced by pity and brotherly concern. Bobby stepped forward and cautiously put a hand on Sam’s shoulder.

"Okay, yeah. This isn't a job. We’re just saying we should do some research. You've been running around all over the country without any time to really get ready. I mean, you must be exhausted. Why don't you get some rest?" Bobby suggested.

"Ruby needs to rest more than me and one of us should stay up to keep an eye out for demons," Sam stated matter of factly, running a hand through his hair while trying to regain his composure. "It may have been the two of you for a long time, but right now there are four of us. We want to help you, Sam. Dean and I will keep watch. Go get some sleep; you're still healing." Bobby patted Sam’s back softly.

Sam looked a little confused by the offer, unaccustomed to really having help beyond Ruby. It had been so long that it felt foreign and hadn’t even occurred to him. "Fine. I'll bandage up Ruby’s injuries, then I'll go to bed…. Thank you."

"Dean, go grab the first aid kit from the kitchen," Bobby ordered in his best almost-dad voice. Dean looked thoughtfully at Sam, smiled sadly, then went down to the kitchen. "Sam, I want you to know that you and the kid are safe here as far as I'm concerned. And your brother might be a little rough around the edges, but he'd never really do anything to hurt you, including touching the kid."

"I know. It's just, for months I've been hearing my dad's voice telling me….” Sam covered his face with his hands, then rubbed his stinging eyes. “I don't think I could take hearing it from Dean."

"Dean loves you, and he's a better man than your daddy ever was. So are you. Both of you’ll be fine; you each just gotta pull your heads out of your asses."

Dean handed Sam the first aid kit, then paused briefly to gently pat his shoulder and smiled in a strange combination of concern and reassurance. Once Dean had started heading back down the stairs, Sam went into the bedroom and began cleaning Ruby's wounds. Part way through he stopped to adjust her pillow to be more supportive. She smiled weakly up at him.

He thought back to the crazy scene he had stumbled upon earlier in the night. She had more or less blown up the motel room, defended herself against half a dozen demons, somehow killed one without her knife, and did it all while basically having a watermelon strapped to her. The idea that she had somehow managed to paralyze one of the demons by cutting his tendons conjured the strangest mental images. She had even made it out of the building with only one demon on the
ground floor. Except for Dean’s interruption she might have slipped away from the demons on her own.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a hell of a woman?"

"Only the smart ones." She grinned smugly.

"I should have been there. If—"

"You got there in time," she said, trying to quell his guilt. "I'm not gonna say that I had things under control, but I had another trick or two up my sleeve for the demons. It was the hunter I wasn't expecting."

Sam pursed his lips and closed his eyes for a moment. He knew that Ruby would initially be stubbornly ‘us against them’ where Dean was involved, but she would have to swallow her anger and pride too if this was going to work. He just hoped that she really cared enough about him to endure Dean, especially if it took Dean a while to come around.

"I'm trying to make things work between me and him…. Could you do me a favor and just call him Dean?" he asked meekly. "I know it's silly, but I don't want to think of him as a hunter, at least until things get better. He's just my brother."

"Okay, I won't use the h-word. Do you think he's gonna try on his end?"

"I think so. He seemed disappointed… but he also stopped himself from doing something stupid a few times. I think Bobby will probably talk to him and try to fix things between us. He's already talked me down twice. I'm sure Dean is getting an ear-full right now."

"I'm sorry that everything went to shit tonight." Ruby placed one bandaged hand on Sam’s and exhaled a chuckle at the poignant gesture.

Sam looked at her, her bandaged hand, and the shabby little spare bedroom. He sighed slowly, then smiled. "Honestly, I'm not. I'm glad they know. All the lying…. I'm so tired of lying. It's better that they know about us and the baby."

"You sure they won't try anything?" Ruby asked, unconsciously covering her belly with the other hand.

"I'll keep an eye on Dean, but I don't think he'll actually try anything," Sam assured her. "He can be a hardass, but I don't think he'd do anything to hurt me. Bobby doesn't think so either."

"Well, Dean might not want to hurt you, but I'm sure he has no problem going after me."

"He might argue with you, like the old days, but I doubt he hates you so much that he'd be willing to screw over his relationship with me. I'm the only family he's got left other than Bobby. Anyway, we'll be gone before the baby's born so you'll have a tiny human shield while around him."

"Half-human shield," she corrected.

He kissed the back of her bandaged hand, then suggested, "Maybe try not to remind him of that."

"How's Bobby taking the news? I can't get a good read on him."

"I think he's taking it pretty well, all things considered. He referred to himself as a grandpa." Sam smiled. "Aside from being a bit worried, I think it's okay. He's trying to make it not awkward."
"Well, that's—" Ruby touched her belly and let out a long sigh, then relaxed into the bed a bit more. "The baby's moving."

Sam placed his hand on her belly and felt a little shifting sensation. He felt relief unlike any he'd known before. Things had gone from bad to worse in such a short stretch of time, but even though everything went unexpectedly it had somehow ended up generally for the better. He was with Bobby and Dean, but so were Ruby and the baby. The baby didn't seem to be harmed by the attempted exorcism. They weren't even lying about Ruby's identity or having to dance around the whole baby thing.

It wasn't a perfect situation though. Eventually, Lilith's demons would roll through the area and he would have to flee with Ruby, but maybe he could call every once in a while or meet up with Dean on the road. Sam doubted that Dean and Ruby could ever find a way to be comfortable with Dean visiting the coven. He wasn't sure that Dean could stand being surrounded by witches even if it meant being able to see a nephew or niece. But maybe Bobby would visit? The old hunter was a softy at heart and the grandpa comment had given Sam more hope than he had expected.

Sam finished tying off the last of Ruby's bandages, took off his jacket and shoes, then climbed into bed with her. He lay down behind her on the bed that was barely big enough for a single person. The tight fit didn't bother either of them. Ruby turned slightly to look back at him, but he just ran his fingers through her hair reassuringly.

"Dean and Bobby are going to keep an eye out so we can get some sleep." He nuzzled his face into her hair and was asleep within seconds.

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Bobby and Dean grabbed some beers, then sat down at the kitchen table to watch the glass spheres that Sam had set up. Neither of them could remember what exactly each sphere correlated to, but if any of them so much as moved they would just run for Sam. Dean looked at the cigar box, but didn't start digging through it again. He just shook his head and took a long chug of his beer.

"Can you believe that Sam is so anti-hunter?" Dean asked, more hurt than angry. "I mean I get that he had a few run-ins with a bad crowd, but to be so dismissive of all of us…..

"It sounds like he's had a year-and-a-half living on the other side of the fence," Bobby commented. "Unless we're missing something it sounds like the last time he was with a hunter that wasn't trying to kill him, was when we buried you. Traumatic departure and then being hunted yourself, I could see it changing a person."

"I know, I mean it makes sense…. It's just, we're hunters. He knows good hunters." Dean took another sip, nearly finishing his bottle. "I mean he could still be a good hunter. He could make a difference. But he is acting like he's just done and good riddance."

"He might really be done hunting. Aside from the whole trauma by that group of hunters, he's going to have a kid. Could you imagine Sam raising a child into the life of a hunter? Especially, a kid that's part demon. He'll probably do everything he can to keep that kid away from hunters."

"With good reason," Dean conceded. He gripped his empty beer bottle and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He couldn't meet Bobby's eyes, so he just looked at the floor. "I don't know if I can accept it, Bobby. I mean, this kid has got to be bad news. It's not gonna be human, not really…..

"The kid might be something else, but I'm not sure what we could do even if we were convinced that that's a good enough reason to do something. Sam seems like he's going to do whatever it
takes to protect that kid. I don't think we're really going to fight him. Hell, if we did it sounds like we'd lose."

"It's Sam. He wouldn't—" Dean started while shaking his head, but was cut off by a hard truth.

"He's killed almost a dozen hunters, and has been involved in a lot more combat than we have lately. I personally don't like those odds. I don't care if he's your sweet little brother. If push comes to shove a parent will do incredible things to protect their child."

"So what, he just has some weird demon kid and tries to keep it away from hunters? We're hunters —"

Bobby put down his beer with enough force to silence Dean, who apparently had crossed some line. "No. We're family. We gotta make that clear to him. Unless this kid is something really dangerous we're not going to try anything. Sam needs to know that he can count on us or we're just gonna lose him again. He needs us." Bobby spoke firmly and Dean looked up at him pleadingly.

"Bobby, this kid—"

"Is your nephew or niece, and you should try to get used to that idea. Acting like it's a threat around Sam is just going to spook him."

"It might be a threat," said Dean quietly.

"Yeah, and so might Sam. Ever since he started having visions he was something that might be dangerous, but have you ever seriously considered putting him down?"

Dean bit his lip and acknowledged Bobby's point with thoughtful silence before muttering, "Things would just be better without the kid."

"Things would be better for you, but think about what Sam wants. You might hate Ruby and be freaked out about the baby, but you saw the way he was with her. He really does care about them."

Dean absentmindedly played with his beer bottle as he asked, "Do you think he's in love with her?"

"I don't know…. He's always been an idjit; you both have. I wouldn't put it past him to fall for a demon. He always was so compassionate that he'd give everyone a chance."

There was a living room illuminated only by two electric lanterns resting on the floor. The curtains were pulled shut and the furniture had been removed, leaving imprints on the perfect white carpet. At least four people were bound on the ground, blood clotted on their faces, and a strange metallic purple powder had been sprinkled on them. They looked up at their captors, a group of maybe six men and women holding knives. One man held a large spool of nylon rope.

"You'll never get away with this," one of the prisoners managed in a jagged, hoarse voice. After speaking she coughed painfully causing a little fresh blood to trickle down her chin.

"We're not trying to get away with anything," explained one of the captors. His voice was full of conviction and he even smiled pleasantly. "This is just the beginning. We'll move on and the world will know we walk in the light."

"You're insane," the bound woman replied as she shook her head. The man reached down, slid his fingers through her blood-caked hair. It was almost a caress or a comforting gesture until he tightened his fingers and jerked her head backward to make her look up at him.
"We could say the same about you."

He plunged the knife into her chest. The other captors grabbed their own prisoners and went to work. The prisoners were each stabbed repeatedly, turning the crisp white carpet dark red. When the prisoners were dead, the captors began carving into the skin of the corpses, but the images were unclear. Then the bodies were hung upside down from the ceiling with rope.

"Come on. We have a lot of work ahead of us," the leader said as he walked out the front door into a snow-covered street.

Sam woke up in a cold sweat and looked around the bedroom. Dim moonlight came in the windows and a bit of warm light shone through the barely-cracked door. It was quiet and peaceful, except for the unsettling images of mutilated bodies that lingered in his mind. Ruby had been jostled awake by him sitting up abruptly on the too-small bed. She rolled back to look at him.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Something’s happening—no,” he corrected himself. “Something’s starting.”
The Morning After

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

Dean had taken the first watch until about three in the morning, then went to bed after being relieved by Bobby. He quietly walked back to his room, passing the spare bedroom that Ruby had been in. The door hadn’t closed properly and was cracked slight. After a moment’s hesitation, he leaned over to peer into the room. Sam was in the bed with Ruby and they both appeared to be sleeping rather peacefully.

Silently, Dean continued on to his room and lay down on the bed. In a strange epiphany he realized that he really thought of it as ‘his room’. It had been over twenty-five years since he’d claimed a bedroom and settled his belongings somewhere. After returning from Hell, he had almost nothing to call his own. Sam had taken the Impala along with all its contents. Dean had only had the clothes he was buried in and Bobby’s charity. Over the past eight months he had used Bobby’s home as his base of operations, leaving his clothes and other newly acquired belongs in the bedroom he used while in the area. When the leads on Sam were slim, Dean would just stay at the house to help Bobby with the greater hunter network. In the house, he’d formed routines and felt more grounded. Reflecting on it, he noticed that earlier in the night he had reacted to Bobby’s instructions with the same reverence that he would have given to his dad.

He had secretly settled down or something like that. Dean tried to imagine going hunting if Sam really did quit. There was no doubt that Sam would give him back the Impala, but without Sam riding shotgun it would just be him; it wouldn’t be his home. Bobby was a source of immense comfort in his life, but there was a reason the old hunter worked the phones. Hell would literally need to be breaking loose to get Bobby back in the field regularly…. Granted, it kind of felt like that with everything that had been going on.

Dean looked at the dresser on the far side of the room. He had bought a record player and about two dozen vinyls to replace his lost music collection that lived in the Impala. He could have just bought some tapes or CDs to use on the road, but he had indulged. It even had a high quality amp and speakers, which occasionally became the bane of Bobby’s existence. Those objects would be no good to him on the road. At the time it hadn’t occurred to him how out of character those purchases were, but maybe he had changed too. He was thirty-one if you looked at his driver’s license, but sometimes he felt the full hundred twenty-one years of his soul. Sure, he was fit enough to get at least ten or fifteen more years of decent hunting in, but the thought of going it alone made the entire prospect seem more unpleasant than it was in his early twenties.

In his fatigue he helplessly fell down memory lane. He thought of the false paradise he’d lived thanks to the djinn attack a few years back. In that life Sam had almost nothing in common with him because they hadn’t hunted together. If Sam quit would they grow apart from having nothing in common? Was he really so two-dimensional that they couldn’t find something to keep their bond alive? He imagined trying to think of anything they would be able to talk about if Sam wasn’t having anything to do with hunting and those were the only stories Dean had to tell. Sam would probably talk about the kid, but Dean could barely relate to that. Maybe he’d tell stories about Sam when he was younger, but how much could he really say that Sam hadn’t heard a million times
He thought of Lisa and Ben. Some nights he would think about them, imagine being a family together. Lisa was beautiful, smart, funny… so many things that he could see himself loving, but it felt a little off. He cared about her and Ben, probably only second to Bobby, Sam, Ellen, and Jo at that point, but the thought of being with her somehow felt like settling. He was only thinking about the two of them then because he was hoping to find some common ground with Sam. Starting a relationship based on the motive of securing a different one seemed like the worst reason for him to re-enter their lives.

Keeping his relationship with Sam alive was going to take a lot of work. Bobby was right. He would have to be more than a hunter. He’d have to be Sam’s brother and try to repair their friendship before their lifestyle disparity drove them further apart.

It took a while for Dean to fall asleep, but at least the sleep he did manage was dreamless from sheer exhaustion. He awoke, surprised that he hadn't had another nightmare about Hell. With everything that had happened the night before it was a miracle that he had gotten any rest at all.

It was the early morning, but someone was already in the kitchen. He could smell the heavenly combination of coffee and bacon. After throwing on some clean clothes and doing his normal morning routine, Dean descended the stairs, then went to seek out whatever breakfast was left.

Sam was seated alone at the kitchen table, staring at a pad of paper and tapping a pen in frustration. A few pages had been ripped from the pad and depicted strange symbols that looked like pieces of an incomplete image. He had an almost empty mug of coffee and a small plate with a half-eaten slice of toast. There was a baking sheet full of extra crispy bacon resting on the stove. Dean excitedly shoveled several strips of bacon onto a plate, poured himself some coffee, and took the seat to Sam’s right.

"Hey, Picasso,” he said as he started into his bacon. “You're up early."

"I got a solid four hours." Sam rubbed his forehead, then looked up at Dean. "I had some trouble sleeping."

"Are you okay?” Dean asked. The words echoed in his ears for moment and it occurred to him that he couldn’t recall the last time he had asked Sam that. Sam smiled a little in what seemed like appreciation of the question, then put down the pen and leaned back in his chair to fully acknowledge his brother’s company.

"I had a vision last night."

"You're getting those again?” Dean was a little taken aback. To his knowledge, Sam hadn’t had a vision since before Yellow Eyes had died. Now over three years later they were back?

"Yeah."

"Do you think it's related to all this demon stuff?"

"No... I don't think so.” Sam tapped his fingertips on the pad of paper and temporarily avoided meeting Dean's eyes. “They started up before everything went nuts."

"What'd you see last night?"

"Some people. They were tied up and stabbed. I don't know where or why, but after they were
dead the attackers cut things into them and strung them up.” Dean stopped short of suggesting that
carving up people and hanging them sounded like witches. He didn't want to start the morning off
on a bad foot, but he made a mental note to investigate that line of thinking on his own. "I'm trying
to piece together what the carvings looked like, but it wasn't really clear."

Sam rubbed his head again, then reach into his pocket. He pulled out a small bottle of aspirin and
took two with the remainder of his probably-cold coffee.

"Are the visions bothering you? I thought you had that stuff under control."

Dean remembered how in the beginning his little brother would nearly pass out from the headaches
caused by his visions. At the moment things didn’t seem nearly that bad, but Sam had spent who
knew how many hours recovering already. It was certainly worse than the last time Dean had seen
him suffer a vision.

"I did until a couple weeks ago. It was weird. All the demons took off, but when they came back it
was…..” Sam’s brow furrowed, betraying his discomfort with the unknown implications. “It was
like back when it started."

"Nose bleeds and all?"

"Yeah…. It's getting better though." Sam smiled weakly. “No nose bleeds this week, except from
a broken nose.”

Dean started eating a strip of bacon and looked around the room, unsure of what to say next. Part
of him wanted to make a joke about Sam talking so matter-of-factly about taking a beating, but that
felt incredibly insensitive after what he'd been told last night. Sam had returned his attention to the
pad of paper, drawing a new shape while scrunching up his face in concentration. He
absentmindedly scratched at one of his wrist scars, which made Dean lose some of his appetite.
Dean put down his bacon and exhaled to renew his composure.

"Listen… I'm sorry about last night. I said some things that crossed the line. This whole thing
is…..” Dean raised his hands in a gesture that conveyed nothing but awkward confusion. “I'm
trying." 

"I know you are."

“Remember when we were kids and I accidentally killed that cactus you kept in the back seat cup
holder?” Sam chuckled at Dean’s non sequitur. “I’m gonna be an uncle. How screwed up is that?”

“It’s terrifying,” Ruby commented as she gingerly entered the kitchen. She looked tired, but all
signs of disorientation were gone. Her bandages and shirt were stained brown with old blood, most
of it not her own.

"Other people's blood is a good look on you. Really classing up the place," Dean said with an
unpleasant smile.

She held up a bandaged hand and made an imperfect attempt at flipping him off. "You wanna
come over here and help me make some matching pants?"

She waddled over to the stove, grabbed some bacon for herself, and sat down at the table to Sam’s
left directly across from Dean. Sam looked at her, smirked, then turned back to Dean, waiting to
see who would make the next bickering comment.

"What's a demon even have nightmares about?" Dean asked while staring bluntly at Ruby.
"Hell," she replied before coolly countering, “Tell me, Dean. What do you dream about?"

He frowned at her. Not only had she turned his jab around on him, but she knew. Of course it made sense that she would know he had nightmares about Hell; she'd been there too. It was disconcerting to find they actually had something in common, and more than that, it was something no one else could understand.

"Fuck you, that's what." Not his Wittiest retort, but she had distracted him by hitting too close to home.

"No. That's actually what your brother dreams about.” Her eyebrows rose smugly and Dean could've sworn she mouthed the words ‘suck it’ at him. Now it was official. Dean had entirely lost his appetite. It was bad enough for her to put that image in his head, but to make him pass up crispy bacon…. Dean glared at her.

"Leave me out of this," Sam said, intently drawing on the paper and trying to avoid eye contact with either of them. His ears had turned pink.

"Any luck with the carvings?" Ruby asked, mercifully changing the subject after seeing that she’d embarrassed him more than she had meant.

"I've got some pieces, but I don't know how they fit together. There were several bodies and I only got little glimpses…. It might even have a little overlap in parts." Sam moved several pages with drawings around on the table. He rotated them one at a time trying to spark a memory, but it wasn't coming.

"Your visions have all been about Lilith lately. Do you think it's a task of hers?" Ruby speculated, trying to be helpful.

"This was different. Her tasks have been so granular—isolated…. The way the leader talked about it...." Sam pursed his lips. “This felt like something was just beginning. I don't know how to explain it. Maybe she's switching up her game plan?"

"The Crossroads demon that I was talking with hinted that something chaotic happened in the pit. Maybe it has to do with that?" Dean suggested.

“Maybe.” Sam frowned down at his drawings.

Bobby entered through the side door next to the kitchen, then walked over to the sink and began washing his hands. Instead of going to sleep when Sam came down, he had just decided to go work on his current project of restoring a 1973 Opel Manta A. He poured himself a cup of coffee before refilling Sam's mug without asking. After putting down the carafe, he leaned against the counter and looked at his house guests. He glanced at the mostly empty sheet of bacon, then eyed Dean and Ruby who both had plates full of strips in front of them.

"You guys are gonna run me out of food at this rate. It's been a while since I had such a full house. Hell, depending on how long you're here it might get even more crowded." Bobby nodded at Ruby.

"We'll probably have to take off in a day or two," Sam said, a little pained. “It seems like we can only get a few days between attacks. And we don't want them gunning for you."

"What are you going to do anyway? Once the kid's born. I mean, I can't see you taking a kid on the road. Especially—" Dean almost brought up the half-demon thing, but instead tried to be more diplomatic—"with everything that's going on."
Sam overlooked Dean's half-second pause to bite his tongue and answered, "Well... until we figure out a better solution we were going to stay with Ruby's coven."

Dean's eyebrows rose and he nodded slowly while taking in the information. Everyone was staring at him waiting to see how he would react. Bobby looked equally surprised as Dean felt, but nobody really expected Bobby to be the one to make a scene over it. Dean placed his hands palms-down on the table and took a calming breath.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to go stay with...." Dean tilted his head as he licked his lips dryly. He was struggling to think of a tactful way to finish his sentence and the lingering silence made it painfully obvious.

"Witches?" Ruby said what everyone knew he was thinking. "You can say the word; same with whole half-demon thing. Saying something a few times doesn’t make it any more real." She was looking at Dean like he was an idiot. Apparently Sam hadn’t told her about the Bloody Mary incident.

"The coven is really well hidden and protected," Sam explained in an attempt to reassure Dean. "When we were there last we were completely off the radar to Lilith and...."

"Hunters," Ruby finished for him. "The coven's been incredibly safe from hunters."

"We shouldn't have a problem with the North Carolina gang there." Sam tried to narrow the idea of hunters in general just to the group that was actively hunting him.

Dean pursed his lips, but still appreciated Sam’s attempt to not categorically exclude him and Bobby from his life. "This is the same coven that you wouldn't tell me about yesterday?" Dean huffed in a combination of a question and a statement. "I don't suppose you'd tell me where it is now?"

"Dean." Sam’s voice had an unconvinced reluctance to it. "Would you really be okay going to a coven and not, you know...?"

"Burning them at the stake?" Ruby once again chimed in.

Sam and Dean both rolled their eyes, but Sam did so because the comment was dismissive of Dean. Meanwhile, Dean did so because burning was a horribly impractical way to kill a witch. The local phone line rang and Bobby escaped the tense scene to answer it.

"Delicate as always—" Dean stopped himself from calling her ‘bitch.’

"Maybe you two need to be a little less delicate and just talk like fucking adults," she countered.

Dean couldn’t really argue with her suggestion. Sam and Ruby both knew everything he had been tiptoeing around, the same way he and Bobby had knew that Sam was trying to avoid sounding anti-hunter. The whole pretending-that-he-was-already-fine-with-everything approach was not only insincere but also a huge pain in the ass. There was probably more ground to be made by being honest about their disagreements, as long as nobody did or said anything really mean-spirited. Sam knew that he wasn’t perfect and that he was trying. That would hopefully be good enough.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to raise a kid around a bunch of witches?" Dean asked frankly. “I mean, it's safe from Lilith and hunters, but is it a good environment for the kid?"

"My coven would never hurt a kid, especially mine," Ruby replied defensively.
“Ruby's witches are good people and really like her,” Sam added. “Also, the environment is perfectly fine to raise a kid in. There—"

But Sam was cut off by Bobby's return from the other room, wearing a bleak expression. He walked over to Sam and put a hand on his shoulder, then said, "Time to stow picking a preschool. Sam, you got a suit still?"

"More or less…. Why?"

"You and Dean need to go into town on a job." Sam started to object, but couldn't get a word out before Bobby continued, "Don't get your panties in a twist over terminology. You're definitely gonna want to see this."

"See what?" Dean asked.

"Jody—Sheriff Mills called. She found five bodies in a house about an hour ago, stabbed something awful and hung from the ceiling. Their skin was carved up."
It didn’t take more than a few minutes before the brothers were suited up and on the road into town. Sam had had everything that he’d needed to look like a fed, except for a necktie which Bobby leant him. His dress shirt was slightly wrinkled, but it would have to do since he could no longer fit into Dean’s shirts and they were short on time. Bobby had told Sam that Jody would run interception if any of the locals asked too many questions. But Sam assured him in turn that just because he’d been out of the game for over a year, it didn’t mean he couldn’t work a cover. Dean scowled slightly at the reminder of how hard Keith Ness had been to locate.

After Sam and Dean had left for town, Ruby decided to go back up to the bedroom to rest. She was feeling much better than the night before, but her full strength wasn’t back yet. It had taken more magic than she was used to wielding in order to evade the group of demons. That combined with the unpleasant attempted exorcism and the physical drain of being pregnant had taken its toll. She was looking forward to having renewed autonomy and mobility in a week or two, but in the quiet house she allowed herself to relish a day or two of sloth-like inactivity. About an hour after retreating to the bedroom, Bobby knocked on the door.

He found Ruby lying on the bed reading a worn copy of *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. She looked up when he entered, but didn't say anything, unsure what his presence signified. He approached the edge of the bed and handed her a large bundle of clothes. Picking up the one on the top of the pile, Ruby held it out to discover that it was a maternity shirt. The style was outdated, but the overall look didn’t really offend her sensibilities.

"When I was looking for a tie for Sam—I thought you might want some cleaner clothes." He looked uncomfortable, but she wasn’t sure if he was embarrassed by his gesture or if something else was bothering him. "You might need to cut a slit or two up the side to let it out a bit. I only had clothes up through seven months."

"You had these?" Ruby raised an eyebrow at the old, borderline-recluse hunter.

"In the attic. My wife—they were hers…." "I'm sorry." She shifted to face him a little more, but didn’t know what else to say.

With the exception of the afternoon that she had spent helping him repair the Colt two years earlier, she hadn’t really interacted with Bobby very much. Initially, he had treated her with the same animosity that Dean had, but he had been faster to accept her as an unpleasant, yet useful asset. And there he was offering her the use of his dead wife’s clothes. It seemed that a lot had changed between them and she couldn’t entirely understand why, but she knew better than to blow off either his hospitality or vulnerability.

"It was a long time ago. She—those were a hard few years.” When he spoke, he looked at the wall or the floor, anywhere but at Ruby. “We never did end up having any kids.”
The way Sam tells it, you were more of a father to them than John ever was,” she said in an attempt to validate him. The old hunter smiled slightly and relaxed a bit.

“Thanks…. John was always so fixated on keeping them safe and trained…. I know I’m not really their dad, but I couldn’t stand them growing up so fast. Dean, he was already an old soul when I met him. He was seven then, but he didn’t even play ball.” Bobby leaned against a dresser and his smile turned downward, betraying his feelings of pity. “Sam was easier. He was only three, so as long as he can remember I’d sneak in trips to the playground or things like that. He never had to relearn how to find happiness outside the life.”

Ruby tilted her head in an acknowledging nod. “That actually explains a lot.”

“I might not’ve been their real dad growing up, but I like to think… maybe I made a difference.”

"I don't remember my parents—not just 'cause of the demon thing; I grew up far away from them. But I had people that took care of me even in… horrible circumstances. They shaped the kind of human I became and honestly I like to think my relationship with them shapes the demon I am. They were there and they made the difference, like you did.” She set down the bundle of clothes and Bobby finally allowed his eyes to meet hers. "Thank you, Bobby. You raised a good man—maybe one and a half, but don't tell Dean I said so."

Bobby chuckled, then mimed sealing his lips, which had curled into another soft smile.

“Actually the funny thing is, aside from giving you the clothes, I came up here to thank you.”

“What for?” Ruby furrowed her brow slightly, trying to think of anything she’d done aside from using his bed and eating his food.

“When Sam left, he was torn to pieces. Thanks for bringing him back whole.”

Sam threw Dean the keys to the Impala without even asking if he wanted to drive. They both knew that Baby would be Dean's car once they parted ways so it didn't hurt to start transitioning back now. Sam hadn't yet gotten around to adding Dean to the locking wards on the trunk and glovebox, or simply disabling them entirely, but they wanted to get to the crime scene as fast as possible so it was put off until later.

That was the first time that Dean had really been in the Impala without a concussion or panicking over Sam in almost eighteen months. He was nearly giddy, taking turns a bit too fast while listening to his Baby purr. For a moment he felt a sense of preemptive loss at the realization that that might be the last time he would be rolling down the highway on a case with his brother. He pushed the thought from his mind and tried to focus on enjoying the moment, but he quickly realized that they were missing an important detail.

"We need some music. Can you grab Houses of the Holy?"

Sam cringed at the request. "Sorry. Your music got moved to the trunk. If you pull over—"

"What?" Dean asked a little hurt. “Why'd you throw it in the trunk? I thought you liked it."

"I… I couldn't listen to it after you died. It was too much. We've been using an iPod.” Sam pulled it from the glovebox to show its practicality. "It's got some good stuff on it."

"Zepp?"
"No."

Dean’s shoulders slumped. "AC/DC?"

After a brief hesitation Sam answered, "No."

Dean threw him an intense what-the-fuck face. "Man, you really have turned dark side." He shook his head while speaking, but Sam appreciated him making light of the greater situation.

"You okay with Iggy & The Stooges or are we pulling over?" Sam offered apologetically.

"Do you have The Stooges?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, you get a pass this time. But we're listening to some real music on the way back."

They parked across the street from the crime scene, which turned out to be a quaint house with a for-sale sign in its front yard. A small crowd had formed to morbidly speculate as police and medical examiners went about their business. The brothers had crossed the yellow tape line, flashed their badges, and had started to introduce themselves when Jody Mills came out of the house. She spotted Dean and walked over to greet them. She escorted them into the home, which had been cleared upon their arrival. After calling Bobby, she had informed the local police that the feds were send some real assholes that she'd dealt with before and for their own good everyone should give them some space. Once the three of them were alone, she dropped the act of forced politeness in exchange for sincere gratitude.

"Good to see you again, Dean. Wish it was under better circumstances, but at least you might have some idea what the hell we're dealing with." She turned to Sam. "You must be the other one. Sam, right?"

"That's me. Nice to meet you." He shook her hand, but was slightly distracted. There had definitely been demons in the house not too long ago. He could feel their fading presence... and something else. It was wrong, some constricting, decaying power, but it felt slightly familiar. He couldn't place the feeling of déjà vu. "I just hope we can help."

"The bodies are in here." She guided them through an entryway into what was the empty living room. It was definitely the same scene from Sam’s vision.

Holes had been punched in the ceiling sheetrock allowing the wooden studs above to anchor the nylon ropes which suspended the corpses. There were five bodies in total, three men and two women. All of them were hung upside down by one foot with their arms bound behind their back. The cause of death was obvious from the multiple stab wounds on each of their chests. Blood had dripped down their faces and soaked into the white carpet below. Several feet beyond the bodies was a second set of large, older blood stains, one for each victim.

"That blood looks pretty fresh. Any idea when it happened?" Dean asked Jody.

"They think it was between four and six o’clock. The interesting thing is that the older blood stains to the side there indicate that the vics were killed on the floor, laid there for awhile, then were hung up. The pools under the bodies weren't from bleeding to death; that was just gravity draining them."

Dean examined the older blood stains while Sam crouched down to look at one of the victims' face.
It was the woman from his vision. He knew how she had died. He'd watched it. She was almost unrecognizable from the layer of thick, tacky blood that had coated her face. Her eyes were open, resulting in a disgusting appearance from the blood caking on her eyelashes. Sam averted his gaze downward and noticed a strange discoloration on her forehead. Leaning closer he realized that it was a fine carving into the skin.

"Yeah. The medical examiner said there was some sort of carved design on their foreheads," Jody commented. "She didn't want to disrupt the scene by washing the blood off one until all the photos were taken. If you want I can text you the clean image once it's available."

"That'd be great," Dean replied while he looked around the empty living room. "I'm guessing this place'll be on the market for quite awhile after word gets out about this."

"Yeah. This place has been empty for months. It made a nice place for them to have some alone time. The door was busted so we don't have any leads on that front." She leaned against a clean wall, away from the mess. "Hell, we don't even know how many killers we're dealing with. All the vics were bound prior to being killed so it could've been as few as one or two people—or things."

"There were six," Sam said neutrally as he stood up and began looking at the victims' clothing. There was something he was missing and he knew it. He was so distracted by the bodies that Sam didn't notice the look of confusion on Jody's face.

"Sam has a really good sense of intuition about these things," Dean offered as explanation.

"Intuition?" Jody crossed her arms and gave Dean a skeptical look.

"I'm a psychic. That's why Bobby sent me. This morning I saw this happen, or bits of it." Jody grinned at first, thinking that it might be a joke, but realized that the brothers weren't smiling. Dean actually looked annoyed at Sam for telling her. When Sam noticed Dean's expression he shrugged. "Bobby trusts her and she should know what we do if this really is just the beginning of something."

"Beginning?" Jody asked in alarm.

"The killers...there was a leader—white male, maybe 40 years old with short dark hair. He told the people that were with him that they had work to do." Sam looked at the rope and ceiling while he spoke. "He was talking with the victims like he knew them."

"We've only IDed one of the vics so I couldn't tell you what they had in common, but when we get more information I'll let you know."

"The common link could be really minor or bizarre," Dean added. "With sacrifices, or whatever this is, you don't want to restrict yourself to normal, human motives or methods."

"Sacrifices? You mean like throwing someone into a volcano or witches killing goats under a full moon?" Dean glanced at Sam to see his reaction to Jody's witch comment and was surprised to see Sam give a shrug acknowledging that she wasn't wrong. "Fuck. And I thought zombies were bad."

"We don't know that it's a sacrifice. It could be a spell or straight murder." Sam pointed out, trying to expand the scope of possibilities again in Jody's mind.

"This doesn't look like any murder I've ever seen," Jody replied.

"You run with a different crowd than we do," Dean said with a smile.
They recovered Dean's music from the trunk before getting back on the road. After enjoying a few minutes of unbridled horsepower and classic rock, Dean decided to take advantage of the ten remaining minutes that he was guaranteed to have Sam to himself. There were various things he could talk about that he didn’t really want to discuss around Ruby, but the thing that stood out in his mind was the way Sam had taken the possibility that their killers might be witches. The night before, it had seemed like every mention of witches had caused Sam to become incredibly defensive. He wanted to know if Sam’s new composure was a sign that they were going to really be able to get along again.

“Well get your crowd out of my town.”

“That was a weird way to gank some people,” Dean offered up as the beginning of a conversation.

“Yeah. It’s weird though. I had this feeling of deja vu, like I’d seen it somewhere before,” Sam commented as he stared out the passenger side window.

“Technically, you had.” Dean smirked. "You really think that could've been witches?"

"We can't rule it out," Sam said plainly.

"So you didn't see something that seemed particularly witchy?" Dean probed, not too subtly.

"You mean anything I’ve picked up?" Sam at least gave the idea a moment of serious contemplation before answering, “No."

"I guess I was just surprised you volunteered the idea."

"I'm not going to pretend that all witches are good just because I know some who are. I can put aside my personal biases if it means figuring out what's going on."

"Fair enough.” Dean tapped his fingers on the steering wheel awkwardly. Sam had just shown a level of maturity that made him want to try a little harder. He had grown too and didn’t want his little brother to just see him as the same old Dean. He bit his lip trying to plan out what he would say, but then he noticed Sam looking at him in confusion and decided to just go for it. “You know that I wouldn’t— I mean, about witches. If they weren’t hurting people, then they’re sort of like any random person casting a spell—except for the whole demon-soul thing, which is wrong, but obviously I’m not one to talk. And, I mean, the fucked up things they do to animals is seriously not cool. I don’t think I could be okay with, like, draining Bambi—seriously, what is with all the bodily fluids? It’s just gross—"

“You can stop being diplomatic. I know that when push comes to shove you wouldn’t intentionally hurt good people. Last night, I was just…. I’ve seen a lot of evil in the last year or so, demons and humans. I’m a little defensively offensive at times.” Sam looked at his hands resting in his lap for a second, then glanced up at Dean. “Thank you for trying to reassure me that you aren’t a complete dick though."

“You’re welcome?” Dean’s brow furrowed, then he shrugged off Sam’s comment.

“Do you think you’d ever considering spending some time around some really nice people, who just happen to be witches?” Sam asked.

Dean chewed his lip for a moment before answering, “I mean, if you end up hiding out with a bunch of witches, then I’ll probably break down and visit you. If I can endure Hell for…. I can endure being around a handful of witches for a few hours.”
“I doubt it’d be the torture you think. You’d probably have a good time.”

Dean laughed dryly. “What could I possibly do for a good time with witches?”

“All sorts of things, but if you end up there I want to see you try this moonshine they make. I wasn’t brave or dumb enough to try it, but this one guy, Pascoe, he’d go head-to-head with you at shots in a heartbeat.” Sam chuckled to himself at the mental image.

“You seriously think that there’s a human on Earth that can beat me at drinking?” Dean remembered that his fortitude was still recovering from his resurrection. “Actually, give me some time to train before you schedule the match.”

“You want me to play Eye Of The Tiger?” Sam half-joked while reaching into the glovebox for the iPod.

“No. I’d need a drink first. Once we get back to Bobby’s you can put on the training montage theme music.”

When they got back to Bobby's house, Dean went straight for the fridge to grab a beer while humming. Sam found Bobby in his study, handed back the borrowed tie, and looked around the quiet house.

"Where's Ruby?" Sam asked.

"Upstairs. She was complaining about a backache so I told her that there’s bathtub in the bigger bathroom. I doubt she'll be down for awhile. The way she reacted, you’d think I cured cancer. So what'd you find?"

"It was definitely from my vision. They were hung up by their feet from the studs in the ceiling—"

"It was pretty messy." Dean added, having returned from the kitchen, beer in hand. “There were a ton of stab wounds and they had their hands tied behind their backs.”

"And that carving I was trying to figure out was on their foreheads,” Sam continued. “Jody is going to send it to us once they get a cleaned up picture of—"

"Wait.” Bobby looked like something was clicking together in his mind. “Were they strung up by one foot or two?"

"One," Sam answered, suddenly realizing just how strange that fact was. It probably would have been easier to secure the bodies to the studs if both ankles had been bound.

"One leg suspended upside-down from wood with the arms behind the back is the hanged man.” Sam and Dean both looked confused, causing Bobby to roll his eyes. "From the tarot card deck."

"Well that lends a bit of weight to the witches theory," Dean commented, then glanced sideways at Sam.

Sam didn’t argue, only shrugging in acknowledgement of the point. "What about the carving on the forehead? I don't remember seeing that on the cards," Sam countered.

"More recent decks are probably a bit more sanitized than older versions,” Bobby theorized. “Let me grab a few books and we'll see if it got revised out along the way."
It didn't take long to find a book containing the history of the deck, but even the earliest recorded versions of the hanged man didn't include the carving. Bobby switched over to investigating which schools of magic actively used tarot cards, while Dean called to check in with Jody. Sam continued reading about the origins of the tarot symbols to try to get a better understanding of the message. After a few minutes, Sam got up and rushed across the study to grab a dusty book on medieval European history. He checked the index, flipped through the pages, and let out a satisfied chuckle. Bobby and Dean both turned their attention to him.

"Get this. The pose doesn't come from the card; the card comes from the pose," Sam smiled a bit while explaining his findings.

"What?" Dean asked as he slipped his phone back in his pocket and fully entered the room.

"The card was based on a way of killing people that was used during the Cathar Crusade in the 13th century. The card was made about a century later and used the positioning of the bodies as a reference. The forehead carving was too detailed to be properly illustrated on a card so it was left out entirely."

"So we aren't dealing with tarot card fanatics. We're looking for European history buffs," Bobby summed up, then discard the goosechase he had been working on.

"Any pattern to the killings back then?" Dean asked.

"Not as far as I can tell with this book. All the victims were soldiers during the Crusade, but people got killed that way on both sides. No pattern is obvious, but I don't know much about the war. I mean this wasn’t against Saladin or anything.” When Sam noticed Dean looking a bit thrown by the last comment he said, “You should read—you know what, just rent *Kingdom of Heaven*.”

Dean stared at Sam, slightly offended. “Hey. I read books—”

“It’s got Liam Neeson in it,” Sam interrupted, but Dean didn’t object, instead opting to nod thoughtfully.

"It also has Alexander Siddig,” Bobby added, earning another expression of confusion from Sam and Dean. “He played Dr. Bashir in Deep Space 9. It was an underrated show….” The old hunter flustered a bit at the realization that he’d just outed himself as a Trekkie, then hastily said, “In any case, I guess it's time we brush up on our Cathar and Crusades history.”

While they were hunkered down researching, Ruby came downstairs to join them. She was clean and bandage free, having almost fully healed. Her blood-soaked shirt had been traded for one of the tops that Bobby gave her. She'd had to cut slits up both sides, but managed to not substantially damage it. A small yawn escaped her as she slowly walked over to the table full of open books. Flipping through a few pages, her sleepy smile turned into a frown and she tilted her head while blinking in surprise.

"Why are you guys researching the Dendrik-Phen War?" she asked. The three men all looked up from their books at her, then looked around at each other to see if anyone knew what she was talking about.

Sam tried to correct her. "Uh, we're researching the Cathar Crusade."

"Yeah. Same war—that's just a human name for it.” She eyed an apple that Sam had been slowly eating and picked it up, not realizing that the others were waiting on her for further explanation.
"Wait. Demons have their own names for wars on Earth?" Bobby asked.

"Only the ones we fight in," Ruby said casually, then bit into the apple. The three men were looking at her dumbstruck and she realized just how out of the loop they were. "Oh, for fuck's sake. This is what I get for surrounding myself with humans."

"Demons fought in the Crusades? Are you serious?" Dean exclaimed, tossing his book onto a table, which earned him a glare from Bobby.

"It's not like team Hell was backing a side or anything." Ruby leaned against the desk. "Hell just needed somewhere to have a brawl and a battlefield is a great place for one."

"Ruby, you're going to need to explain this one from the ground up." Sam patted her knee absently.

"Okay. So Dendrik and Phen were two archdemons way back when. For whatever reason they decided that they wanted to go to war against each other, probably settling some grudge—you know the whole victor-writes-the-history-books thing makes it hard to know the details. Anyway, it's really hard to kill demons in Hell, which makes it a terrible place to have a war. So Den and Phen's armies just popped into the soldiers in a pre-existing human war and went at it. Dendrik's forces won and Phen was killed. That's why it's the Dendrik-Phen War instead of the Phen-Dendrick War."

"You're saying demons possessed humans, just so that they could kill other demons possessing other humans?" Dean asked.

"Yeah." Ruby shrugged. She knew it was upsetting from a human perspective, but for a demon it was par for the course.

"But how is it easier to kill demons on Earth?" Bobby asked, trying to understand the practicality of the event... or lack thereof. "The Colt didn't exist back then and your knife doesn't look that old."

"There are other ways to kill demons," she replied. "It just takes a little more effort. I killed a demon the other night, but it took a decent amount of prep. Trust me, if you want something bad enough, you can probably find a way of doing it."

"Did the demons that were topside during the war kill humans too? Maybe mutilate them?" Sam asked, trying to connect their victims to the killings during the Cathar Crusade.

"Probably. Demons can identify each other without too much effort, but I doubt they'd pass up a chance to do some carnage. Why?" She took another bite of the apple.

"We found the mutilated bodies from the vision. They looked like sacrifices and they seem an awful lot like these illustrations," Sam explained, pointing to one of the books she'd been looking at.

Ruby’s eyebrows rose. She swallowed dryly and put down the apple. "Those weren’t sacrifices; those were demons."

"What?" Sam, Dean, and Bobby asked at the same time.

"That's the traditional way of displaying an enemy demon. It's like a warning." She looked confused. “You said this was in a house?”
"Yeah."

"Well that’s not much of a display. They’ll probably get bolder. I bet you'll be seeing more strung up in public. Always hung from wood or above holy ground. That made fighting during the crusades a good deal; nearly everywhere was somebody’s holy ground back then. You definitely need to have the hands behind the back."

"Is stabbing in the chest part of the routine?" Bobby asked.

"You don’t need it for demons to recognize the warning, but it’s a common way of killing demons," Ruby explained. "You need to have an iron blade, or one coated in iron flecks, that’s magical and then you have to pierce the heart at least three times. It’s the easiest way to kill a demon without my knife or the Colt, but it’s dangerous against groups and nearly impossible without the demon smoking out first."

"So those demons must’ve been bound somehow?" Sam mused quietly, half-distracted in thought.

"You can engrave or brand the flesh of the meatsuit with a binding ward or use something topical, like the potion I used or a powder—"

"That’s it!" Sam finally understood the sense of deja vu and feeling that something was missing at the crime scene. He’d felt that same bound sensation when he found the demon that Ruby had killed in the abandoned apartment, but in his panic to find her it had barely registered. Also, in his vision the bodies had been sprinkled with a purple metallic powder that wasn’t there at the crime scene. "There was something that seemed off about the crime scene. In my vision the bodies had a powder of them, but it wasn’t on them when we went there."

"It could’ve been balsam powder," Ruby guessed. "It fades after about an hour so you need to use it fast, but it’s one of the easier binders to locate." She stood up a little straighter, looking jolted more fully awake by some thought. "What did the carving on the forehead look like?"

"Oh, yeah. Jody sent it to me a few minutes ago. Let me pull it up." Dean found the photo and handed her his phone. "Any idea what it means?"

"It should be the sigil of the dead demon's commander." Ruby looked down at the phone, then held onto the side of the desk she was leaning against for stability. "That's Lilith's sigil. Someone declared war on Lilith."
"Someone is gunning for Lilith?" Sam asked almost musingly.

The news was sudden and probably welcome, but he hadn’t had time to let it sink in at all. His mind wanted to run through scenarios that he didn’t have enough knowledge to justify. They needed more information before he could start feeling optimistic so he pushed the overly-hopeful hypotheticals from his head and tried to give the discussion his full attention.

"Not just 'gunning' and probably not just 'someone,'" Ruby clarified. "Displaying demons like that is huge. I don't even know if anybody has tried it since Den and Phen. When I said 'declared war' I meant it pretty literally. There are definitely gonna be more bodies showing up."

"What do you mean 'not just someone?'" Bobby asked.

"These types of things are only ever led by an archdemon. There's enough of a power difference between an archdemon and even the most powerful lesser demons that it'd be basically suicide to throw down the gauntlet if you weren't an arch. A handful of demons aren't going to pull this without a strong backer."

"So how do we know who to send the thank-you card to?" Dean plopped into an armchair and looked around the room for any suggestions.

"Shola seemed pretty pissed at Lilith," Bobby offered. "You think the Crossroads would try something like this?"

"I don't know." Ruby chewed her lip thoughtfully. "The Crossroads has been anti-Lilith since I was downstairs last time, but this seems a little too direct for them.... I wouldn't be surprised if Lilith's team scores a few hits in the next day or two. Then we can see whose sigil gets carved."

"This seems—" Sam started, but couldn't finish.

He clutched his head, tipping forward in his chair, and collapsing over the desk full of books. A few cries of pain escaped him as he writhed, knocking several books to the ground. Ruby tried to put a hand on his shoulder to help keep him stable and offer reassurance, but she stood farther away from him than she would have liked in order to protect the baby from an accidental elbow.

The vision only lasted a few seconds and by the time Bobby and Dean had gotten to him it was over. Sam sunk backward into the chair, still holding his head. His eyes were watery and took in the room with a little difficulty. He groaned, then shut his eyes as he leaned his head back far enough that he would’ve been staring at the ceiling.

"It was them." Sam spoke in a loud, fatigued whisper. "They killed some more. Maybe three or four? It was hard to tell."

"Any idea where they were?" Dean asked at what he hoped was a quiet enough volume to not hurt
his brother. “Maybe we could still catch them if they're in town.”

Ruby stepped a little closer to check on Sam, who was trying to hide a grimace of pain under his hands. She reached into his pocket for the aspirin bottle that seemed to have taken up a permanent residence there in the last two weeks. She looked at him for a second trying to gauge how many to give him and settled on just one. He wouldn’t be playing fine for Dean or Bobby if he really needed two or three. She returned the bottle to his pocket, then placed the pill into his fingers. He accepted the medicine, popping it in his mouth wordlessly.

"Do we even want to catch them? I mean, they're killing Lilith's demons. I’m kinda liking your idea of a thank-you card," Ruby countered.

Dean’s posture straightened with determination and he spoke a little louder. "That was when we didn’t have a chance at catching them, but if we have some idea of where these demons are we should go after them. I know this group is going against Lilith, but they're also killing humans."

“First of all, let’s be clear: ‘we —’” Ruby pointed at Sam and herself, “—aren’t going to go sticking our necks out on extracurriculars because of the whole baby-that’s-gonna-show-up-in-a-week-or-two thing.”

Sam tilted his head and slid his hands down so that he could watch the impending argument. He didn’t jump in. He was too tired, pained, and disoriented to start breaking them up…. And honestly he was hoping that Ruby would spare him having to refuse another hunt with his brother. In all fairness, Dean had only opened his mouth to argue, but closed it after a second thought. It looked like he was attempting to smother his expectations that Sam would actually voluntarily going into harm’s way again.

"Secondly,” Ruby continued while crossing her arms in front of her chest, “even if you found enough hunters to take them, I still don’t think it’s the right answer. I mean there’s a pretty big chance the meatsuits are gonna die whether the demon is killed or is left to ride them into the ground. At least this way there's some good that might come out of it."

"And the ones that could've lived, we're just—I’m just supposed to let them get killed and strung up? How fucked up is that?" Dean was shaking his head in disagreement and frustration. "Killing is one thing, this whole sending-a-message thing...."

She gave a little shrug. "It's a message we want them to send. Lilith's underlings should think twice before putting a target on themselves in her name."

"You said that she's head of the zealots? Are they really going to be fazed by the chance of dying in the line of duty?" Sam asked, finally rejoining the conversation. His soft tone made it clear that he was asking a serious question instead of taking Dean’s side.

"Sam, remember the demons in Houston? She's got members of other castes helping her and they didn't seem 100% committed. Maybe some of them will bolt?" Ruby suggested hopefully.

"I don't know. There’s something about it all....” Sam sat up more in his chair and rubbed his temples. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Fuck, I hate when you say that.”

The phone range in the kitchen, calling Bobby away to impersonate some middle-ranking officer at some regional office of some federal agency. Dean followed him into the kitchen to see what the call was about. He wanted to continue the conversation about how to deal with the demons, but
he had a personal interest in the wellbeing of the hunters within Bobby’s network and wanted to
know what was happening.

The free wall in the kitchen had been covered with a map of the continental United States and
Bobby pushed a yellow thumbtack fully into Lincoln, Nebraska. Yellow meant that a hunter was
investigating in the area. The fully-recessed status of the tack meant that there was something
ominous about the situation and one of them should call to check in on the hunter within 24 hours.
Bobby jotted down the time, location, and hunter’s name into the log they kept near the phones,
then smiled reassuringly to Dean while finishing up the call.

“Ellen was working a cover in Lincoln. Case sounds like multiple missing persons,” Bobby
explained to Dean.

“Is Jo with her?” Dean asked with added interest.

“Probably, but I think she’s still a little young to pull off being a Fed. She’s just—”

Furniture squeaked on the wooden floor, then there was sound of books falling to the ground and
Sam crying out in the study. Bobby and Dean ran in to find Sam on the floor behind the desk he
had been sitting at holding his head. The heavy desk had been knocked back an impressive three
feet and all the books that had survived the first vision had been finally knocked to the ground too.
Ruby was kneeling next to Sam’s head, holding his shoulders. She didn’t bother looking up when
they entered; she was busy talking to Sam.

“Come on. You gotta try to stay in control. Don’t let it overpower you. Just breathe.” Her voice
was soothing and confident, like she had experience talking Sam down. That thought made Dean’s
stomach sink a little.

“Is he alright? What happened?” Bobby asked.


“This is bad,” Ruby said as she turned to look up at Bobby and Dean. “He hasn’t had visions this
close together that were this strong before.”

“All the more reason to go after those demons.” Dean knelt down to check on Sam up-close. “If
them killing each other is messing up Sam like this, we should find them and kill them. I don’t
care if they’re fighting Lilith’s goons. This can’t keep going on.”

“They were different, the demons. It was another group.” Sam rolled from his side onto his back,
then slowly opened his eyes.

“What?”

“There are more of them than the group from the house.”

“Where were they?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know.” Sam started to shake his head slowly, then thought better of it.

Ruby frowned at a thought, then said, “This could be past the point of just finding some demons
and killing them. If word has gotten out about this feud, then I don’t think we’re gonna be able to
do much to stop it.”

“So what? Sam keeps getting beat up by these visions?” Dean was getting louder and visibly
agitated at his inability to improve the situation. “This is the third one related to this crap in less than a day.”

“Sam, you’re gonna need to try to block these visions out or something. You can’t just let them hit you full-force.” Ruby’s tone was soft, but she was talking to him like he was some sort of underperforming student.

“Give him a break,” Dean told her, growing more defensive of his little brother.

“She’s right,” Sam muttered between his fingers that he had brought up to cover his face.

Dean wanted to stop Sam from giving himself too hard of a time. “It’s not like you can control this stuff. Your visions just happen.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have to figure this out.” His fingers raked through his hair, which he pulled down to cover his face. After using his hair to shield his eyes, his arms fell slowly to the floor. He was moving with an almost intoxicated level of exhaustion. “This can’t keep getting worse…. We can’t stop the demons…. I need to get better at controlling my p—visions.”

“First, you need to get some rest, if you can. You look like shit,” Dean said as he looked from Ruby to Bobby, who both conceded the point. “At least in a bed you won’t fall down.”

“He could still fall out of bed,” Bobby corrected.

“Just strap him to the bed. He can sleep through that,” Ruby suggested, earning an awkward moment of silence from Bobby and Dean.

“It wasn’t for sex,” Sam mumbled through his face full of hair.

It took a little doing, but Bobby and Dean managed to get Sam to an upstairs bedroom. Once he was in bed, they strapped him down with three leather belts latched end-to-end across his chest. They didn’t bother restraining him further since the goal was only to stop him from rolling out of the bed, not preventing his escape. Ruby volunteered to stay with him for the first stretch while he slept, assuring them that she would yell if there was an emergency.

With Sam settled, Bobby and Dean went back downstairs to catch up on some of the network business. They’d been slacking during the chaotic last few days and needed to get updates from several hunters in the field. More importantly though, they wanted to inform the network of the pending demon-on-demon spats, and needed to come up with a good story for where this information came from that wouldn’t expose Sam. With the North Carolina hunters still potentially looking for him, they had to be cautious. The two hunters descended the staircase arguing about what kinds of explanations were believable.

Ruby pulled a chair up next to Sam’s bed, positioning it to allow her a view of his face. Watching him sleep while tied to a bed reminded her of their first few weeks working together after Dean’s death. She had strapped him down after his suicide attempt. At the time she had been torn between pitying him and being frustrated by the situation. Their current predicament felt very similar, but in their time together since the suicide attempt, she had learned that her faith in Sam was well-placed and that made her a little less worried. He had never tried to control his visions before, but if he could control his other powers maybe there was a chance…. Granted, he was almost completely inept with his telekinesis.

After an hour, Sam shifted slightly and looked over at her. He smiled weakly, then said, “I know I should be used to it by now, but it’s weird when you watch me sleep.”
“It’s not as weird as when you watch me sleep,” she countered.

“That’s just because you shouldn’t sleep.”

“I’m not wrong.” She reached over onto the nightstand to grab a glass of water. “You thirsty?”

He felt a little silly being waited on, but he accepted the water without complaint. They had taken turns sewing each other up and it was just his turn to be the one laid up in bed again. When he was done drinking, she took back the water glass, returning it to the small table.

"Sam, I know you're worn out, but we need to figure out how you’re going to practice controlling your visions.” She entered mentor mode. “They’re coming faster than ever. If they stay this rough…. You need to see if you can block them out or something…. I’m worried about you.”

"It's not just the visions. Lately, I feel like all my powers have been cranked up. I can sense demons after they've left.” He hadn’t had a chance to tell Ruby about that new discovery. She nodded thoughtfully, trying to add that piece to the picture she was forming in her mind of what his current powers encompassed. “And the whole thing with hitting Dean.” He looked away from her in his shame. “I'm honestly more scared of hurting someone else than being hurt myself.”

She put her hand on his forearm, then squeezed it in soft reassurance. He was scared and felt guilty about everything that was going on. It was in his nature to take on way more guilt and emotional responsibility than he deserved. She didn’t want to make him feel worse by pointing out that he had telekinetically thrown Bobby’s heavy desk back several feet during his last vision. Deep down she knew it was probably a bad decision, but Sam knew well enough that he had to get his powers better under control.

"Well, I don't want that either,” she agreed in an attempt to lighten the mood a bit. “That’s why we’re going to figure this out. It's quiet right now—"

"Aside from my splitting-headache-inducing visions."

"Ok, that’s true. I meant that we’re not running for our lives. That’s why now’s the time to get a little more control of yourself."

"The visions and the telekinesis hasn't really been something I can control, at least not well. I did sort of feel okay with the telekinesis last night, but that was a fluke.” He was caught between doubting himself and trying to build his own confidence.

"Maybe you're finally getting better at it?” Ruby offered, trying to emphasize the more optimistic outlook.

"I don't know. Maybe. It's hard to think about focusing on that with my head killing me from these visions.” He seemed strangely resistant all of a sudden, but she continued to press the issue.

"All the more reason to try reining in your powers." 

"I don't know about doing that here." He didn’t met her eyes and his expression was almost embarrassed.

"You're worried about Bobby and Dean finding out about your other powers, aren’t you?”

She realized that she’d hit the nail on the head when he didn’t respond for a long while. He knew that he would have to continue training, but he had realized that training one of his powers could quickly reveal the existence of his other ones. The two of them could easily fall into the old
mentor-student dynamic again and appear very experienced with that in a way that wouldn’t be easily justified. Maybe they could excuse it with her teaching Sam some witchcraft, but it was still dangerous from his perspective.

He finally admitted, "Things are almost good between me and Dean….”

"You think that having other powers is really gonna be the straw that breaks the camel's back?" she asked. “After all the shit that they've been willing to swallow so far—"

"Fine. I'll tell them." Sam took a deep breath and looked around the spare bedroom to try to avoid thinking about the impending confession to Bobby and Dean.

He had stayed in that bedroom countless times as a kid. Nothing in the room had changed, largely due to Bobby’s general disregard for maintaining his house after the death of his wife. The upstairs was barely used except for sleeping so it had an even more cluttered and neglected appearance than the first floor. But to Sam it felt cozy and comforting. He looked back at her.

"It has been quiet—like, no-demons-at-the-door quiet," Sam commented.

"Yeah," Ruby agreed. “After the run around last night, I was expecting the alarms to trip within a few hours of getting here. But hey, I guess Lilith’s demons that we dodged have their hands full right now.”

"I was thinking… if we don't have any demons coming through, if they’re really busy messing each other up, it might be a good idea to stay here until the kid's born. It'd be less strain on you and we would have some help. Hell, right now I don’t think I’m in much shape to be driving.”

“You need to come clean about the powers first,” she said while crossing her arms in front of her chest. “You have to be able to work on them without feeling like you need to hide it. And you’re right, I wouldn’t trust you driving or doing a lot of other things until you get a better handle on these visions. The way you were knocked down last time… I don’t think I’d trust you with the kid.”

"Yeah…. That makes sense.” Sam looked slightly hurt, but nodded in agreement. He knew it would be dangerous for him to hold the baby if he was having visions so strong that he was collapsing. The thought was a stark realization of just how bad things had gotten, but it also made his conviction grow. He was committed to being there for the baby, so he would find a way to make this work.

“So what am I supposed to do?” he sighed, not really expecting Ruby to have all the answers. “I’m supposed to keep the visions out, but I don’t know about them until they’re already happening. And what, I’m supposed to just block it all out? Aren’t we trying to have me look for the other demon’s sigil?”

“The second sigil is less important than keeping you in one piece,” she reminded him. “As for the blocking it out, how have you dealt with visions in the past?”

“I didn’t really try to block them. It was more like I got used to them and they stopped hurting. This is worse though; the visions are stronger.”

“Yeah, but you’re stronger too.” Sam gave her a sidelong glance, but didn’t argue. "Are you fighting these visions when you should really be letting them roll off you?"

"Maybe.” He had to think about that one a bit. “I guess I am expecting them to hurt, so it makes sense that I’d be extra sensitive to the pain.”
“You know how I say that I like that you’re a sensitive guy... I didn’t mean this sensitive.”

He smiled fleetingly at her joke. “Thanks.”

“When you have a vision, can you feel it coming on? Like even if it’s only a split second warning?”

“Yeah, actually.” His eyebrows rose like he hadn’t considered that fact before. “There’s a flash of light and the real world gets a bit saturated. Then I see and feel the vision. Back when I had them more under control, I could see the real world at the same time and it didn’t really hurt. It was more like replaying a bad memory.”

“So when you see the next flash, you should try to just let it happen and stay calm. Try to remember that you’re stronger than you used to be and let it roll off of you like a bad memory.” She had no idea if it would work, but it was the best idea they had so far. “Do you think you can try that?”

“What choice do I have?”

“Don’t be such a fucking fatalist.” She lightly shoved him. “It’s counterproductive. Try to have a little faith in yourself. You’ll get the hang of this again. You’re just starting out in a higher league; it’s understandable that it’ll be hard at first. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Thanks.” He smiled up at Ruby, who squeezed his hand. “How long do you think I’ll need to wait before I get to practice?”

A half hour later Sam had another vision. He saw the flash and instinctually braced himself for pain. The dull colors of the room started growing in intensity. He tried to breathe, to stay calm, but it was a challenge. Ruby saw his body tense and grabbed his arm.

“You’re fine,” she told him. “Just see what it is and let it roll off you.”

His face contorted like he was struggling not to react to something. She hoped it was just a gruesome image and not pain. The water glass on the nightstand shook slightly, jerking a couple millimeters one way, then the other. She watched the glass and decided to try something else to soothe and distract Sam. She quickly moved to sit next to him on the bed. With one hand she held his hand to her belly and used her other hand to stroke his cheek.

“You’re fine. Just relax. It’ll be over in a second. Just let it go.” The water glass stopped shaking as his tension eased. He opened his eyes and looked at her with a worn expression, but he smiled slightly.

“I think that was a little better,” he whispered.

“You look a little less death-like. Did it hurt?”

“Yeah, but mostly at the beginning.” Sam rolled his face so that her hand cupped his jaw, then exhaled slowly. “Definitely need to work on this, but it’s a start.”

Ruby dragged her thumb across his stubble, then somewhat regretfully removed her hand. He watched in confusion as she started undoing the belt that held him to the bed. She tossed the belts to the floor, then climbed into bed with him. He scooted back to give her space, then wrapped an arm around her.
“I think you need to relax more than you need to worry about fall out of the bed.” She dragged the pillow towards her a few inches. “Also, if I’m gonna stay with you through this, I might as well be comfortable.”

Over the next ten hours they laid in bed, mostly resting but occasionally being awoken by one of Sam’s visions. Ruby would feel him tense next to her, then she would stroke his arm and talk him through it. After the third vision like that, Sam held her to him gently and kissed the back of her neck. The vision hadn’t caused nearly as much pain as he’d been experiencing over the last week and he was even able to to split his focus somewhat between the vision and the real world. He fell asleep quickly, face buried in her dark, soft hair.

While Sam was asleep, Dean peeked into the room to see how things were going. Ruby saw him and raised a finger to her lips. He nodded in understanding, then pointed at Sam and shrugged. She gave Dean a thumbs up, which made him smile in relief. He exited, closing the door quietly behind him.

After a few hours, Sam woke up. He tried to get out of bed without jostling the mattress too much on the chance that Ruby was still sleeping, but she wasn’t. She turned to look at him as he stood next to the bed rubbing his neck and head.

“I had another vision while I was sleeping.”

“You look pretty chipper. Did it hurt?” she asked, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

“A little. Not bad, maybe like a little headache, like when you get dehydrated.” Ruby couldn’t relate to his metaphor, but didn’t bother trying to get a better explanation. “That’s only part of why I’m ‘chipper’ though.”

“Oh?” she invited, causing Sam to grin excitedly in a way that made her feel a million times better.

“I saw the other sigil. Time to find out who this other big bad is.”
The Changing Seasons

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

It was the middle of the night, but maintaining normal hours had been abandoned in Bobby’s house long ago. Bobby and Dean had been sorting through call logs, when Sam and Ruby came downstairs to the kitchen. Sam offered a quick reassurance that he was handling the visions better, before grabbing a pad of paper and getting to work. After taking a few minutes to sketch out the sigil, Sam tore off a page and handed the paper to Ruby. She stared at it thoughtfully for a moment, rotated it, stared some more, rotated the page a second time, then put down the paper.

"I have no idea who this is." Ruby looked up apologetically. "I hate to ask, but are you sure this is what you saw?"

"Pretty sure. Maybe some of the little details are off.” Sam picked up the paper and chewed his lip in mild frustration. “I guess it could have been a bit rounder?"

"That probably wouldn't make a big difference," she guessed.

"How many people do you actually know in Hell?" Bobby asked Ruby in an attempt to reframe their expectations. “I mean, what were the odds that it’d be someone you recognize?”

"This should be an arch, but this doesn't match any of them. None of the living ones.” Ruby rubbed her neck while peeking at the drawing again. “It doesn't even match the big up-and-comings, like the most likely demons to next ascend to arch status. Also, I don’t recognize it from any history lessons."

"Could we check online? I know we don't have the name, but the image could probably work," Sam suggested.

"We're gonna seriously try to Google Goggles a demonic sigil? That sounds like the beginning of a bad horror movie." Dean clapped his hands together with false enthusiasm and a smile that left unsaid, ‘How could that go wrong?’

"Okay, so maybe we shouldn't start with the image. Maybe we can find a list of demons online and go through looking for images one at a time?" Sam didn’t look thrilled by the amount of research he had just suggested, but they were low on ideas. Now was not the time to be sweating the grunt work.

"I don't suppose demons have Tinder or Facebook?" Dean smirked.

"No... but actually there is something not too far off that might be useful," Ruby mused. "There's a book that's supposed to chronicle all of the archdemons and higher order demons. It might take some doing, but we might be able to find it in that."

"Where's the book?"

"Hell."
Sam and Bobby both looked at Ruby like her suggestion was a live snake that had just fallen onto the kitchen table. Dean actually scooted his chair backward and stood up while raising his hands in forfeit. She huffed with annoyance at their silent complaints. "We don't need to actually go down and get a physical book. Most of Hell's archives are incorporeal. These sorts of things are like Hell's public record, assuming you're a demon. We can just make a hard copy."

"Let me guess: spell?" Bobby raised a cautiously curious eyebrow.

"It's easy." Ruby reconsidered her statement. "Well, it won't be too difficult. We're gonna need to make a few substitutions, but it shouldn't be too bad."

"What do you need?"

"Bobby, do you have a book that you'd be willing to destroy? The older and bigger the better."

"I'm sure I can find something."

"And where do you keep your spell components? I've got to see if we're missing anything," she explained. "Sam, could you grab anything we still have from the trunk."

Dean helped Sam bring in the supplies from the Impala, while Bobby searched for a book he was willing to sacrifice. Ruby explored various cupboards and desk drawers trying to find all the miscellaneous components he kept randomly strewn throughout the house. When they all had met up again in the study, she organized the components on the desk and counted off items on her fingers. In addition to the normal collection of plants, dried animal parts, and bottles of mysterious contents, there was a glass bowl with a carving knife and dish towel in it.

"You have everything you need?" Sam asked her while fiddling with a small bundle of dried sage.

"Almost." Ruby picked up the knife and the glass bowl. "Dean, you ready to donate a pint to a good cause?"

"What? Fuck no!" Dean took a step back and looked to Sam and Bobby for support.

"Look, the spell calls for a cup of virgin blood, but I can substitute a pint of plain human blood as long as it's fresh. Sam isn't exactly pedigree and I'd much rather take it out of you than Bobby."

Ruby casually pointed the knife at Sam and Bobby while talking about them, earning a reflexive step backward from the older hunter. Sam seemed completely unfazed by Ruby playing with a knife, but he looked up from the sage once he realized that the situation had grown slightly tense.

"Ruby, you really need the blood?" Sam asked.

"You guys should just count yourselves lucky that I’m good enough that I only need a pint," she said, a bit indigantly. "I’m just saying, a novice would probably need to straight up drain Dean."

"Seriously? How dark is this spell?" Dean complained, but his look of concern and disapproval was mostly coming from a place of growing reluctant acceptance. Even though he hated everything about the situation, he wasn’t going to let Bobby provide the blood if it actually was necessary.

Ruby shrugged. "Sorry to break it to you, but checking a book out of Hell takes a little more than a library card."

As much as Ruby had been looking forward to using a knife on Dean, she had eventually conceded
that tapping a good vein with a needle was just as effective. They only needed the blood, not any
theatrics involved in collecting it. His cooperation had been conditioned on Ruby trying to lay off
him for awhile, Bobby being the one to tap the vein, and Sam throwing a frozen pie in the oven.
Dean didn’t say so, but while Sam was at risk of having intense visions he didn’t want his little
brother holding sharp objects around him. Instead he made a show of needing pie for his
impending drop in blood sugar, and Sam was more than happy to make the showing of goodwill.

After the blood was drained and the apple pie was baking, Ruby got to work. The three men stood
around the study watching her perform a spell that hadn’t been cast in probably several lifetimes.
She mixed the dry components in a metal bowl, said a few words, then poured Dean's blood into
the mix. The blood hissed on contact with the other ingredients and was quickly absorbed, creating
a dark maroon paste. She put the large book, a 300-year-old guide to werewolves, on the cleared
desk and opened it to the middle page.

"I'm gonna go black eyes for the next part," she told them. "Don't talk until I tell you it's okay
otherwise we have to start over, which means bleeding Dean again. Anything you want to say
before I start?"

"Fuck you," Dean offered while clutching the elbow that had provided the blood.

"Anything important?" she asked again, but Sam and Bobby didn't have anything to add.

Ruby blinked her eyes black, then held her left hand over the bowl. She began speaking in a
language none of the men recognized. Sam looked over at Bobby and Dean who had both once
again taken a step backwards away from her. Their expressions were both uncomfortable, like
they wanted to leave the room, but they stood resolute against the impulse. Dean was actually
sweating and shaking a little. Sam looked back to Ruby, who had picked up a small knife.

After a few more seconds of speaking, she cut her left palm, causing some blood to trickle into the
mixture. The moment her blood touched the maroon paste, the inside of the bowl caught fire. She
continued dripping blood into the flames for almost a whole minute. Sam was getting a little
worried, but she wrapped her hand in a temporary bandage before he dared intervene. The fire
burnt until she finished speaking and then extinguished with her last word. Tipping the bowl
upside down, Ruby poured a fine, ashen powder into the inside seam of the book, then closed it
gently. After placing her right hand on the book's cover she said a few more words in the strange
language. Delicately, she lifted the cover to reveal the first page. She smiled proudly and shifted
her eyes back to normal.

"It worked. You guys can talk now."

"What the hell was that?" Dean looked faint and breathed through his mouth, almost panting.
"That stuff you were saying."

"That—oh, yeah. Abyssal can be a little rough on human ears." She smiled and tilted her head
with a slightly repentant shrug.

"Abyssal?" Sam and Bobby asked at the same time.

"The language of Hell," she explained, then raised an eyebrow at them. "You didn't think we all
speak English down there or something?"

Sam looked back at Dean, who had taken a seat on the couch. His posture was recoiled, arms
crossed in front of his chest. One of his legs bounced slightly, possibly trying to disguise a tremor.
"Dean, you okay?" Sam asked in the least accusatory voice he could manage.

"Fine.  I think the blood loss is just catching up with me," he lied, but nobody called him out of it.

Sam and Bobby approached the desk to see that the original text of the large book had been replaced.  The new text was indecipherable in a strange, curvy font that was clearly not based on Latin.

"I guess I won't be adding this to my light reading list," Bobby muttered.

"Yeah.  It's all Abyssal.  I can skim through and translate any of the good stuff." Ruby flipped two pages in beyond what appeared to be an introduction to what looked like encyclopedia entries.  Most of the entries were only two or three inches long and began with an illustration of a sigil. She set the drawing down next to the book and took a seat.  "This might take awhile."

Ruby worked her way through the pages, skimming for the sigil's particular entry or even some reference to it within another entry.  It was slow work that was made slower by the fact that she couldn't get help from any of the guys.  Bobby and Dean had proved unable to stare at the text for more than a minute before needing to take a long break as far away as reasonably possible.

Sam didn't seem affected by the demonic quality that made Abyssal so unpleasant to humans.  The discovery that he wasn't affected had been more unsettling to Bobby and Dean.  Sam had started getting used to the idea that having a little demon blood gave him some advantages when dealing with demon-adjacent topics.  But Bobby and Dean had only found out about the demon blood at all the night before.

Dean had ended up going for a walk, again.  Sam frowned slightly at hearing that he was going for a walk… in the middle of the night… in winter… for the second time in two nights.  It seemed that that was going to be his go-to technique for avoiding Sam.  Dean had claimed that he needed to get away from the book, but Sam thought Dean's eyes lingered on him before walking out the door.  At the time Sam had been standing over the book, completely fine, highlighting one of the major disparities below the surface of their relationship.

In spite of him being unaffected by the Abyssal, Sam was still unable to read it.  He could look for the sigil at the beginning of each entry, but that wasn't particularly helpful while Ruby was still trying to look for references in other entries.  Instead he opted to occasionally look over her shoulders while rubbing her back.  Some of the entries were much longer than average, which Sam would ask about.  She would give a little summary of the entry before moving on with her search.  Bobby had drifted over a few times when he heard particularly interesting stories, like Cain, but would eventually have to retreat to the other side of the room.

Dean returned after about an hour.  His cheeks were rosy from the cold air, and he went straight into the kitchen to grab a beer and slice of pie.  Sam followed him in, grabbed a beer in solidarity, then took a seat at the table.  Dean eyed him, sensing that he wanted to talk, and sat down next to him.

"Find anything?" Dean asked while throwing his bottle cap into a nearby recycling bin.

"Not yet.  Ruby's looking, but it's slow with her being the only one who can read that stuff."

"You can't read demon?" He didn't look at Sam while asking.  His attention appeared to be focused on the pie, giving the false sense of nonchalant interest.

"What?  No." Sam was slightly offended, but mostly confused by how Dean had gotten to that
thought. “Why would you think that?”

"You've been hanging around with demons—"

"I've been hanging around with one demon.” Sam corrected, growing a little defensively. “I've been killing demons."

"I just figured since that language didn't bother you, maybe you knew some of it."

"No…. I think it might have to do with the demon blood thing."

"Yeah. That.” Dean’s eyes rolled as a reflex, but he managed to stop himself from making any larger display. He continued to pick at his pie with telling indifference. Sam watched him and noticed that for as mutilated as the slice had become, Dean hadn’t actually taken a bite.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked. “I mean, you took off kind of fast."

"I just needed some air. The blood being drained—"

"Dean, I know you've lost more blood than that and been fine. It was that language." Sam reflected on the way Dean had been panicked-looking during the spell, his disinterest in his favorite food, his hostility over everything even slightly related to Hell. Sam may have skipped taking Psych 101 in college, but it didn’t take much to see that Dean was struggling to deal with issues related to Hell. "Do you remember Hell?"

"Some of it,” he responded with a blunt honesty that surprised them both.

"Did that, like, trigger some memories?"

Dean sipped his beer. He self-consciously switched his attention to the map on the wall, redirecting the false interest. As much as he tried to play it cool, he could feel Sam staring straight through his guise. His hand steadied a knee that bounced helplessly. He made a mental note that he had to watch that tic. It was obvious that he wasn’t fooling Sam so he gave up the act.

"I know that you're okay with Ruby and the magic and the demon stuff, but all this stuff....” Dean shook his head. “I'm trying to be okay, but it's hard. It’s really hard. I mean, I'm hunting demons, then we're letting some go. Now they're running around doing who knows what and I'm just supposed to be fine with it when I could've done something to stop it." 

"Dean, we didn't know things would escalate so quickly. We don't even know if there was ever a chance to really do anything about it." 

"Great. So we feed ourselves some line to make us feel better about doing nothing? We're supposed to be going out and stopping bad guys, not sitting around talkin' philosophy—and doing magic like that!” Dean threw his hand out, gesturing at the study where Ruby was looking over the book. “That was some heavy shit and it's like you don't even care."

"Are you sure that was actually as heavy as you think? Bobby's still in there. Maybe you're just taking this a little too personally. You're too close to this—" 

"That’s fucking rich.” Dean huffed an unamused laugh. “I'm too close to this? Look at you. You're up to your ass in demon.”

Sam’s lips thinned, but after a moment he replied, "Okay. So maybe I'm too comfortable with demon stuff and you're too sensitive about it."
Dean glowered at being called sensitive. He could feel his teeth grind slightly, then he took what he hoped would be a calming breath. "This is gonna be a thing between us, isn't it?"

"It doesn't have to be. Maybe you can work through some of—"

"Going to Hell? You expect me to fucking go to therapy, make macaroni art about my feelings? That's not gonna happen."

"I'm just saying that maybe eventually you'll get more comfortable with this stuff."

"Hell and all this demon crap?" Dean asked, raising his voice a bit. "Just a thought, but maybe that's the kind of thing you're not supposed to get comfortable with. How is that normal? It’s fucked up—" Sam opened his mouth to say something, but hesitated. Dean didn't mean for his statement to sound like he was putting Sam down. He was trying to excuse himself for not getting over his own trauma, not telling Sam he was doing something wrong. He knew that Sam didn’t choose to have demon blood and even though he disagreed with some of the choices Sam had made, Dean wasn’t trying to be a dick about it. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I might not be normal," Sam said, with some audible pain in his voice. "But at least I can sleep at night."

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"I found it!" Ruby yelled excitedly from the study.

Sam and Dean tabled their conversation along with their mostly drunk beers and the razed plate of pie. When they entered, her face was only a few inches from the page, slowly inspecting some detail of the entry. Bobby had dragged a chair next to the desk, but he was careful not to get too close to the unpleasant text. Dean leaned against the far wall from the desk, and Sam went to look over Ruby’s shoulder.

“What’s it say?” Bobby asked, trying not to sound impatiently eager. He’d been watching her read probably the most interesting book that had ever been in his house for the last hour and the suspense was killing him.

“It’s a little weird. There are some words here that I’m not used to…. Let me just double-check something.” She held the page and then flipped back to an earlier entry to compare two things. Looking back at the primary entry, she frowned a little. “Weird. There’s a word I’ve never seen. I can give this a shot, but I’m not really getting the full picture on the last bit. So some of the subtlety might be lost in translation.”

“Anything’s better than nothing,” Sam said encouragingly.

“Yeah, well. I’m not sure you’re gonna like this.” She pointed at the first section of the entry. “It starts off pretty standard. The name is Lucian, but there aren’t any gender signifiers. In fact there aren’t many signifiers of any sort.”

“Signifiers?”

“Gender, age, caste—that kind of stuff usually starts off the entries so you can get an idea who you’re dealing with. With this one there’s almost no firm description, and I think it’s because the entry looks prophetic. It’s not some archdemon or big shot that’s made the annals. It’s one that’s going to. There’s actually an indicator here that the entry hasn’t been edited in... um.” Ruby did some quick Hell-to-Earth time conversion calculations. “Maybe 1,200 years or so. It’s marked for additional editing upon culmination.”
“So we don’t actually know any real-time information?” Dean looked thoroughly annoyed. He had lost some blood, endured some demon-speech-induced flashbacks, and possibly pissed off Sam for something that was a millennium out of date.

“Just because it’s old, doesn’t mean we can afford to throw the book in the fire. If this Lucian demon is really busting out, then you’re gonna want to hear this,” Ruby began underlining text with her finger and slowly translating the second half of the entry. “‘Then with the breaking of iron bands and the falling of the heavens will come Lucian, First of the Second Season, made by the First Light, harbinger of war and Champion of Hell.’"

“That doesn’t sound good.” Dean’s annoyance had turned to concerned interest.

“What was that about ‘harbinger of war and Champion of Hell?’” Bobby asked, enthusiasm draining from his face.

“The war part is pretty straight forward; I’m not seeing any subtext in the word choice. But the ‘Champion’ part is what I was having trouble translating. The word looks like another word we have, ‘knight.’ It’s a rank in Hell, but there haven’t been knights out and about in forever. This ‘Champion’ looks like a rank or some sort of title, but I’ve never seen it so I’m really just making up the meaning as best as I can.”

“So the first part about breaking bands and Heaven falling sounds like the omens predicting Lucian’s rise.” Bobby speculated.

“It specifies iron bands.” She reminded them. “But yeah. Then it goes into descriptive phrases.”

“What was that stuff about seasons and being made by light?” Sam was staring intently at the page even though he couldn’t understand the writing.

“Yeah…. That’s the bad part….?” Ruby’s voice was a little softer than usual, revealing just how unnerving she found that section.

“Really? I thought the ‘harbinger of war and Champion of Hell’ was the bad part.” Dean smiled sarcastically.

“So ‘first of the second’ is like….?” She paused for a moment to figure out how to explain the concept properly. “Lilith has the title of ‘First of the First’, which is usually just cut down to ‘the First’ or ‘Lucifer’s First’. The story is that she was the first human soul that Lucifer twisted into a demon. It’s sometimes called the Dawn of the Season or Age of the Demon. This whole ‘First of the Second Season’ is like the first of a new age.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s going after Lilith? Out with the old and in with the new?” Sam suggested.

“He or she,” Ruby corrected. “I know Lucifer is usually a male name for humans, but this entry could be for a female demon.”

“So what’s that being made from light thing about? It would make them easier to spot.” Bobby smirked a little trying to lessen the tension.

“They’re not actually made from light. They’re made ‘by the First Light’.” She emphasized the word ‘by’ to try and imply some meaning that the three humans weren’t understanding. “The First Light, otherwise known as the Morning Star.”

“Balls.” Bobby sighed.
Dean looked around a little confused by the sensation of having heard that phrase somewhere before, but not being able to place it.

“The Morning Star, like Lucifer the Morning Star?” Sam asked, hoping that he was mistaken.

“That’s the one.” Ruby leaned back in her chair.

“I thought Lucifer wasn’t real, or at least was a non-entity?” Months ago, Sam had talked with Ruby about the Luxia caste and their worship of Lucifer, the absent deity. So few demons were old enough to claim to have seen him that his existence had passed into respected legend to all but the most devout demons.

“He is, or was. I don’t know what this new creation means. You’d think the Devil coming back would make a bigger splash?” Ruby mused.

“Maybe it has? I’ve got a map full of demonic omens in the kitchen saying that something is going down,” Bobby offered bleakly.

“So worst case scenario: we have some sort of powerful demon, maybe archdemon, crafted by the Devil, beginning a new age, acting as the harbinger of war, and carrying a high rank in Hell,” Dean recapped while rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“And I’ve seen at least fifty demons killing or being killed because of this Lucian in the last day,” Sam added dryly.

“You said ‘last day,’” Ruby noted, then corrected, “This is actually just the first day.”
"What are we going to do?" Dean asked.

"What can we do?" Sam replied. "This isn't just some demon hunt anymore. Dad spent over twenty years looking for Azazel. Ruby and I had no luck going after Lilith non-stop for a year. Now there are two archdemons and shit's escalating. What could we even do about this?" Sam looked down at Ruby, who was seated in front of him. "What could you guys even do? I… I can't be running into fights like I used to. I'm sorry, but even if you had a plan I have to sit this out."

"Seriously? This may be the biggest clusterfuck we've ever seen and you're gonna be a benchwarmer?"

Sam wanted to reassure Dean that he'd be there if things became a matter of life and death, but the work of a hunter was always life and death. If he started making exceptions, where would he draw the line? Dean would almost certainly try to bring him in on more hunts, both because he'd miss his little brother and also for the safety net that having a second hunter provided. But as much as Sam wanted to protect Dean, he couldn't go back to hunting and he couldn't give Dean false hope. So he just silently nodded in response.

Dean scratched his head and turned away from him, looking around the study. There was a quiet tension in the room. Bobby looked disappointed by the turn, but he hadn't been expecting that Sam would considering getting back into the fight, no matter how bad things had gotten. He knew perfectly well how stubborn Winchesters could be and Sam had plenty of additional reasons to stick to his guns.

"Whether we have a plan or not, we should at least warn the other hunters about this." Bobby tried to keep the conversation going to prevent the boys from dwelling too long.

"Did you guys come up with an okay alibi for your intel? Because this seems like it'll take a pretty big leap of faith to—" Sam closed his eyes, braced himself subtly against Ruby's shoulder, took a few slow breaths, then regained his focus. Everyone had stopped to watch how he handled what appeared to be a vision. He looked a little tired, but he didn't reach for his head in pain. "More of the same."

"You okay?" Dean asked. He may have felt a little hurt by Sam's continual refusal to help him, but the vision was a stark reminder of all the crap that Sam was having to deal with already.

"Yeah. It's still a bit jarring, but it didn't really hurt much."

"I'm impressed you managed to get those visions under control so quickly. You looked like death yesterday. That's some fast turn around," Bobby observed.

"I've actually gotten pretty good at dealing with that kind of stuff." Sam stood taller and walked
around the desk to be closer to Dean. His determination was visible, but non-threatening. “Since
teaming up with Ruby, I've kind of redesigned my training and fighting style—"

The first thing the four of them noticed was the high pitched humming sound of multiple alarm
spells activating at once. Whirling to look at the front door for an incoming demon attack, they
nearly missed the new occupant of the room. After a split second double-take, Sam, Dean, and
Bobby all noticed the man, then took defensive stances. Sam reached out with his powers and
realized that they were dealing with an incredibly powerful demon.

His meatsuit appeared to be in his middle forties with light skinned, short brown hair, and a
mischievous yet relaxed smile on his face. He wore a tailored black suit, black dress shirt, black
tie, and carried an unnaturally dark red rose in his coat pocket. The demon wasn't posed to fight. In
fact, he was seated in one of the shabby armchairs. With a snap of his fingers the alarms stopped
whining. Sam started to move to get between the demon and Ruby, while Bobby and Dean moved
forward to attack the newcomer at the slightest provocation.

"Ruby, be a dear and call off your dogs. I'm not here to fight." He spoke with a British accent.
The guys all hesitated slightly at his apparent familiarity with Ruby.

"Guys.” Her voice wavered momentarily with intimidation. “Back off. He won’t fight."

"He could be lying," Dean growled. He had easily concluded that the man was a demon, and after
the last few days he was long overdue for beating some demonic ass. The prospect of something
tangible to fight was more than welcome. Dean hoped that the demon would turn out to be a
disposable little lying shit, but a quick glance back at Ruby’s concerned face made his hope
dwindle.

"He can't lie." Ruby’s tone was unnaturally reserved.

"What?” All three hunters looked stunned. They had never heard of a demon who couldn’t lie.
Hell, most rookie hunters actually thought that demons only lied.

"It’s a condition of my position. Crowley, King of the Crossroads.” He held up a glass of scotch to
toast them. "Charmed, I'm sure.”

"King?” Sam asked what Bobby and Dean were both wondering.

"Archdemon of the Crossroads caste.” Ruby clarified.

"Can I offer anyone a scotch?” Crowley pointed to a cut crystal bottle of amber liquid that sat,
along with four matching glasses, on the table next to his chair. “It’s a ‘79 Port Ellen, quite a good
year. Bobby? Dean? Sam? ...Ruby?”

Ruby held her belly and bared her teeth at his joke offer, but didn't insult him or object outright.

"What do you want?” Dean asked. He hadn’t relaxed a muscle in spite of the archdemon’s
hospitalable appearance.

"Mostly certainty, but ideally, stability.” Crowley swirled his drink, took a sip, and continued on
with his preamble. "When Lilith started her little campaign on Earth it caused numerous problems
in Hell. That's what happens when less experienced and hotter heads get their first grab at power. I
tried to make things work, cleaned up her mess as best I could and made a few deals to have her
cleaned up as well.”
"When you sent me back?" Ruby asked, surprising Dean who had thought Crowley's last statement was only directed at him.

"Among others. But Lilith has turned her little fling on Earth into an all out war in Hell. She made a play for power, and was only barely fought off."

"What did she do?" Ruby leaned forward in her chair, attention rapt.

"She attempted a coup. The Archdemons Zygris, Solinus, Palim, Tyre, and Verity are dead. Denerus and Weller are missing, but presumed alive." Ruby looking horrified at the news. Sam, Dean, and Bobby were all somewhat alarmed, but mostly confused without any context. Crowley recognized their lack of familiarity with the subject and elaborated for them. "Those are—were the more liberal archdemons of Hell. The members of Hell's High Council that help keep Hell quiet, from your perspective. She attempted a coup, and in the process started a civil war."

"What do you mean High Council?" Bobby asked as his body relaxed from his fighting stance.

"Hell is a republic, or oligarchy depending on who you ask, ruled by a council consisting of the archdemons of every caste, fifteen in all," Crowley explained. "Lilith massacred one of our meetings and made a power play in the Pits as well."

"That's why all the demons left?"

"Yes. Everyone was pulled back down for the fight, with the exception of Ruby, who couldn't be located."

Ruby had been staring in shock at the desk in front of her, too distracted in thought to realize that her mouth was slightly open. Hearing her name brought her back into the conversation, but she hadn’t really been listening to the last few sentences. She quietly asked, "Verity is dead?"

"Condolences. She was one of the sane ones." Crowley toasted to the late demon’s memory, then took another sip of his scotch.

"She was my archdemon," Ruby explained. Her eyes widened as new thoughts crept into her mind. "What's going to happen to her covens? Who's taking over for the Maji?"

"Her covens' fates are on hold until the Maji are done figuring out your next archdemon. Last I heard Morrison was the popular choice," Crowley said, earning a nod of agreement from Ruby. "But on a grander scale you can see where this would be problematic. Hell has split into two sides and our side is temporarily down by roughly two-thirds of its leadership."

"Our side?" Dean frowned, not thrilled by the surprise association.

"Yes. You want my side to win because we prefer to keep Hell a well-oiled machine below the surface instead of letting it spill all over Earth on some daft holy mission."

"What do you mean 'holy mission'?" Sam asked. He and Ruby had known that Lilith was working on something, but never had any real sense of what she had been trying to accomplish. It had always worried him, having only a pinhole view of the big picture.

"Lilith is archdemon to the Luxia caste. They're Hell's version of the extreme religious right. Everything they do is for honor and service of the Devil. Of course whatever big move she's making is based upon the worship of the Devil. And that would also explain how she has won over the other conservative archdemons. She is Lucifer's first demon working to serve the father of all, etcetera and so on. It's easy to see how that would be eaten up."
"What is Lilith even doing?" Sam pressed for intel and desperate confirmation that things weren’t as bad as they appeared. “We messed up one of her tasks. She can’t get all sixty four."

"For some reason, that hasn't slowed her down. She's still at it. Unfortunately, we do not have any high-ranking Luxia demons who would be able to give more insight.” Crowley looked to Ruby. “Verity was working on what the rites could be for, but clearly we suffered a setback with her death. Morrison was assisting her and has taken the lead on continuing her research."

"He should be working with her covens,” Ruby suggested. “They might know more than it seems, and as many of the higher Maji who can be rounded up. The more the better."

"It's funny you should mention that. Your little disappearing act and reported antics have raised a few eyebrows. Morrison can't drag you back down while you're hidden. Whether he'd want to or not hasn't come up… yet. But you can bet that it will be discussed."

"Are you threatening me?" she asked with a cold edge that undercut their previously conversational tone.

"Only incidentally. I prefer to think of it as warning you." Crowley rocked his glass of scotch back and forth indicating an unstable state. “I’m not a fan of making oaths of secrecy because with me they are painfully binding— What if there’s an emergency and I’m prevented from sending someone to assist you? Scenarios like that make the whole thing so problematic, but how about I accept a limited fiduciary duty to you with the limitation being set by a standard of reasonableness?”

“That has got to be a trap.” Dean interjected while rolling his eyes at the jargon.

Ruby, Dean, and Bobby looked to Sam for insight into what the Crossroads demon had just said. "Maybe?" he told them with a shrug. “What? I haven’t taken any law classes in like five years.”

“In lay terms, I’ll try really hard not to screw Ruby over,” Crowley said to reassure them. “It’s really not in my interest to cause you problems. Anyway, I have more pressing concerns than helping with Morrison’s recruitment drive. I’m working on a more immediate plan to stopping her.”

"How are you planning on doing that?" asked Bobby.

"I plan on taking advantage of a small fissure in the conservative base to split it entirely." Crowley set down his glass on the small table next to his chair. He sat up in the armchair, smoothing his suit slightly.

"How are you going to do that?" Sam’s voice was hesitant. There was something unsettling about the way Crowley was just giving them so much valuable information.

"By forming an alliance with Lucian."

"You know where Lucian is?" Dean asked as he stepped forward. Politics be damned, he was excited by the possibility of finally finding something he could fight.

"Possibly." Crowley spoke with a mild tension, almost like anticipation.

"Possibly?"

"Right now those Lucian followers aren't actually following anyone’s orders. They're making war
on Lilith of their own initiative. Lucian hasn't stepped up to claim the title of archdemon, making the search that much harder."

"That doesn’t make sense," Bobby added. "If Lucian’s around, then why hasn’t he or she stepped up to the plate?"

"That's an excellent question." Crowley turned to Sam. "Why haven’t you?"

"Rumor around the watercooler is that you’re Lucian." Crowley smiled, taking a little pleasure in getting to deliver the news himself and observe their candid reactions. He poured a bit more scotch into his glass and took a sip while waiting for his audience to process what he’d just said.

"I'm not….” Sam barely managed to form words around the crippling confusion that had filled his head. He wasn’t sure how he was going to defend himself against that suggestion, but he was interrupted by Dean who seemed to be in a growing panicked rage.

"Sam's not a demon! He's human!” Dean was shouting in a way that startled everyone, including himself. He knew that Sam was different, but having some asshole call his little brother a demon was too much. He didn’t care if the asshole was some archdemon. That was outrageous. Sam wasn’t a demon. “Ignoring the fact that our parents were human—salt, iron, holy water—none of that stuff works on him.""That's the interesting bit.” Crowley grinned. “You see, we're getting very close to arguing semantics. What makes a demon a demon and a human a human? Salt, iron, and holy water. You make it sound like being a demon is only about weaknesses. Of course you would; exploiting those weaknesses is your primary function in life. But what about the perks? The strength, the powers, an immunity to some of the things that go bump in the night. Looking at it that way, Sam seems to have an awfully strong resemblance to a demon in possession of a body.” He looked intently at Sam. “I take it that you’ve been using locator spells on demons? Any chance you got a look at one before those delightful wards were put on you?”

Sam opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated. In the first few month of looking for Lilith, they’d had plenty of chances to look at demon locator maps that had only shown Ruby… but they hadn’t used the spell between him getting Ruby’s blood in Philadelphia and getting the anti-detection tattoo. It was true that they had used the alarm spell on the way to Portland, but it had been designed to ignore Ruby and if Ruby’s blood was what broke some sort of threshold within him would he go unnoticed by the spell as he had when she purged the warehouse?

"Still doesn’t change that fact that Sam was born human,” Dean objected in his brother’s defense.

"So are all demons. We're made, we aren't born—well, not yet.” Crowley raised an eyebrow and looked at Ruby briefly before returning his attention to Sam. “You may have been born a human, but Azazel did something to you and what Azazel was most known for was his claim that he had actually spoken to the Devil. So if anyone was going to act on behalf of the First Light to make a demon, it would have been him. All that and then a few demons see you use your powers, and your knocked-up demon girlfriend…. Well, you can see how rumors might have formed."

"That doesn't make sense." Sam swallowed hard and felt a little faint. His heart was pounding more from fear than anger.

"No. Actually, it makes perfectly fine sense, you just don't want to accept it as a possibility.” Crowley swirled the remainder of his scotch. His posture softened slightly, no longer reminiscent of a cat playing with a string. Instead he tried to adopt a more sympathetic tone. "Listen, I'm not
particularly inclined to believe all this prophecy stuff either, but it's less important what the situation really is than how things are perceived to be. You could be Lucian or not. I'm not even sure if I particularly care and you probably shouldn't either. Those demons Lilith sent after you stopped chasing you because they wouldn't dream of harming Lucian. Imagine what they'd do at your explicit instruction.” He paused a beat to let that point sink in before continuing. “You can play ignorant and have a handful of demons fighting Lilith to defend you or you can play the game and get who-knows-how-many demons actively hunting her down."

"I'm not a champion of Hell.” Sam’s upper lip arched up in an unconscious snarl as he spoke. Crowley’s suggestion was insulting and borderline insane.

"I know that and you know that, but the rest of Hell doesn't need to know. All you would have to do is take the title, condemn Lilith's forces, and advocate some points that would be advantageous for us."

"You want me to be your political puppet?” Sam looked like he was going to be sick at the mere thought.

"Those aren't the words I would choose.” Crowley shrugged. “But, yes."

"No!” Sam took a few steps closer to Crowley while trying to decide if he was actually insulted enough to fight the archdemon or if he was just making a symbolic gesture. “I'm not going to pretend to be some demon to help you make a power play in Hell.”

"Lilith is already making her power play and she has the advantage. The best chance we have at stopping her from bollocking-up both Hell and Earth is to undercut her base now.” Crowley looked to Ruby, hoping that she would be a more receptive audience. "We have the Central District, including the Citadel, but she controls almost all of the Pits. All she has to do is outlast us. We need to hit her before the scales tip too far and we can’t recover."

Ruby looked concerned while the rest of his audience just looked bewildered and offended. Crowley huffed softly, finished his scotch in one long gulp, and placed the crystal glass onto the side table. Then he stood from the armchair and straightened his suit again.

"Tell you what. You think about it for a bit. It's a lot to process. I want us to be allies so I'm not going to bother threatening you. But I want you to understand that striking back quickly is critical, certainly for Hell and likely for Earth.” Reaching into an interior jacket pocket he withdrew a tiny black box wrapped with a red ribbon that matched the rose in his outer breast pocket. He placed the box and a small metal disc roughly the size of a large coin onto the side table. “I'm prepared to compensate you for your assistance. I'm leaving my calling card in case you change your mind, and the box is a gift for the pup. Don't say Ruby's side of the family never did anything for the kid."

Crowley disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of dialogue/speculation/discussion that I've shifted from this chapter to the next or later chapters. Originally this conversation with Crowley was going to cover a ton more stuff, but it became too dense & heavy. I feel like there's a fair amount of new information in this chapter as is and didn't want to overload it. So, if
there are questions you were expecting the characters to ponder, that might come up shortly.

Also, I love the idea of characters with restricted communications. I wanted to make the archdemon of The Crossroads restricted to only telling the truth (to the best of his/her knowledge) because I felt like the best way to establish the integrity of Hell was to make someone carry some measure of integrity as a burden. It's made Crowley interesting to write, but luckily I haven't had to do anything too tricky with him yet. I imagine this will bite me in the ass in a few later chapters.

Quick request for any British readers: If I screw up any of Crowley's slang please let me know and I'll fix it.
An awkward silence filled the house as soon as Crowley left. The suggestion that Sam might by some definitions be a demon, or worse, be Lucian, had thrown them all. Each person fell on a different point of the spectrum of denial. Dean was wholly against the entire idea that his brother could be some sort of demon, no matter how unusual his circumstances seemed. Bobby was resistant, but had to admit that in a certain light some of the evidence sounded convincing. Ruby thought the idea that Sam could be a demon in more than just some small percentage of blood was unnerving, but at that point it wasn’t the strangest thing to have happened to them. Lastly, Sam felt the fear and embarrassment indicative of the subconscious thought that there really might be something to the claim.

“He was talking out his ass,” Dean said in an attempt to reassure everyone, including himself.

“He wasn’t actually saying that you’re a….” Bobby couldn’t quite bring himself to seriously discuss the possibility of Sam being a demon, under any definition. “He was just saying that some of the demons think you are.”

“We all know I’m a little bit demon. He’s not entirely wrong.” Sam spoke with a slightly defeated tone. “The normal tricks don’t work…. How do we even find out? I bet you can’t exorcise me.”

“Well, that’s a thought I never wanted,” Dean whispered, looking a little sick.

“Not sure what else we could do to test it.” Sam huffed out a humorless chuckle. “I mean, I don’t feel like getting stabbed with Ruby’s knife.”

“Someone could say the c-word and see if you flinch,” Ruby suggested, but the guys all looked at her in confusion.

“Cunt?” Dean asked.

“What? No…. Seriously? I thought you were supposed to be hunters? Starts with ‘chris,’ ends with ‘to.’ It’s like no one ever remembers that’s a thing.” She rolled her eyes, then jerked forward in her chair and pointed at Dean. “But don’t do it around me. It’s uncomfortable as hell and I will hit you. I will use this baby as a shield and I will punch you right in the face.”

“If she’s reacting like that, please don’t say it around me.” Sam sighed. “I mean, what’s it going to prove anyway? We’re all trying to prove I’m not a demon, but we don’t even know how to define ‘demon’ and we can’t prove a negative even if we had some idea what…. This is so fucked.”

“Okay. So things maybe look bad, but Romo Lampkin can’t seriously expect you to impersonate some archdemon. What happens when the demons find out you aren’t the real deal? What if Lucian really does show up?” Dean countered. “It’s insane to think that you should put your life on the line because they’re having a some fight in Hell.”

“I’m not saying that we get involved, but this isn’t just ‘some fight in Hell.’ It sounds like there is
a serious war going on down there. If Lilith really does have the Pits, then things are really screwed,” Ruby corrected Dean. The three men looked at her with the collective realization that she had a much better understanding of everything that Crowley had said.

Bobby seized the opportunity to get a better picture of what was happening. “What did he mean by that whole ‘Central District’ and ‘Pits’ thing?”

“Central District is like the capital of Hell. It’s more metropolitan and where most business gets done. The Pits are what most people think of as Hell, where the souls are tortured and turned into demons. If Crowley and his allied castes are holed up in Central, then they’re essentially cut off from the main resource of Hell. Lilith can just wait them out, harvesting human souls from the Pit. The more people she kills up here, the larger her army of demons becomes. Eventually, she’ll get a big enough army to take Central by force. Unless something big happens, Lilith is gonna win.”

“Do we care?” Dean asked with a genuinely uncertain shrug. “Don’t get me wrong, I hate Lilith more than the next guy, but Hell is Hell. What do we care if Lilith gets to wear the crown?”

“Like Crowley said, she’s not just going to sit back in Hell. She’s working on something up here and with control over the full resources of Hell…” Ruby shook her head, then looked up at Sam with concern. “I’m not saying you do anything. I don’t want you getting involved with Hell any more than Dean, but you guys all need to realize that this war in Hell is a big deal. It’s not just going to fizzle out downstairs.”

“Say she gets all of Hell. How long before she can make our lives up here miserable?” Dean asked.

“Seriously?” Ruby looked at Dean with a disgusted expression. “You wanna kick this one down the road?”

“I’m not suggesting that we hide with our heads in the sand. Last I checked you—” Dean cut himself off by literally biting his tongue. “I just want to know how fucked we are, how fast.”

“Things have been crazy for the last month and she only has half of Hell. The whole deal’s got to be bad news,” Bobby observed.

“The Pits are more like 95% of Hell by area, but if she gets into Central….” Ruby looked genuinely concerned. “That’s where all the contracts are kept. That’s where huge numbers of curses and hexes take root. That’s where the sneakier demons that hunters haven’t seen topside in centuries like to reside. Where the hellhounds are bred. Where Hell’s worst prisoners are trapped. Where the tombs are…. The Pits might be where Lilith could grow her army, but Central is where she’d get her bombs.”

Ruby’s assessment of the situation in Hell had managed to make everyone’s bad mood worse. There was a common feeling of helplessness and a general lack of an idea on how to proceed. The entire discussion about Sam pretending to be Lucian felt more and more like an intangible doubt that could only ever be resolved by doing something everyone was adamantly against. The situation in Hell was bleak, but it was beyond their reach and, even if they had something obvious to fight, it was unclear what could be done and who would be in the fight.

Sam didn’t want this—nobody wanted it—but yesterday he’d had some small hope that he could have a quiet, simple life. It would have been a little unusual, but he would’ve been part of a community with the coven. He could’ve raised his kid in relative peace, probably with Ruby based on the way things had been going between them lately. Maybe Bobby and Dean would even visit
occasionally. But the whole Lilith-Lucian thing had put a dark cloud over his hopes, if not dashed them entirely. He could still go to the coven, but if nothing was done about Lilith eventually the situation would catch up with him.

Why couldn’t things be simple? Sam wondered what normal people worried about two weeks before their first child’s birth. Probably matching tiny linens to the wall color or something like that. In that moment the idea of decorating felt inane, but he had to admit that he hadn’t really thought a lot of the baby logistics recently. They had been planning on having the kid as close to the coven as possible without giving away their eventual destination. The coven was equipped to handle a newborn. When they’d visited about a year ago there were two babies and a few young children. But if he and Ruby were going to stay at Bobby’s until the baby was born, they’d need supplies. Wasn’t that what baby showers were for? His eyes moved to the wrapped box that Crowley had given them, which was far too small to be a carseat.

Grateful for the distraction from their own thoughts, the others watched as Sam walked over to the side table and looked over the objects that Crowley had left. The crystal bottle of scotch and five matching glasses remained. He picked up the small metal talisman, examined it for a few seconds, then slipped it into his pocket before turning his attention to the tiny black box. Cautiously, he untied the red silk ribbon and removed the lid. Inside he found a folded piece of parchment and two half-inch long teardrop-shaped pieces of what looked like black wood resting on a red velvet cushion. He grimaced at the anything-but-normal gift, opened the note, and read it aloud.

"A little protection for the pup. It took a little doing, but they’re perfectly safe."

He stared at the two pieces of wood, not recognizing the gift, then handed the box and note to Ruby. She reread the note and looked at the two pieces of wood. She tilted her head in confusion, then flashed her eyes black for a second while looking over the gift. Her mouth formed a silent ‘oh.’

"It looks like a syf." She lightly touched one of the pieces, but immediately jerked back in surprise, dropping the box to the floor. Sam, Dean, and Bobby flinched, expecting something dangerous to spring from the box. "It's not gonna explode guys. It just startled me." She gestured at the box indicating for Sam to hand it to her. He carefully picked it up, trying not to touch the contents of the box, and returned it to her.

"What is it?" Sam asked, eyeing the small, black objects warily.

"They’re a syf, a demon thing."

"Big surprise," Dean muttered. “What’s it do?"

"It doesn’t really do anything.” Ruby thought for a second, trying to find a decent way to explain it. “Every demon has one. It's like a title—less like ‘manager’ and more like ‘duke,’ but every single demon from the top to the bottom has a rank and also caste. Your syf changes as your rank changes. Basically, the idea is that other demons can look at you and know exactly who’s in charge and what caste you come from."

"I don’t get it; how is that supposed to help protect the kid? What caste is off limits?" Dean asked, inching forward to look at the syf.

"There isn't really a caste that's off limits. It's more that this syf is um… different.” She was clearly uncomfortable with her discovery and that worried the others.

“Different how?” Sam asked even though he could tell that he wasn’t going to like the answer. The
whole interaction with Crowley had been bad news and unpleasant questions—why had he imagined the gift would be anything but trouble?

“It doesn’t include a caste, but… I think it's made from the Seat of Hell.” Her voice wavered uncertainly and trailed off, but the guys just stared at her blankly. Ruby looked around the room in disbelief that she was surrounded by people who had so little familiarity with the basics of Hell. "It's like the throne, but no one sits on it. Supposedly, the Devil sat there while crafting Hell and ruled from it until he was banished."

"Yeah, that sounds like a great gift for a baby," Dean joked, though he looked disturbed at the thought.

"It’s a pretty bold statement really.” Ruby turned the box in her hands to examine the syf more closely. Her fixed attention and lightening demeanor revealed how impressed she actually was with the gift. “To most demons that would probably give the kid an untouchable status, or at least make them seriously second-guess attacking. Having a syf that’s made from the Seat is as close as I can imagine to sitting on it and that's unheard of."

"None of the archdemons like to kick their feet up in Satan's comfy chair?" Dean asked a little surprised.

"None that have survived. The Seat burns usurpers on contact. That's probably what the note means about them being perfectly safe. Somehow he made the pieces safe…. Maybe once you break a bit off it loses some of the juice?" She began gingerly poking one of the syf with professional curiosity.

Sam leaned closer to look at them. "How do those things even work?"

“They usually aren't corporeal like this—huh. I wonder if the Seat’s corporeal?” she mused aloud. “Since these are corporeal, I imagine they’ll fade on use. These things aren’t meant to be visible all the time. They adorn the head and act like quali."

"Quali? You wanna write us a demonic phrasebook to get us through this explanation?" Dean suggested in mild annoyance.

"Hey, you’re the ones asking about demonic stuff. You don’t like the lingo, then get ready to be left out of the loop. Just be happy that I’m anglicizing the words—otherwise you’d be getting bad-touched by Abyssal again," Ruby jabbed before turning back to Sam and continuing her explanation. "Anyway, quali are the physical manifestations of supernatural characteristics, like when demons turn our eyes black."

“That’s not just your cloud covering up the eyes?” Sam asked, a little embarrassed that after seeing her eyes go black so many times in the last year and a half, he’d never really thought about the mechanics of it.

“No.” Ruby looked surprised by the question. “Remember, Lilith has white eyes and black smoke. All Crossroads demons have red eyes, but Crowley is the only one with red smoke. Supposedly, he’s quite the showman. It’s just an innate magical ability of demons, one of the powers.”

"Wait. So you have one of these syf things?"

"Yeah."

"And you can show us or manifest it?" Sam looked at her with an endearing sort of expectancy.
On several occasions he had asked about her appearance, both as a human and as a demon, but she
had been unable to describe herself in a way that had satisfied his curiosity. Her syf was in some
way a potentially visible piece of her identity and the idea of seeing it was incredibly appealing to
him on several levels. At the very least, having a visual display of a syf would help him, Dean, and
Bobby understand Crowley’s gift a little better.

"Give me a second," she said. "I haven't done this in a long time."

Ruby closed her eyes in concentration for a couple seconds. After a few deep breaths, an ornate
series of thin, black lines appeared on her forehead. The lines intertwined forming a shape that
Sam thought vaguely resembled a bird with its wings spread. The syf almost looked like a tattoo,
but it changed in transparency occasionally, almost pulsing. When she opened her eyes, they were
black.

"Did it work?" Her eyebrows furrowed, which warped the lines of the syf.

"Uh... yeah." Sam stared candidly at this blatant display of demonic powers that he had never seen
before.

“Go back. You were less fugly before,” Dean said as he tried to not look at her. He didn’t actually
think that the syf made her look ugly, but the sight made him uncomfortable. Thinking back he
could remember seeing syf on demons while he was in Hell. At the time he hadn’t known what
they were, but after seeing Ruby that little piece of information clicked into place… and brought
painful memories back to the surface.

“Even though syf are technically quali, and can be manifested on Earth, it’s almost never done.
Demons can spot them without you having to wear them on the outside.” She reverted her
appearance back to human-looking. “And personally I think it feels a little weird even though it’s
not draining like using other powers.”

Ruby put the lid back onto the tiny box and handed it back to Sam. He decided to stuff it into one
of the hex bags he kept in his duffel upstairs. Until they had some idea of what to do with the
bizarre gift, it was best that they just keep it hidden. He took a step toward the door when Dean
moved in front of him and held up a hand. Dean had been lost in thought for the last few seconds,
but the expression on his face told Sam that those thoughts had been troubled.

"That archdemon, he said some other demons saw you use your powers?” Sam could see where
Dean was going with this. They were going to have the talk. He took a deep breath and put the
little box into his pocket as he readied himself for a potentially delicate and undoubtedly
exhausting conversation. "I don't get it. How did they see you having a vision? It just looks like a
headache."

"Actually, I don't just have visions." Dean looked irritated yet not entirely surprised. He opened
his mouth, but Sam continued. "I was going to tell you. I was trying to explain when he showed
up. I should've told you both sooner, I just didn't want you to...."

"To what? Be mad?" Dean tried not to yell, but his voice was raised slightly in a way that made it
clear how much restraint he was actually exercising.

"I didn't want you to give up on me." Sam knew that his fears didn’t completely excuse him
keeping secrets. Ruby was right that in the grand scheme of things, having additional powers
probably wouldn’t mean that much to Bobby and Dean. Hell, after the conversation with Crowley
his powers felt like a single drop in the bucket.
For his part, the exasperation on Dean’s face faded slightly. He hated when Sam lied to him, but generally he understood why Sam did it. He didn’t want to hurt or scare off his big brother. The idea was a combination of sweet and insulting. Dean swallowed some of his pride and tried to take it in the best light possible. After all, Sam didn’t mean to insinuate that he wasn’t mature enough to love his little brother no matter what crazy shit came between them. It was just that some days Sam was the dumbest genius Dean knew.

"So what can you do?" Dean asked in as neutral a voice as he could muster.

" Mostly just stuff related to demons," Sam replied. "Sensing them, exorcising, killing—"

"Killing?" Dean repeated as he replayed the word over in his head a few times. "Like psychic-mojo, demon-ganking, mind-bullets killing?"

Sam shifted self-consciously at the characterization. "Well—yeah—I guess—Killing."

"Okay…." The elder Winchester exhaled in surprise while shaking his head slightly. "Anything else?"

"Um… grabbing demons," Sam continued. "Binding them— stuff like that."

"And what's not covered by 'mostly?'" Dean asked while nodding to indicate that he was processing that new information.

"The telekinesis is back." Sam looked most wary about mentioning that power.

"The telekinesis?" Years earlier Sam had told Dean that he'd used telekinesis once before in order to save Dean's life. But to Dean's knowledge Sam hadn't ever used it again. As helpful as it would have been on several occasions, he had actually been glad that Sam hadn't continued using it. Telekinesis was the kind of ability that was most commonly seen used by powerful demons. The thought felt like a crushing realization in light of their conversation with Crowley and he wondered who else was struggling to not connect dots. "I thought that was like a one-time thing."

"Sam can use telekinesis?" Bobby asked, only having heard about it for the first time.

"'Use' is an overstatement." Sam shrugged. "It's been more like a reflex. I don't think I've ever used it intentionally; maybe once or twice. It mostly just happens as a defense mechanism."

One of Dean's eyebrows rose. "Defense mechanism?"

"Like the hunter that was going to shoot the kid when I was in handcuffs. I threw him without really thinking about—" Sam cut himself off. He'd just accidentally walked into a conversational minefield.

"You threw a guy…." Dean became very quiet as his lips thinned. He touched the side of his ribs, which were bruised below his shirts. His eyes briefly flicked over Ruby before returning to Sam. "You were the one that decked me in the alley?"

"I didn't mean to." Sam held up his hands in a gesture of surrender to let Dean know that he wasn’t trying to fight. "It just sort of happened."

"You knocked me out cold!" Dean yelled. "I think some of my ribs are cracked! And you're just, 'Oops, my bad.' What the fuck?"

Too much had happened too quickly in the last few hours, which normally would have been more
than enough, but finding out that another one of his preconceptions was wrong was so disorienting. Dean could feel the conversation about to be derailed by his surprised outrage.

"You were threatening Ruby and the kid," Sam said in his defense. "I just reacted. It's like a reflex at this point. After all the run-ins we've had—"

"—with hunters," Dean finished. He left unsaid the fact that Sam had killed some of those hunters, probably by accident, but maybe not. How lucky was Dean that his injuries weren't worse?

"I was upset and I hit you. We've both done that before. This was just a different way that I overreacted. Please don't let this be anything more than that, please."

Dean didn't respond at first. He covered his mouth and clenched his eyes for a long while. He was pissed off. It wasn't just the fact that Sam had hit him; it wasn't even the fact that Sam had used some weird powers to hit him. The thing that was most painful was that Sam hadn't told him sooner. They were trying to make things right between them and Sam continued to sit on bombshells.

Dean wheeled and walked out of the room. Sam silently cursed, then followed him upstairs. If Dean had made for an exit Sam wasn't sure whether he would've tried to stop him, but the fact that Dean had just left the room meant that he wasn't beyond interacting with Sam. Bobby shook his head, signaling to Ruby that she shouldn't follow them. The brothers needed to have a heart-to-heart and Dean knew as well as anyone that he couldn't do that in front of Ruby. Sam found Dean in his room, waiting at a mild simmer for the talk. Sam entered and shut the door behind him to reassure Dean that Ruby wouldn't be walking in on any moments of vulnerability.

"The last few days… it's like it just never stops with you." Dean shook his head, while his already wet eyes tried to avoid Sam's. "Around every corner there's some new secret just waiting to…."

"I was going to tell you," Sam repeated in his defense. "I was trying to when Crowley showed up. I know you're putting up with a lot of shit from me, but it's hard for me too. Do you have any idea how terrifying it is to think that you'll just decide I'm not worth it anymore?"

"Goddammit, Sam! For as long as I can remember it's been me and you, against all odds and everything. I know that sometimes I can be an ass, but when it comes down to it I'm not going to stop caring about you because you fuck a demon or have weird powers or whatever. What's gonna fuck things up between us is if you won't let me be there for you. I'm not just gonna drop you because things get tough. We're family."

"Dad was—"

"You know what, fuck him!" Dean shook slightly, surprised at his own words, but he meant them. "He was wrong to turn his back on you when things got tough. It was wrong for me to side with him. I'm not talking about being blood; I'm talking about being family. I'm trying to be there for you. I want to be there for you…. I don't want to be the kind of person that can just shut someone out because things are inconvenient. I don't want to be like Dad. But I can't take you sneaking around behind my back like you did to him. I don't want you to be that scared around me."

A few tears rolled down Sam’s cheeks as he sat down on Dean’s bed. With each new twist and turn that had come in the last few days, one of Sam’s biggest fears was that Bobby and Dean would reject him. That’s why he had never been able to bring himself to call Bobby after they had buried Dean. He had been scared that every step he had taken into his harsher existence would turn out to be the thing that cost him his sanctuary, his family. But in trying to protect his relationships with censorship, he had only weakened them.
"If we're going to make this work, you've got to be completely honest with me," Dean told him. "No holding back because you don't want to hurt my feelings. Tell me everything thing that I've missed, grave-to-the-cradle." Dean smiled, trying to lighten the mood slightly. "I need to know what's going on with you. I can't take more of these surprises. I shouldn't have to take more."

Sam sat quietly for a moment, unconsciously rubbing his wrist scars. He understood what Dean was saying and it was perfectly reasonable, but the prospect was daunting. Somewhere in the last year or so, Sam had crossed a line that the brothers hadn't really toed while hunting. Sam had killed over a dozen humans—more if you counted all the meatsuits that he couldn't spare. The circumstances had been unfair to him, but he knew that even with each victim being partially justified the overall body count would eventually tip the scales. And the truth was that even though he regretted the need to kill, he never regretted doing what was necessary. He felt guilty. In his mind he needed to in order to remember where the line was even when he had already crossed it.

When he had been fighting with Dean over Ruby and the baby, he had assumed that things with Dean were hopeless. He didn't care if Dean found him cold and cynical. Why would Sam need to explain himself to the kind of person who would threaten his kid? But once they'd both calmed down he began to realize how much his long-lost big brother's acceptance really meant to him and how close it was. The idea of losing Dean because of his own failings had driven him to try to hide them. But now Sam was at risk of losing Dean through sheer cowardice. He would come clean, but he wouldn't do it alone.

"This is a two way road," Sam said, adding his own demands. "You gotta tell me what's going on with you. I'll tell you everything and anything you want to know, but you tell me about Hell."

The tables had been flipped on Dean and now he was the one with the burdensome power of being able to selfishly detonate their relationship. He hated the idea of telling Sam the truth, but he seriously questioned his ability to lie about Hell. Dean knew that he still got twitchy over the subject and Sam knew how to read him better than anyone. Sam wanted to play shrink with him, it was obvious, but the only real way to stop him would be to stubbornly refuse to participate. That would almost certainly be the wrong answer.

"You can't do anything about Hell," Dean muttered.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't talk about it."

"The things I went through, the torture and feelings... You can't even understand what it was like. I can't explain because I don't even know the words."

"I might not be able to do anything about the past, but I want to at least know what happened, even if the picture is incomplete or fuzzy." Sam hesitated a moment before adding, "And as for the understanding... Have you thought about talking to Ruby?"

Dean hated that the suggestion made some amount of sense, but at the same time he was so incredibly against the idea. He and Ruby hated each other. Period. He was not going to share his feelings with a stranger, let alone someone like her.

"I'll talk to you, but getting touchy-feely with her? No way, never, not happening."

"Fine," Sam agreed. "But good luck finding another person to talk to who's gone to Hell."

Castiel had been the second in command of zir garrison until zir superior Anael fell. Zie had taken
up zir newly acquired position with ease and the respect of zir subordinates.

The position wasn't glamorous, keeping a vigilant eye on the happenings of Earth. For the most part, the humans were completely unaware of the garrison's presence. There were a few rare occasions when divine intervention would require the taking of vessels, but generally it was a quiet and mundane existence.

Castiel was selected to participate in the mission to save the Righteous Man, but not because of zir rank; zie wasn't even a seraphim. Instead zir value was in zir ability to endure exposure to the impurities of Earth. The other angels that ventured into Hell may have been more powerful, but they had never seen evil or suffering like Castiel had. Zie knew from thousands of years of observation how to steel zirself against true evil.

In the end Castiel was the only angel to survive the mission, but zie returned to Heaven severely wounded. There were many injuries inflicted by demons, but the most concerning was from the Righteous Man himself. Castiel's grace had been touched by a human soul. To zir own surprise, Castiel had lied to zir superiors, stating ignorance as to how the corruption had occurred. The other angels did not doubt zir account. After all, it was unheard of for an angel to intentionally allow zir grace to be touched, let alone lie about something as serious as that.

Upon zir return from Hell, Castiel was removed from duty. The corruption to zir grace made zie weak, not in strength or fortitude, but in purity. There was a fear that the corruption would affect zir judgment and increase the risk of falling. Therefore, zir superiors attempted to rehabilitate the disabled hero of the lower angelic choirs.

After extensive treatment, it was decided that Castiel would return to Earth for a single mission, under the watchful eyes of two siblings. Uriel, zir former subordinate and the current commander of the garrison, as well as the garrison’s second in command, Tambriel. Castiel's mission was to accompany zir siblings, observe, and obey.

The hope was that Castiel could prove zirself in spite of unfavorable conditions. Zie would have to be in close proximity to the soul that had corrupted zir grace. If zir obedience to Heaven was at risk of faltering, then this would surely test zir. Castiel suspected that zir actions would be given an incredible level of scrutiny, but zie was not worried. The mission was straight-forward and insignificant compared to the journey into Hell. This would be easy.
Mortality & Misnomers

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for her help on this chapter.

An archdemon had been detected in close proximity to the Righteous Man. He was not under the same level of protection that was afforded to prophets, but some investigation was required. The Righteous Man seemed to have a propensity for getting into dangerous situations that were often disregarded by Heaven as typical, yet an archdemon warranted some real concern. The objective was to assess the situation and resolve any potential threats, though they took their vessels in case violence became necessary.

When the angels arrived at the Singer household, the archdemon known as Crowley had just left. Castiel suggested that their mission was made moot by his absence, but Uriel denied the request to immediately return to Heaven. The archdemon may have left, but there was something unusual occurring in the house and as long as the angels were invisible and incorporeal there was no harm in observing a while longer.

"The woman is clearly a demon and this man does have characteristics of the Abyssal," Uriel commented as he examined Sam. The angels listened to Sam and the others discussing the possibility and extent to which he was a demon. Tambriel and Uriel moved closer to Sam and Ruby, while Castiel kept his distance. Castiel’s evaluation appeared to be unexpectedly complicated and he wanted to be as far away from unknown variables as possible. He moved a few feet further from Dean.

"They may be demonic, but Dean Winchester does not appear to be endangered by them," Castiel pointed out, but a few seconds later Ruby threatened to punch Dean in the face. Tambriel and Uriel stared at Castiel pointedly. "I believe that she is unlikely to follow through on that threat and any resulting injury would likely be negligible."

"Her threats might be underwhelming, but he is more concerning." Uriel’s eyes narrowed as he watched Sam. “He appears to be quite powerful.”

None of the three angels had seen anything quite like him before. Sam was still human in many ways, but in some respects he was unmistakably Abyssal. There was something else that worried Uriel, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

"They are so concerned with the fate of Hell," Tambriel commented.

"What do you expect from demons?" Uriel added, dismissing his detailed investigation of Sam and directing his attention to the scene as a whole.

"Their primary interest seems to be largely in the welfare of Earth," Castiel countered, but he didn’t bother to discuss the matter in depth. It was noteworthy that the fates of both Hell and Earth were being discussed, but it was not completely unexpected within the context of a mixed group. Castiel’s primary concerns were ensuring Dean’s safety and observing as much about the situation as possible. He did not need to stretch his imagination to justify the actions of demons.
Tambriel approached Ruby and extended a hand to sense what forces he could. His eyes closed in concentration before he recoiled a few inches. Castiel and Uriel both turned their attention to him in concern.

“The demon, she is pregnant. It is not merely the vessel’s state.” Tambriel’s tone betrayed the discomfort that he felt. “It appears that the child is part demon.”

"That does not make sense. Our father has never allowed demons to breed, and there have been no revelations from Joshua. If this is not our father’s will….“ Castiel mused aloud. “As their creator, only Lucifer would be capable of enabling this sort of advancement, but he is still imprisoned.”

It was well-known in Heaven that Lucifer had been trapped in his cage for millennia. To doubt that would be to doubt the power and effectiveness of Heaven. Lucifer had been bound by Michael himself and all of the fallen angels under Lucifer’s command had been killed or imprisoned in Heaven.

“Lucifer is still bound. There is another explanation for this.” Uriel spoke with a confidence that was partially to reassure his subordinates, but also to demonstrate his absolute faith.

"We should consult with our superiors about the child," Castiel suggested. "This situation is... unsettling."

Uriel looked at Ruby, then at Sam in a silent contemplation that concerned Castiel. It was obvious to Castiel that the situation was beyond their rank. Matters of first impression should have been immediately sent up the chain of command, at least to the higher choirs and possibly even to Raphael or Michael. The amount of thought that Uriel appeared to be giving the child indicated a weighing of options that Castiel only would have found justified under more pressing circumstances.

Uriel’s concentration was broken when Sam opened the box to reveal the syf. The three angels immediately became uncomfortable. Tambriel averted his gaze, Castiel stood in contemplative silence, and Uriel scowled. They all knew what the syf was, but none of them were prepared to have the additional surprise loaded onto what should have been a fairly simple mission.

"That should not be here," Tambriel said as he struggled to monitor where the syf was without looking directly at it. "It was cast out from Earth. This is wrong."

"It's blasphemous," Uriel corrected. He walked over to look at the small pieces of black wood and shook his head in disgust. "The perfect work of our father, corrupted by our brother, adulterated by some archdemon, given to these... things."

"They do not understand what they are dealing with. They may yet dispose of it," Castiel offered in a feeble attempt at optimism, but he too felt a sickening sensation. While it was clear that Sam and Ruby recognized the syf's uniqueness, they obviously did not understand its significance, and were unlikely to destroy it without further investigation.

“We could take it and destroy it ourselves,” Tambriel suggested.

“We should avoid intervening if possible.” Castiel’s neutral expression began alluding to a frown.

"What's the problem, Castiel? Are you feeling your illness?" Uriel asked in such an ambiguous tone that Castiel was unsure if he was offering genuine concern or delivering a veiled threat.

"I am unaffected by my condition. I just do not see why we are still here. Dean does not appear to be in imminent danger, and we should inform Heaven about the child and the artifact.”
Before Uriel could answer, all three angels heard Sam admit to telekinetically throwing Dean. Castiel experienced fleeting annoyance at the comedic timing of providence.

"He does have three rib fractures," Tambriel commented matter-of-factly as he examined Dean.

"The brother admits that he doesn't have control over these powers. He is dangerous," Uriel said with growing conviction.

"He seems sincere in wanting to resolve this dispute peacefully. He might be a somewhat unpredictable element, but the risk of an immediate problem is minimal. Their confrontation is verbal," Castiel argued, but he felt the credibility of his stance failing.

“And how frequently do experienced killers resolve their conflicts with words?” Uriel’s question was rhetorical.

Dean became upset and left the room, quickly followed by Sam. Uriel instructed Tambriel to watch Ruby while he and Castiel followed the brothers upstairs. In Dean’s bedroom, the brothers discussed the importance of not keeping secrets while they were covertly watched. Castiel felt a pang of sympathy when Dean expressed frustration at discovering multiple unpleasant surprises. After finally agreeing to come clean with each other, the brothers hugged and dried their eyes before heading back downstairs to reassure Ruby and Bobby that neither brother had been killed.

Uriel and Castiel followed Sam and Dean back down to the study, where Ruby and Bobby were waiting. Ruby had been sitting at the desk, but stood when Sam came in. She looked at him with a concerned expression, but seemed a little comforted by the brothers’ close proximity. She put her hands on her belly for a second and smiled at what was almost certainly a kicking sensation. Sam rushed over, eager to feel the movement. Uriel watched that interaction and frowned at some sort of internal decision.

"We need to deal with this, now," Uriel stated.

"What?" Castiel asked in disbelief.

"They're a danger."

"I do not believe that they will harm Dean—" Castiel started, but Uriel cut him off.

"Not everything revolves around your pet."

"He is chosen by our father. You should treat him with respect." Castiel raised his voice slightly, but he continued to stand at respectful attention to Uriel.

"He is still human. I remember his place, as I remember my own. Brother, you would do well to remember yours." Uriel’s tone was blatantly threatening.

Probably the most fundamental principle ingrained in all angels was the instruction to obey one's superiors, but there had never been an edict from Heaven stating that angels should respect humans. Humans were to be watched over and protected, but they were a lesser order of beings. Their judgment, comfort, and preferences carried no weight to an angel without being specifically elevated by divine order.

Castiel knew that he no longer had any authority over Uriel, but his brother's disrespectful comments toward Dean were disturbing. Dean might be human, but he was important. He was the Righteous Man, a designation given to him through the will of God. It was true that Castiel had not been informed what the title entailed, but it had been vital to save him from Hell. He had been
Castiel's charge once before and he continued to be the angel's concern, not just as a matter of physical safety but also general wellbeing. And if there was one thing that Castiel had learned from observing Dean’s interactions with his brother upstairs, it was that his little brother meant a great deal to him.

"This is not your decision to make," Uriel said before taking a few steps toward Sam.

Castiel looked to Tambriel for solidarity, but found none. The angels were still hidden from normal perception, providing Uriel an opportunity to attack without warning. Castiel did not want to be insubordinate, but he could not bring himself to allow the unfair act… and he reassured himself that revealing their presence was not technically disobeying an order.

Without any explanation, three men appeared in the study. One was a large black man with a shaved head in a grey suit and purple dress shirt. Another was a lanky, blonde man in a brown tweed suit. The last was a fair-skinned man with nearly-black hair and bright, blue eyes in a dark, blue suit and a tan trench coat. The man in the trench coat was clearly upset at the black man, who seemed rather put out about something.

"Castiel, you shouldn't have done that."

"They deserve a chance to clarify the situation," the man in the trench coat replied.

Bobby and Dean both began looking for weapons as soon as the men had appeared. Dean found a pistol within arm's reach, grabbed it and aimed at the closest intruder, the blonde man. The demon alarms had failed to go off. Dean hoped that was because the intruders were something vulnerable to bullets, and not because Crowley had simply disabled it altogether.

"Hey, asshats! You better start explaining who you are and what you're doing here!" Dean yelled, but none of the intruders appeared to be remotely concerned by his actions. In fact, they seemed to largely ignore him.

Sam reached out with his mind, but realized with alarm that they weren't demons. While Dean’s pistol and yelling had done nothing to draw the intruders’ attention, Sam’s ineffective use of powers was somehow noticed by all three. Castiel looked bothered by the gesture, but the other two appeared to be a strange combination of annoyed and vindicated.

"Your little demon tricks don't work on angels," the man in the grey suit told him.

Sam, Bobby, and Dean exchanged looks of growing concern. No one knew exactly what to make of the statement. They all knew abstractly what angels were, but no one had ever proven that they existed, let alone provided accounts of what they were like. Ruby silently stepped backward, away from the men who claimed to be angels. Noticing her subtle retreat, Sam slowly started moving to stand in front of Ruby. He glanced over at Bobby and Dean, who seemed to appreciate her fear that the men might actually be angels.

"Uriel, we should go," Castiel said in a strangely neutral tone that disguised his plea as a simple suggestion.

"Our mission is to assess and resolve threats," Uriel replied.

"Threats?" Sam asked, but the angels ignored him.

"These demons are not our concern. They are not even within the contemplation of our mission," Castiel argued. The mention of demons suddenly clarified and worsened the situation. Sam could
feel Ruby grip onto the back of his shirt anxiously.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Sam threw up his hands in a gesture of non-hostility. "Ruby isn't a threat. She's good. She's on your side."

The angels looked at him in apparent recognition of his words, but their expressions were largely unmoved. Castiel was proximately sympathetic, but Tambriel and Uriel barely even blinked.

"You think that this is about good and evil?" Uriel asked. Castiel looked to Uriel, unsure of whether an appeal to abstract concepts of morality would make any difference.

"But... you're angels," Sam said quietly in confusion.

"And?"

It was like all the air had been sucked from the room. Sam’s heart was pounding. His mouth was suddenly too dry to speak, but he couldn’t even think of the words to say if he’d been able. There were three things that claimed to be angels, two of which were eyeing Ruby menacingly. His side had no idea how to fight an angel, let alone defend against one, which meant that their best hope was to talk their way out of the situation. But the angel’s complete indifference to the fact that Ruby was a good demon was crushing.

"Uriel, they are not threats to the Righ—" Castiel began.

Uriel turned slightly to give his subordinate more of his attention. "You think this is about one man? Your judgment truly is impaired. If you cannot see the seriousness of this situation, then your illness is worse than we thought."

Castiel seemed thrown by Uriel’s words. He didn’t understand what Uriel was arguing and that made him falter. "This... is wrong.... The mother is questionable, but the child and father have souls."

Dean kept the pistol aimed at Tambriel, but spared a worried glance at Sam. Sam looked back in anguish, apparently also catching the comment about the ‘father’ being lumped into the discussion of ‘demons,’ though neither brother wanted to interrupt the angels’ conversation as long as Castiel was trying to talk the others down.

"And you would let the demons use that against us?" Uriel countered. "War is coming. I know you can feel it. Many of our brothers and sisters will see combat for the first time. You are an honored soldier, but hesitate because of a soul. What do you think our young siblings would do? They will hesitate and be left vulnerable."

"Then they would hesitate for good reason." Castiel’s voice was raised and his body tensed.

"And they would die. I will not allow it."

Castiel looked at each of the occupants of the room in turn, then circled around to stand between Sam and Uriel. He faced Uriel with regret. The fear that other angels would refuse to kill a demon with a soul was real; Castiel was proving that himself. But the question remained whether a demon with a soul would exploit that sort of weakness. At the moment, the threat was limited to Sam and some unborn child, but it was unclear how widespread the situation could potentially become. Castiel had faith that Sam would only kill an angel in defense. Sam’s belief in some affiliation between angels and goodness supported that faith. Yet Uriel was not thinking of just one person, or one demon, or one soul. Uriel wanted to end the moral conflict before it grew into a more systemic problem, and possibly with demons more prepared to fight back.
"Brother, you followed my judgment and command for millennia." Castiel’s face was intent, but he spoke with a quieter, pleading tone.

"But you are no longer in command." Uriel’s voice softened slightly. When it came down to it he did not like how events were unfolding anymore than Castiel. "You are too weak to defeat us. If you stand down now, I will ask that instead of punishment you receive further rehabilitation."

Castiel frowned with disappointment for a moment, but he was resolute. A long, silver, three-sided blade fell from his sleeve into his hand, which he immediately raised, adopting a defensive stance. Without taking his eyes off Uriel or Tamriel, Castiel turned his head slightly toward Sam and Ruby.

"Don't let them touch your head or torso."

"So be it," said Uriel.
Uriel and Tambriel drew their angel blades and charged at Castiel, who parried Uriel's attack and dodged Tambriel's swing. Dean unloaded his pistol's entire magazine into Tambriel, only earning him a quick look of annoyance from the blonde angel. Sam wavered between physically joining in the fight or trying to maintain a defensive position between the angels and Ruby. He tried using his powers on Uriel again, but it didn't seem to have any effect. Dean threw the empty pistol at the angel in frustration, but it only thudded against his chest unceremoniously before falling to the ground. He didn’t even have time to roll his eyes; he ran to a nearby cabinet looking for another weapon. He found a large hunting knife, which would have to do.

Castiel landed a glancing blow on Uriel's arm, then swung his blade toward Tambriel, who barely avoided a lethal hit. Instead, Tambriel’s chest was slashed and he stumbled back a step. He recovered immediately, then turned to strike again at Castiel. Uriel circled around to flank Castiel, leaving him almost no room to move and forcing him to block Tambriel’s attack instead of dodging it. Tambriel and Castiel’s blades locked briefly on their negligible hilts, leaving Castiel further exposed. Uriel stabbed him in the back, above his left shoulder blade. In Castiel's moment of shock, Tambriel forced their blades downward, stabbing Castiel in the abdomen. Tambriel withdrew his blade as Castiel turned to face Uriel and collapsed to his knees.

"We'll deal with you later," Uriel said before clutching Castiel's throat and throwing him through the ceiling into the room above. Uriel's blade was still imbedded in Castiel when he was thrown from the room, but Tambriel remained armed.

With the one angel that had been helping them taken out of the fight, the plan instantly became to defend and retreat as quickly as possible. Sam and Dean shared the same anxious look that they had exchanged before dozens of ominous fights. Ruby moved closer to Bobby, who gestured for her to come with him. Bobby tried to position himself between her and the angels while hurrying her to the nearby double doors. Their exit was lost when Uriel waved a hand, causing the doors to close and seal.

Having no better idea of how to fight angels, Dean rushed Tambriel with the knife. The angel staggered backward and parried Dean's attack, but he didn't counterattack. Instead he looked to Uriel uncertainly. The human Tambriel was supposed to be protecting was attacking him and even though Dean didn’t have the means to kill him, he was turning into a frustrating distraction.

"Just be careful,” Uriel told Tambriel as he rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Bobby struggled with the door handles for a second before looking for something to help him break through the weak points of the wooden doors. Having lost their quick escape route, Ruby tried to take cover as best she could while staying close to the doors. She didn't have any spell components on hand, but she started whispering an incantation while Bobby began bashing one of the doors with a chair.

Uriel turned his attention to the non-menacing figures of Ruby and Bobby, but paused. Out of the
corner of his eye he noticed Sam, who was holding up his right hand. At first the angel thought it was a gesture of non-resistance, but then he realized that Sam looked like he was struggling. Uriel laughed at the realization that Sam was still trying to use his powers.

"I told you, demon powers don't work on angels."

"Yeah. Got it," Sam said as a little blood trickled from one of his nostrils.

The heavy, wooden desk between Sam and Uriel flew at the angel. Uriel's eyes widened as he held up a hand, stopping the desk just a few inches from hitting him. Uriel immediately hurled the desk back at Sam, who instinctively threw up his arms to brace for impact. About a foot in front of him, the desk hit an unseen barrier and splintered outward along the invisible plane. Everyone stopped what they were doing, momentarily distracted by the telekinetic stalemate, including Sam and Uriel.

"Sam, door!" Bobby yelled, interrupting the stupor. Sam turned to try blasting open the doors when he felt a huge impact on his left side. He managed to counter it and stop himself from being slammed into the wall. More blood trickled from Sam’s nose and he huffed his breath out his mouth, spraying a few drops through the air. Uriel smiled at the realization that using telekinesis was straining to Sam.

“You think you’re clever because you know a few tricks? Yes, you can throw things, but I can throw them too. Let’s see just how much you can handle.” Uriel hurled a bookcase at Sam, which he barely managed to redirect to be embedded several inches into the wall. Then the glass windows behind Uriel shattered inward, launching shards of glass at Ruby and Bobby. Sam was able to get up a barrier, which pulverized the glass to sand, but using those higher-difficulty powers so much was taking its toll.

Dean landed two hits on Tambriel, without obvious effect, then was knocked down with a reserved kick to the chest. He landed hard and felt his already-fractured ribs reel from the impact. The stabbing, hot pain extending through his ribs and into his lung made it hard for him to catch his breath, but adrenaline got him back on his feet. Dean watched the onslaught of broken glass and made to run for Uriel. He tried to evade the blonde angel, but Tambriel kicked the side of his left leg, breaking his knee with a loud, low pop. Dean almost fell to the ground, but scrambled with his hands and pushed off the floor with his right leg trying to continue forward. Tambriel knocked him to the ground with an elbow to the back, which emitted the crack of another broken bone.

Lying on the ground, Dean panted shallowly, his heart pounding. After a dizzying moment he noticed that he felt strangely cold. He recognized that he was going into shock, but pushed the thought from his mind. Still clutching the knife in his right hand, he started dragging himself toward Uriel. Part of him knew that the knife would likely be as ineffective against the lead angel as it was against the subordinate one, but he didn’t have the time or mental composure to come up with a better plan.

Sam swayed briefly before Uriel knocked him backward a few feet. He spat even more blood and a tooth onto the ground, but regained a defensive posture. He and Dean had each been distracting one of the angels while Bobby tried to make a way out for them. But Dean had just been downed and if Sam couldn’t hold up his end of the fight—and probably more—then Bobby and Ruby would be left vulnerable. Luckily, relatively speaking, Uriel seemed to be finding validation in proving that he was more powerful than Sam.

Uriel smiled and started walking towards him, but Sam tried to push the angel away. The effect was that Uriel only progressed an inch or two per step. Uriel leaned in with new focus and Sam realized that while he was keeping Uriel a constant distance from himself, he was actually being
pushed backward for every inch the angel advanced. With the wall slowly coming up behind him, Sam struggled to push back against Uriel. He thought his heart would burst from the effort, but Sam lunged forward in a sudden burst of power that knocked the wind out of him.

Uriel was hit hard, flew back several feet, and fell to the ground. Sam pitched forward, but stopped himself from falling down entirely. He braced his hands on his knees while trying to catch his breath. Sam felt his hope flicker out when he realized that Tambriel had turned his attention away from Dean, who was laid out on the floor with a visibly broken leg and foreboding tremors. Tambriel took a step toward Sam, but Dean grabbed the angel’s legs in his left arm and started stabbing wildly with his right. The overall effect of Dean’s attack wasn’t substantively harmful, but it did prove a large enough nuisance to stop Tambriel from immediately going after Sam.

With a few seconds free from assault Sam turned his focus to helping Bobby bust down the doors. As Sam got ready to try breaking a door, a wave of force spread through the room hitting Sam, Ruby, and Bobby. Sam toppled over, then feebly got back up to his knees. Ruby was thrown into Bobby, who helped cushion her impact, but he was knocked unconscious when his head collided loudly with the doorframe. Uriel regained his footing and gestured at Ruby. Sam reached out to shield her, but Uriel had feigned. Sam flew up and to his left, straight into the fireplace. His upper back and head hit the stone mantle with an audible crack. For a painfully long second Sam couldn’t see anything and he lost all sense of direction.

“Sammy!” Dean yelled, but his voice broke as Tambriel knelt down on his fractured rib cage to subdue him. The angel broke three of Dean’s fingers prying the knife from his hand and tossed it to the side. Thanks to his injuries and the supernaturally strong arms restraining his upper body, Dean couldn’t do much of anything apart from watching helplessly as Uriel raised his hand, telekinetically dragging Sam up the wall.

"Let them go!" Ruby yelled. She was standing alone, turned awkwardly to one side leaning against the far wall. Her breathing was heavy and her eyes were black. Uriel looked around the room, confused by her seeming confidence. Bobby was knocked out, Tambriel had immobilized Dean, and Sam was barely conscious.

"You really think you're in a position to be making demands? He had real power and look at him." Uriel grinned as he clenched his fist causing Sam to groan in pain. "You're just a middle-rate demon."

"I'm also a witch."

From his position on the floor, Dean could see that a little blood was trickling down the wall behind her belly.

"You think that one witch is a match for two angels?"

"No, but one witch is a match for two humans." Ruby slapped one bleeding hand onto a bloody symbol she had drawn onto the wall behind her belly. She said a keyword, then raised her bleeding hand at Uriel.

Uriel looked confused for a moment, then started convulsing. He coughed up blood and his flesh began to fester. Large ulcers formed on his exposed skin, some of which emitted bright whitish-blue light. Dean and Tambriel both watched, unmoving from shock, as Uriel struggled to keep his vessel in one piece. Uriel’s grip on Sam faltered slightly, but didn’t fail. Still holding her bloody hand toward Uriel, she started reciting another incantation and looked at Tambriel. The unharmed angel inhaled sharply in pain, then started to get up, but Dean kept wrestling with his ankles.
While her attention was divided, Uriel was able to compose himself enough to telekinetically hurl a fireplace poker at Ruby. She managed to partially dodge, but the poker impaled her upper chest, pinning her to the wall. She gurgled wet screams that drowned out the hissing of the iron poker burning her flesh. Trying to pull it out proved too difficult when she realized how much force and time it would take to remove it. The poker prevented her from collapsing to the floor, but she sunk slightly as if she might pass out.

With Ruby no longer channeling the spell against Uriel, he quickly returned his attention to Sam. Sam struggled against the force holding him to the wall, but he was incredibly disoriented from the hit to the head. Uriel dragged him up the remainder of the wall and onto the ceiling. A few red smears on the wallpaper indicated that he was bleeding, probably from the back of his head. Sam tried to use his powers to pull the poker out of Ruby, but when he reached out Uriel made a sweeping motion. He rolled across the ceiling as he would have if he had been kicked across a floor. Then Uriel thrust his hand up, causing the unseen force to press Sam into the ceiling. The plaster cracked around him. He started to scream, but couldn't after a rapid succession of breaking bones. It hurt too much to move his ribs, so he was involuntarily holding his breath.

With a smirk, Uriel released Sam, letting his body drop onto the floor. He landed on his back, eyes barely open. Blood began spotting and staining his clothes as impact cuts became apparent. His head hardly moved, but his eyes rolled in sockets that began to swell from fractures, searching for the source of Ruby's cries.

Uriel knelt down next to Sam. The angel leaned forward, reaching out to place his palm on his forehead. Sam's heart was pounding painfully and his lungs burned. He could hardly tell which direction was up, but he knew that if Uriel laid a hand on him he was dead. Worse than that, Ruby and the baby would almost certainly be killed, possibly Dean and Bobby too. Sam didn't know what to do; all he could think of was needing to stop Uriel. He lifted his hand as Uriel leaned forward. He touched the angel's chest and pushed weakly.

The contact was minor, but profound. Uriel arched backwards, throwing open his arms. The angel screamed briefly, but the sound was nothing compared to the brilliant white light that emanated from his eyes and mouth. The charcoal grey scorching of massive feathery wings marked the wall and window fixtures behind Uriel as his body fell to the floor beside Sam.

Tambriel released Dean, stood up, and looked around the room, unnerved by the unexpected development. The angel was the only person not immobilized from injuries and the only one that was armed. He gripped his angel blade, then began to rush Sam. Dean tried to trip the angel, but missed thanks to his multiple types of shock.

Castiel jumped down through the hole in the ceiling, tackling Tambriel to the floor. Castiel plunged his blade down through the base of the blonde angel’s neck into his chest. Tambriel twitched spastically for a second before light flashed in his eyes and mouth. A crumpled pair of scorched wings marked the floor below him.

Castiel weakly stood up as he looked around the room to assess the situation. Knowing that there wasn’t much time before more angels arrived, he decided to only provide triage. He staggered over to Sam and laid a hand on his chest.

"Stay away from him!" Dean shouted at Castiel, but his voice was uncertain. He was terrified for his little brother. That may have been the angel that had been trying to help them, but Dean’s instincts were to protect Sam from any unknown.

"I am healing him," Castiel explained. After a moment, the cuts and bruises on Sam had
disappeared, but he fell unconscious. When Castiel stood up, Dean became concerned anew.

"What's wrong? Why isn't he awake?" Dean tried to drag himself closer his little brother, but found it difficult with two dead angels in between them.

"It is best that he is not awake. His injuries would continue to cause him considerable pain," Castiel answered as he approached Ruby. Dean was about to argue with the angel, but then he noticed how much it looked like Ruby was in need of urgent help.

She was very pale from blood loss and only whimpered when Castiel reached out. Her hands tried to cross in front of her belly in a feeble attempt to protect the baby, but the poker was located in the middle of her core muscles that controlled her right arm. The iron hissed against her as she wriggled in an attempt to get away from the angel.

"I will not hurt you," Castiel said.

With a firm jerk, he snapped off the handle of the poker and slid Ruby off the half-inch wide cast iron bar. She would have immediately fallen to the ground, but he caught her, then lowered her down gently. He touched the gaping wound in her chest, healing it. As soon as she was whole again, Ruby recoiled away from the angel, arms wrapped defensibly around her belly. She crawled to Sam's side without taking her eyes off of Castiel.

The angel looked at Bobby, but decided the old hunter’s injuries were minor enough to not require immediate treatment. He proceeded to Dean, knelt down, and extended his hand. Dean grabbed Castiel’s wrist just an inch or two short of completing the healing contact.

"Finish healing Sam," Dean pleaded.

"He's stable for now," Castiel replied as he laid his free hand on Dean, healing him. Compared to moments before Dean felt incredible. The shock had brought him to the edge of passing out, but having that instantaneously removed made him feel like he’d just gotten back from a long-overdue vacation. Unfortunately, the angel next to him looked incredibly fatigued after all the healing and suffering his own injuries. Dean released his grip on Castiel, allowing him to sit down on the floor to try to regain some strength. "I needed to reserve some of my power."

"For what?" Dean asked.

"To get us out of here." The angel closed his eyes in concentration.

There was a moment of darkness, followed by a strange falling sensation, then the room changed. The group was no longer in Bobby's study. Instead the room around them appeared to be the communal living space of a decrepit apartment. One of the first things Dean noticed was that the humidity and temperature increased significantly. They had just traveled at least a thousand miles.

Castiel teetered briefly before falling onto his side while clutching his chest. He coughed, causing blood to leak out of his mouth and two stab wounds. His bright blue eyes seemed a little dimmer and less focused. Dean tried applying pressure to the stab wounds, but Castiel shook his head.

"When they realize what has happened, Heaven will look for us. Do not waste time." Castiel pushed Dean’s hands away from his wounds, then dipped two fingers into one of the bloody gouges. With the blood-coated fingers he started drawing a ward made from his own blood. "To hide us…. You need to put this on the walls…. One each: north, south, east, west…. In blood—not demon blood."

Castiel reached into his trench coat and withdrew the two angel blades. He passed out while
sliding one across the dirty linoleum floor to Dean. Dean took one of the angel blades, cut his arm, and ran to put up the wards. It only took him a few minutes to get the blood wards up, but he had been working in such a flurry that by the end he was utterly winded. When he finished, he moved to return the blade to Castiel, but decided to stay within arm’s length of the weapon. Sitting down on the floor next to the injured angel, Dean rubbed his tired eyes and looked around the room. Bobby, Castiel, and Sam were laying on the floor, unconscious, in unknown states.

Ruby had been sitting next to Sam while Dean was putting up the wards. She didn’t have a readily available source of blood with which to paint the wards so she had decided to stay with Sam. One of her hands held his wrist, monitoring his weak pulse, while the other clutched her belly. She was shaking slightly, but not from cold or blood loss. When Dean returned after putting up the last ward, she looked over at him and they shared yet another unpleasant realization:

It was just the two of them.
Recovery & Reconciliation

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean and Ruby looked at each other from across the dank and disheveled room. Completely independent from everything that had just happened and the varying levels of concern that they both felt for the three unconscious men in the room, they were miserable being stuck alone together. Their instincts were to fight each other. The presence of Sam or even Bobby was usually enough to quell that urge, but now there was no chaperone to break up a fight.

Yet there was a very real possibility that Sam, Bobby, and the angel would need their help or protection while recovering, and that would require the two of them to at least tolerate each other. Neither of them were dumb, no matter how crass or uneducated they might occasionally come off. They both knew that their cooperation could make the difference between life and death depending on the next minutes… hours… maybe days. But even though they understood that, it didn’t mean that they liked the situation. Having to work together was just the icing on the tortuous cake.

"Sam once asked me if I believed in Heaven and angels. I told him I didn't," Ruby said, trying to break the tension. "He's never gonna let me live that one down…. If he—"

"He's gonna be fine," Dean replied coldly. He wasn't trying to reassure her as much as he was trying to stop her from finishing the sentence.

Dean busied himself by checking the windows to get a sense of where they were. The dimming sky indicated that they had not changed time zones significantly. The building they were in looked like a fourplex in a lower-income residential neighborhood. Most of the buildings on the street were single-family homes or duplexes. Every building's first floor was raised slightly above street level to prevent against flooding damage. One abandoned-looking house's front door was spray painted with a faded orange X surrounded by some alphanumeric shorthand around it. It looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place the image.

After taking in their circumstances and realizing that they at least appeared to be temporarily free from assault, Ruby decided to get to work improving the situation. She unbuttoned Sam's shirt, pulling it open to reveal his chest, which rose and fell reassuringly. She carefully laid her hands onto the tattoo on his chest, then started whispering.

"What're you doing?" Dean asked as he approached her in concern.

"I'm trying to channel some magic into him through the healing ward. It should help." She didn't bother opening her eyes while talking to him.

Dean nodded to himself and decided to see if there was anything productive he could do. Bobby was knocked out, but had no obvious injuries. Dean gently positioned the older hunter into something that hopefully wouldn’t be too uncomfortable in the long term.

"Is Bobby okay?" Ruby asked, peeking quickly at Dean’s activity, but not breaking the channeling
of the spell.

“Looks like he’s just out cold.”

“If he doesn’t wake up soon….” She paused briefly because of the difficulty of multitasking. “If you can find a pen…. I could help you put a healing ward on him… tell you how to use it.”

Dean eyed her uncertainly and looked down at Bobby. He didn’t like the idea of using witchcraft, especially on Bobby, but it might be helpful if his condition ended up being worse than it appeared. “We’re gonna give him some time first. He doesn’t look that bad.”

“Fine.” She frowned slightly. “Just don’t let conviction… stop you from saving him.”

Dean opened his mouth to argue with her, but he stopped himself. As far as he was concerned, Ruby was the poster child for questionable ethics. She had always been the one suggesting that they run from the bad guys that needed stopping or killing the virgin instead of fighting the old-fashioned way. Of course she would suggest using witchcraft to heal Bobby, but the fact was that if—when the angel woke up he could probably perform the healing faster and by less shady means.

With renewed focus, Dean made his first priority helping the angel. Kneeling beside him, Dean took the trench coat and suit jacket off of Castiel. He rolled up the bloody trench coat into a cushion to support the angel’s head and at the same time apply some pressure to the stab wound in his upper back. The suit jacket was used to assist in the clean up and applying pressure to the front abdominal stab wound. When Dean removed Castiel’s shirt he was surprised to find that the wounds were bleeding unusually slowly for such significant injuries so he felt for a pulse.

"Angel guy's pulse is really low, 30 beats per minute, maybe less,” Dean said to Ruby. He doubted she knew much more about angels than he did, but at that point she was all he had for a second opinion.

"It could be power save mode,” she suggested, then paused for a few seconds to successfully divide her attention. "He's using a meatsuit…. That kind of stuff takes energy…. If the angel part is hurt... he might just be doing... the bare minimum... to keep the body running.”

"Well, the body isn't going to be running much longer if it bleeds out." Dean maintained pressure on the abdominal wound, but looked up at Ruby. "Any idea if angels can survive having their meatsuits die?"

"Never met one before." She shrugged apologetically. "They seem tough…. Don’t know though.”

Dean picked up the suit jacket to reexamine the wound. It was deep and nasty. The angel blade was three-sided, one of the styles that was banned under the Geneva convention for being inhumane. A slashing cut with the blade would be simple enough to stitch, but a multi-sided stab wound was incredibly difficult to stitch closed. Despite the challenge, Dean hated the idea of doing nothing and feared what might happen if the angel continued to lose blood.

He got up and found the bathroom. The apartment they were in appeared to have been abandoned some time ago, but it hadn’t been stripped bare. There were decrepit pieces of furniture and the occasional discarded object on the floor so Dean held out some tiny hope of finding a first aid kit. In the medicine cabinet he found a prescription pill bottle with a label that was too faded to read, a travel-sized bottle of mouthwash, and a miniature sewing kit that was missing half its contents. He grabbed the mouthwash and the sewing kit, then returned to the living room. As annoying as it was, Dean could stitch some wounds with a straight needle. The really concerning parts were the depth of the wounds, the fact that he only had old cotton thread, and that his disinfectant was some
ancient mouthwash. Unfortunately, he would have to make do and just hoped that angels were resistant to infection. At least angels didn't seem to eat; otherwise patching the gut wound would be all the more unpleasant.

Dean and Ruby worked in silence for a long time, each healing their own patient in their own fashion. Occasionally they would sneak a peek at the other’s progress, but not comment. Dean knew that he couldn’t do any better at healing Sam’s internal injuries than Ruby was doing so he didn’t interfere. Meanwhile, Ruby only cared about the angel to the extent that he could help Sam, so if she was directly helping Sam at the same time that Dean was helping the angel, all the better.

After finishing stitching the angel’s abdominal wound, Dean sat back for a minute to take a break. He tried to clean the blood from his hands on the suit jacket, but a little smear still got on his forehead when he wiped the sweat from his brow. Taking a few deep breaths and stretching his sore back, he looked over at Ruby. She was still in the same half-kneeling, half-sitting position, with her hands on Sam’s tattoo. Dean rolled his eyes thinking about how nice it must be to have demonic stamina.

"How long will it take for Sam to wake up?" Dean knew that was a bigger question than she was probably able to answer, but he asked it anyway. He wished that he could directly help Sam, but knew the best thing he could do was to get the angel back on his feet.

"I'm not sure…. I don't know how long... I can keep up channeling…. I spent a lot of power in the fight…. His innate power... should keep the ward running... but I don't know how bad... the injuries are and... how strong his powers are…. I could—" Ruby cut herself off in a way that alarmed Dean. She looked at him, then looked away quickly.

"Is he okay?" Dean moved a little closer to make sure that Sam hadn't suddenly stopped breathing. "What's wrong?"

"It's not that." She hesitated. "There's a way... to speed up the healing... but it's a last resort."

"What is it?" If she looked that uncomfortable saying it, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

"If I give him some of my blood…” she answered, causing Dean to take a step back in alarm. "He'll have more power…. The healing ward’ll work better."

"No way!" Dean yelled. He was shocked and honestly a little frightened by her suggestion. Demon blood was what had gotten Sam into this mess. "The demons already think he's a demon. Those angels just tried to kill him for it. Even without the angels and the demons— What it would do to him— He's not getting more demon blood."

"He seems stable enough now... but if things turn south—"

"It’s not happening!" Dean tried to get her to stop talking as he had when she was talking about Sam dying before, but she just continued.

“And the angel is still out…. Unless you have a better idea… he might die."

"Then at least he'll die human!"

Dean was shaken by his own words. He knew that Sam had demon blood in him. He knew that a lot of people would say he wasn’t human. But things were going to get better... before all this. Sam was going to tell him everything. They were going to have a fresh start to their relationship. Dean knew that Sam had been through a lot and done some unsavory things, but Sammy was finally going to let him into his life again. Dean would support him, help him, keep him on the straight
and narrow.

But everything had gone wrong in almost no time at all. It had only been a few hours since things were really looking up between them and now Ruby was suggesting putting more poison in Sam. It might save his life on some level, but it would push him further over the edge, into the Pit. Dean knew first-hand what dark dealings with good intentions could do. There was a line that had to be drawn. Sam wasn’t a monster and Dean wouldn’t make him become one.

"This stuff doesn't just wear off…. It's in him; it's staying in him…. He'll never die human." She opened her mouth to say something more, but stopped herself. Her expression was a combination of guilt, rage, and pity. Biting her lip, she bowed her head to look down at Sam.

Dean didn’t see her. He was too busy pacing the room in his outrage. He wanted to yell at her, but he was too livid to form words. He wanted to say she was being selfish trying to make Sam more like her, to turn him into something he wasn’t. What did it matter to her if Sam lost his humanity, lost his soul, as long as she got what she wanted. She didn’t care what it would do him. She just didn’t care—

He stopped pacing and turned, ready to let her have it when he finally looked at her. She was shaking, most visibly in her arms, which had been held out in front of her for hours while she was healing Sam. Her face was looking down at his body, her hair draped around her head, hiding her from view. But below her face were a dozen little drop-sized pools of clear liquid on Sam’s exposed chest and tiny wet spots on the fabric of her maternity shirt.

Ruby was crying. Dean had never seen her express any emotions beside things akin to cockiness, annoyance, and anger. As much as he wanted to power through and vent his frustration, he was too confused. He didn’t understand why she would be crying. He could see her being angry at him for shooting down her suggestion. Maybe she’d even fight with him over it, but she wasn’t fighting.

She was scared… like he was. Why else would she be trying so hard to heal Sam? She didn’t want to give Sam the blood either. If she had really wanted to she probably could have done to covertly while he was taking care of the angel. She didn’t have to tell Dean, but she did in spite of him almost certainly being against it. They both didn’t want to give him the blood, but she had humored it….

Maybe she didn’t care as much about the risks. Dean watched another tear fall from her cheek and got the distinct feeling that in all the stress and chaos he had missed the mark. Ruby cared more than he had given her credit for, but she was willing to take the risks… in spite of fearing the possible outcomes. She was prepared to deal with the consequences, whatever they ended up being, and he hadn’t been.

Dean wanted to fix Sam, for his little brother to be more human—be more like him. He was the one who wanted to change Sam, not Ruby. He wanted a lot of things that weren’t happening and when it got tough he had drawn the line in the sand to make it simple. But he couldn’t change what Sam was, not with stubborn thinking, possibly not ever. He’d talked big about being there for Sam, accepting him, but it was hard to shake old paternalistic habits. At least he saw that now.

“I don’t want to be the kind of person that can shut someone out because it gets inconvenient.” Dean’s voice was soft; he mostly spoke to himself. Ruby glanced up to see that he had started leaning against the wall and buried his face in his palms. His body was curled into itself slightly and turned away from her. “I don’t want to be the kind of person that can let him die because I’m scared of what he might become, what he might be…. This fucking ‘might.’ The last few days everything’s what ‘might have been,’ what we ‘might do,’ what Sammy ‘might be’… I don’t know.
I don’t know about all this ‘might,’ but I do know that Sammy is my little brother and I don’t want to let him die. I can deal with it, whatever it does to him. I’m not gonna ditch him again.”

“He’s a good man... in spite of the blood... in spite of being around people like us.” Dean didn’t look back at her, but let out a small chuckle at Ruby’s painfully true comment. “If anyone can stay good… he can…. But the blood… it’s only… the last resort.”

Dean heard some movement and reluctantly turned to look at Ruby. Neither of them had wanted to endure the embarrassment of seeing each other while having that vulnerable conversation, but he needed know what was happening. Ruby had stopped channeling the spell. She tried to move, faltered and nearly fell over, but managed to prop herself up with one arm. Her eyelids were puffy, pink, and heavy, but otherwise she looked paler than usual. Dean watched her for a second, torn between retreating from any further awkward interactions and helping her. Her expression was strained, then defeated as she looked to Dean.

"Can you help me up?" Ruby asked with visible embarrassment. Dean stared at her, a little disoriented by the fact that in the last minute the mood had gone from him wanting to scream at her to her ask him for help. "I'm completely out of juice and sitting here is killing my back."

He nodded and walked over while trying to avoid eye contact, but extended his hands to her. She took his hands, got most of the way to standing, then stumbled. Dean caught her, wrapping one arm around her back. His other arm instinctively tried to wrap around her front, touched her belly, then jerked away awkwardly. He eventually grabbed one of her upper arms with his free hand and guided her to a shabby couch on the far wall. Lowering her down to the couch he noticed that she was weak enough that she essentially fell onto the couch. So much for his ideas about demonic stamina.

After depositing her on one end of the couch, Dean sat down on the other end. They both sat there quietly staring at the three men laying on the floor before them. Sam and Castiel could both receive more aid, but Dean and Ruby both needed some time to get back their own strength. Each of them had suffered substantial trauma during the fight, and while Castiel’s healing had restored them physically, the last few hours had drained them on many levels. Their emotional breaks only moments earlier had proved that.

"What if he doesn't wake up?" Ruby asked while staring at Castiel.

Dean didn't want to think about the possibility. The angel was probably the most powerful of them in a fight, assuming he fully recovered, and it was naive to think that there wouldn’t be more fights ahead of them. Also, he was their only lead on the new heavenly developments. With angels suddenly on the scene there were many questions that needed answering.

"He'll be fine."

"He might not. We need a plan, if he dies." Ruby propped herself up on the armrest, turning to face Dean. She looked more serious than Dean was used to from her.

“We already talked about the blood.” Dean frowned as he looked out a nearby window, where a waxing moon could be seen breaking through some clouds.

"That’s just one idea. We can still try to come up with others.” Ruby glanced around the room again thoughtfully. “The angels'll be looking for Sam, the baby, and me…. We could split up. Bobby could get Sam to a hospital, and you—"

"I'm staying with Sam." Dean turned to look her in the eyes. He was adamant. He’d spent too
many months away from Sam. He wasn’t just going to leave him. He wasn’t going to ditch him.

"The angels will be looking for Sam and you can't run with him like this.” Ruby pointed at Sam. "They'll be after me, but they might not be looking for you. We could all split up at the same time. I run one way, Bobby tries to hide Sam at a hospital with these blood wards, and you’d run the other way—"

"I can't believe you'd just take off.” He didn’t understand. After seeing her crying, he’d thought that maybe she cared about Sam. “You know what, nevermind. What I can't believe is that you think that I'd just run away too."

"I wouldn't just run away and hide, you idiot. I'd be a distraction. They'd already be looking for me. I can teleport and use warding magic to lead them away from Sam and you."

Dean was a little taken aback by her offer. He felt incredibly uncomfortable from her uncharacteristic concern. "Why do you care about me?"

"I don't," she replied while crossing her arms in front of her chest, in a move that made him feel oddly better. “But if we have to split up, you should take the baby."

His stomach knotted and he felt a bit lightheaded. It had barely occurred to him eventually there might really be a flesh-and-blood baby in his proximity—in his life. The thought that, should things get any worse, he might suddenly find himself responsible for a child completely blindsided him. And it wasn’t just any baby; it would be some kind of freaky interspecies baby that was being hunted by Heaven. That was very nearly the last thing he wanted and he had no idea why Ruby would want that either.

"What?" he asked weakly.

"Sam would want the kid safe.” Her hand absentmindedly settled on her belly. “I can't do that if they're looking for me."

"You’d seriously want me to take the kid?"

"You're our best chance to keep the kid safe. The angels might not look for you. You're fast, resourceful, and could probably stay off the grid. If you took the kid I’d try to buy you enough time to find the strongest protection magics you could and hide. You could contact my coven; they’d help you. If it seems safe, you could try to get in touch with Bobby…. If I could distract the angels long enough, maybe Sam would heal enough to be moved somewhere safe for the long term."

Ruby’s expression was far from the snarky and proud woman that liked to tease Dean. She was trying her best to make a strategic decision under bleak conditions. It looked like that wasn't the first time she'd had to weigh unpleasant options. Dean reminded himself that for the last year and a half she had also been living on the run, hunting and being hunted. She might not care about him, but it seemed she didn’t only care about herself. After all, she had just suggested a plan that involved her almost certain death as an alternative to Sam drinking more demon blood. Dean wasn’t sure how much of it was an offer or an academic exercise, but when it came right down to it he appreciated the gesture regardless.

"The angel'll live," Dean said with determination as he stood up and walked over to Castiel. He knelt beside the angel. "Like you said, he’s tough."

Ruby watched Dean work from the couch. He had returned to stitching up the angel’s second stab
wound. He was finishing the sutures on the infraspinatus muscle when Ruby audibly sighed with
relief. Dean looked over at her. She was holding her belly, staring at it with a fatigued half-smile
on her face.

"What's up?" he asked.

"The baby's moving. After the fight..." She broke eye contact with Dean and her gaze settled on
Sam. She gingerly climbed back down onto the floor, positioning herself next to Sam. Gently
picking up his hand, she held his palm to her belly. "He has this thing about feeling the baby
move. It makes him happier. When he'd sleep or was injured, this would make him more relaxed."

Dean looked away from her. The display of affection and thoughtfulness from Ruby was
unsettling. He wanted to retreat from the intimate moment, but he still had to finish patching the
angel's wound. After stitching the skin, he tried to disinfect the area a bit with the mouthwash.
Then Dean rolled the angel onto his back again and inspected the stitching on the first wound. The
cotton thread was holding surprisingly well all things considered.

Now that the bleeding had hopefully stopped, Dean decided to clean some of the dried blood up.
He grabbed the only-partially-blood-stained white dress shirt and wetted it at the sink that
mercifully still worked. Dabbing the wet shirt at the angel’s abdomen, Dean notice that his
meatsuit had a lean muscularness that was surprising for someone who looked like an accountant.
The angel’s chest rose and fell subtly, which Dean found comforting. He couldn’t imagine how
strange it would be to stitch up something that was essentially a corpse.

Dean didn’t notice how much time he had spent musing over the strange creature, but while he was
staring Castiel regained consciousness. The angel's hand reached up and grabbed Dean's wrist.
Startled, Dean pulled away slightly, but Castiel's grip prevented him from getting far. Castiel
looked at Dean, then down at the sewn up wound on his lower torso. He tilted his head slightly in
confusion.

"Your wounds—you were bleeding. I didn't know if they'd kill you," Dean said a little
defensively.

He tried pulling away from Castiel again, but the angel's hand was still clamped on his wrist.
Castiel realized he was restraining Dean, then released him. Dean fell backward from his kneeling
position and ended up seated on the floor next to the angel.

"I... appreciate your concern. I will need more time to recover, but barring any other injuries I will
survive." Castiel's voice was gravelly and deep as it had been before, but it was also slightly
strained. He didn't change positions, instead choosing to continue lying on the rolled up trench
coat. Castiel softly touched the stitches. "Your treatment of my vessel was thoughtful and will
likely expedite my recovery."

After a few seconds of silence Dean realized several things. The angel didn’t appear to be making
any attempts to cover his bare chest. Dean could feel himself blush with sympathetic
embarrassment for the socially-oblivious angel. And when he looked around the room, he saw
that Ruby was watching them with rapt attention. Dean’s lips thinned and he looked to her hoping
for some sort of help.

“So, who the hell are you?” she asked.

Dean’s shoulders slumped and he glared at her bluntness, but she just shrugged in return. To
Dean’s relief the angel seemed to either not understand or care that Ruby had been somewhat rude.
"My name is Castiel."

"Well, thank you for saving our asses." Dean chuckled nervously to himself at the realization that he had also cursed in front of the angel... granted he had called Castiel an ‘asshat’ back at Bobby’s. He shook the faux pas from his mind. "I'm Dean."

"I know who you are," Castiel said as he turned his attention back to Dean. "You do not have to thank me; you are my charge... or you were my charge while I acted in the service of Heaven."

The angel looked pained for reasons having nothing to do with being stabbed twice and thrown through a ceiling. Dean attempted to parse Castiel’s statement. He abstractly knew that a charge was a responsibility. He supposed it made sense that humans would be the charges of angels. But it was the ‘while I acted in the service of Heaven’ that seemed to make the angel’s mood darken.

"You don't serve Heaven?" Dean asked.

"That is a complex question.... I have defied my superiors and killed one of my brothers." Castiel’s face somehow grew even more reserved and unreadable. "I am fallen."

"That one angel said you were sick. Is it serious?" Ruby asked from across the room as she held her belly and Sam’s hand. She eyed the angel, looking for signs of threats to them in all forms.

"My illness should not afflict humans or demons. As for me, it is not life threatening.” Castiel thought better of his wording. “That is not true. I believe that my condition cannot degrade further; whether it kills me remains to be seen."

"I don't follow," Dean said.

"My illness was an affliction of my faith. I became corrupted and it spread in me until I fell. There are no degrees of severity once an angel is severed from Heaven. I am after the fall. It is only a question of how long it will take before I am captured or killed."

"So you were sick when you guys popped in on us, but you didn’t fall until you helped us?" Dean speculated.

“Essentially.”

Dean felt a pang of guilt. The angel had sacrificed much more for them than it had first seemed. It was one thing to get into a fight, but having Heaven put you on their hit list was something else entirely. And aside from that, he had referred to the blonde angel as his brother. Dean didn’t know if that was literal or figurative, but Castiel had clearly gone to extremes for them.

The talk of an angelic illness had piqued Ruby’s interest. Any information on the weaknesses of angels could be valuable, regardless of whatever gratitude they had for the one in the room. “How does an angel even get sick to begin with?"

"I am told there are multiple ways. Most involve indulgence into emotions.” Castiel avoided eye contact with Dean and Ruby, instead he seemed to be reflecting inward on a memory. “They are... dangerous."

"What happened to you?" Dean asked softly. Not only did he feel bad for this angel that was ill—by some strange angelic standard—but that Castiel had also rebelled and suffered injuries to save them. Yet there was something about him that Dean couldn’t put his finger on....

"I was corrupted in Hell while I was saving you." Castiel refused to look at Dean for the several
seconds of silence that followed, but when he finally braved a glance he realized just how distressed Dean had become.

Dean felt lightheaded and he was grateful that he was already sitting down. Painful memories surfaced as he reflexively tried to recall his rescue. He wobbled slightly, but Castiel placed a hand on his arm to help stabilize him.

“Are you feeling unwell?” the angel asked.

Dean shook his head in lieu of words. Of all of the unbelievable stuff that had happened in the last few days, finding out that he’d been rescued from Hell by an angel was probably the most insane—though he had to admit that under normal circumstances Sam’s demon baby-mama would easily win, but that was Sam. Weird things just sort of happened to Sam, but Dean was different. He’d always been one of those weird things caught in his brother’s orbit. The strangest thing that had ever happened to Dean was selling his soul and going to Hell, which he did for Sam. But being pulled from Hell…. That seemed to have nothing to do with Sam. The way the angels had been talking at Bobby’s house, they weren’t even expecting to find Sam and Ruby there…. Which posed the question of why they had been there in the first place, and one of them already had a significant history with him.

Looking down at Castiel’s hand firmly holding his forearm Dean had a strange feeling of deja vu. There had been the endless pain and sickening mixture of sadistic pleasure and guilt. He had been in one of Alastair’s dungeons, or maybe it was his private dungeon, and then it had all gone blank. After that he couldn’t remember any sights, smells, or sounds…. He had assumed that he’d blacked out, but the sensation of being held, even just his arm, felt familiar. It wasn’t the touch of Castiel’s hand that was somewhat recognizable; if he was honest with himself it was the sensation of concerned support.

Dean finally managed to whisper, "You saved me?"

"Yes," Castiel replied. “I was the one that gripped you tight and raised you from perdition."

"Why?" Dean swallowed hard and blinked rapidly to stop himself from crying after the incredibly emotional day.

"Because God willed it."

“No fucking way,” Ruby exhaled.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a little context for the "die human" interaction:

I wanted to set up a juxtaposition between the context surrounding "Then at least he'll die human." in the show & in my fic. Both statements come from a place of wanting to protect/save Sam, but

In the show:
• Sam is addicted to demon blood
• Sam can detox (debatable that that actually ever made him 100% human)
In my fic:
• Sam doesn't crave demon blood (suffering ill effects is debatable)
• The demon blood doesn't get worked out of his system over time

In the show Dean was watching Sam actively suffer from the blood, but in my fic the suffering Dean sees is the result of perceptions about Sam. The angels see him as a threat so they try to kill him. Dean thinks of Sam as being something impure, so Dean sees their relationship suffer. It's easy to associate second order effects to first order events.

Dean is slowly learning that there's a difference between loving someone and trying to change them/fix them & loving someone and trying to support them while they improve themselves. I'm not saying that Sam can change whether he's demonic, but he can change how he let's that effect him (again, he's not dealing with an addiction). The majority of Sam's ability to shoulder the burden of his nature/powers/role has largely taken place away from Dean, so his doubt of Sam's capability is reasonable.

In the show it took Dean until season 5 (or later) to begin treating Sam like a partner with full autonomy & respect of judgment. But he still reverts back to being domineeringly protective when things get dire. So when everything went to Hell, so to speak, Dean faltered on his respect of Sam's capability/willpower and instead wanted to spare him the risk. When faced with the thought that Sam's baseline will always be as demonic as he is then (as opposed to someday achieving being normal human) the end result of risking a little more demon is not as horrific.

Also, I see Dean & Ruby as very similar characters. They rub each other the wrong way because they have similar personalities, with very different experiences/positions. So I wanted Dean to see his subconscious doubts/disappointments transposed onto her.

I thought about including Ruby's perspective in that interaction, but I decided it would be a little redundant while Dean was working through a process that involved analyzing her. So I cut out a bit of her feelings, but I'm hoping that her general mood came through. She's completely worn out and facing the possibility of Sam dying. I personally think that if push came to shove, she would give Sam the blood without Dean being onboard. But regardless of having a fall back to help Sam, she's upset at the possibility of giving him blood. She knows that Sam has been feeling uncomfortable with all the talk about him being demonic (though I wouldn't say he's in denial or angry) and she knows that it would complicate Sam & Dean's relationship for her to go behind Dean's back.

I thought about having her try to convince Dean by explaining that she'd previously given Sam blood, but honestly felt like Dean would've wanted to fight about it & Ruby was too exhausted to try to convince him.

I hope that provides more answers than questions.
Dean looked back and forth between Castiel and Ruby. He was confused, embarrassed, and more than a little frightened. It didn't make any sense that someone other than Bobby and Sam would care that he was alive, but having God care was just too much. He hadn't even believed in God until.... Well, honestly he still wasn't entirely convinced. Yet, assuming there was a God, Dean was a nobody being called out by the most powerful entity in existence. Thoroughly creeped out, Dean scooted away from Castiel.

"Why?" he asked. "What does God care about me?"

"You have been deemed to be the Righteous Man—"

Ruby interrupted, "What kind of idiot looks at Dean and thinks 'righteousness'?"

"God," Castiel replied flatly, but his eyes narrowed at her.

"God?" Dean groaned and shook his head. It didn’t make any sense, but so much of the last few days hadn’t made sense either. "Why am I ‘deemed'? What’s so special about me?"

"I do not know why you were chosen or my father's purpose for you, but I do know that your survival is a priority of Heaven."

Dean laughed sarcastically at the angel’s comment. "You could've fooled me. However many broken bones and the rest of the beat-down—not to mention the fact that I actually did die once.... Heaven's sure doing a bang-up job."

"I do not know why you were unprotected before, but I expect that there was a good reason."

Castiel spoke with a confidence that seemed more academic in nature than personal sentiment. "Heaven does not act or refrain from action without reason."

"Does Heaven have a good reason for trying to kill me and Sam?" Ruby asked, but tried to not let her anger at the other angels transfer over onto Castiel.

Castiel evaded her with growing discomfort. "Uriel did not have the authority to make that decision."

"And who does?" Her voice had turned cold reflexively.

"If you prove to be a legitimate threat to Heaven...." Castiel became quiet for a moment. "Then the Archangels Raphael and Michael will make a decision. Opinions whether the choice is rightfully theirs are moot."

"Debating who gets to decide if I live or die—" Ruby began to raise her voice, but Dean held up his hand and threw her a pleading glance. She cut herself off from continuing on to yell at the angel that had just risked his life to save her and Sam.
"So what, you're just trying to enforce Heaven's chain of command and saving our lives was a perk?" Dean asked, trying to understand their new ally and the potential limits of his reliability.

"It is more complicated than that," the angel replied.

"Enlighten us."

"If the true judgment of Heaven is to kill them, then it is not the place of lesser angels to question it," Castiel explained. "Similarly, it would not be their place to seek out violence if Heaven spares them. The opinion of a lesser angel in the service of Heaven is unimportant."

Some of the flickering hope still alive in Dean was extinguished by the answer. "But you fell. You aren't in the service of Heaven anymore, so what do you think?" Dean almost pleaded with the angel in asking the question.

Castiel was quiet for several seconds as his lips thinned so slightly that Dean barely noticed the change. "I would not kill them. They may be impure in form, but Sam does not seem to willingly be an enemy of Heaven. Sam and the child have souls, which places them under the guardianship of the Heavenly Host. This privilege is theirs to lose, not ours to take away."

"Do you think the other angels will see it that way?" Dean asked with renewed hope, but his optimism dwindled as the angel pondered the question for far too long.

From across the room, Bobby let out a low groan that caught their attention. Dean rushed to his side to check on him. After a minute or two, Bobby allowed Dean to lift him up into a sitting position to help shed some of the disorientation. It took some time to catch Bobby up on everything that had happened since he was knocked out. When it came time for Dean and Ruby to recount Uriel’s death, they both glossed over the details because of their mutual discomfort with the implications of what they had witnessed.

“That one angel tried to kill Sam, but he got the angel first,” Dean said. Bobby seemed surprised, but somewhat satisfied. However, Castiel looked up with new concern.

"Tamiriel was holding his blade when I killed him and I had the other two," Castiel commented, interrupting the story. "How did Sam kill Uriel?"

"He did... something." Dean began with an uncertain tone in his voice. The truth was that he didn’t know what Sam did exactly. It was obviously some sort of power, but Dean had never seen anything like it before and that scared him.

"It looked kinda like that hellfire ray that…." Ruby struggled with how to end her sentence, while the two hunters and angel watched her expectantly. She gave up and continued with her original thought. "Like the ray that archdemons sometimes use, but it was a little different."

The new power being compared to an archdemon’s ability had felt like a punch in the gut to Dean. He glanced over at Sam and sighed. He tried to shake the thought from his mind and replace it with something more productive. The angel was awake and pretty soon Sam would be healed. Sammy would be okay and he would be there for him. Dean took a calming breath, trying to refocus on the discussion at hand.

"I doubt that is what happened.” Castiel’s brow furrowed subtly as he tilted his head to look at Sam in newfound curiosity. "The Light of Hell might be unpleasant to an angel, but there has never been an instance of it proving lethal to one of my siblings."
"I don't know. He touched the angel's chest, then white light came out his mouth and eyes," Ruby explained. "Closest thing I've ever seen was Lilith pulling that on us a year or so back."

"Light emitting from the mouth and eyes would occur regardless of the cause of an angel's death," Castiel stated, then looked to Ruby in not-entirely-hidden surprise. "You survived the Light of Hell?"

"Barely." She almost shuddered at the memory. "I was wrecked inside and out. I only lived because Sam shielded me."

"He was unharmed?"

"Yeah…" Ruby looked at Sam, then back at Castiel. "Twice. Lilith used it on him twice and it didn't do anything to him."

There was an uncomfortable silence between them for several seconds before Bobby broke it by asking the angel, "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not definitively without more information, but it is unusual." Castiel sat up, put on his dress shirt and jacket, then slowly started trying to get to his feet. "I believe I have recovered enough to heal Sam. He may be able to offer more insight into the situation."

As the most able-bodied person in the room, Dean hurried over to Castiel and grabbed the angel's arm to offer some stability. When Castiel moved in a direction that wasn't synchronized with him, the innate physical strength of the angel became evident. After several instances of feeling like he was trying to redirect a marble pillar, Dean completely resigned himself to letting Castiel lead and simply acting as a cane. With Dean's awkward assistance, Castiel walked over and knelt down next to Sam.

"Healing him may temporarily weaken me," Castiel warned them, "but I will survive."

Castiel gently rested one hand on Sam's forehead and the other over his heart. After a few seconds, the angel fell backward, but Dean caught him. Castiel hadn't passed out, but he looked incredibly weak. With a little difficulty, Dean picked him up and carried him to the couch. Castiel's vessel was two or three inches shorter than Dean and a slighter build, but he was still a grown man, though it proved much easier than trying to move Sam.

"Sam, can you hear me?" Ruby asked.

Dean deposited Castiel on the couch, then turned to see Ruby running her fingers through Sam's hair. Sam's fingertips dragged along the wood floor as he experimented with moving.

"Yeah." Sam spoke in a whisper and didn't bother trying to close his mouth. His lips formed words, but hesitated. Ruby leaned closer to hear him. "Did I…. Am I dead?"

"No. You're alive." She smiled sadly at his question and stroked his arm reassuringly. "We all are. Dean and Bobby, too."

Sam tilted his head back slightly and opened his eyes. The room was dark, barely illuminated by a street light outside a nearby window. His eyes drifted around looking for a familiar face and settled on the dim, fuzzy image of Ruby. A second later he saw Dean come into view, kneeling down on his other side.

"Hey, Sammy. We're all right here," Dean said softly and in a more lighthearted tone than he felt.
Sam’s hand that was closest to Ruby reached for her feebly. "Is the baby okay?"

"Seems to be fine. It was shifting around just a few minutes ago."

"Those things…. They…." Sam flinched slightly causing Dean to move closer in his concern. Ruby softly put a palm on Sam's chest. His mouth struggled with expressing something so Ruby tried to help him.

"There were two angels that tried to kill us,” she explained. “The other one helped save us. He's here, but he temporarily wore himself out healing you just now."

Sam closed his eyes and didn't do anything for a long time, until Dean asked in a hopefully soothing voice, "Sammy, are you okay?"

"Those were angels." Sam turned his head to face away from the streetlight, darkening his face. "They wanted to kill us and we didn't do anything. We've been fighting demons and they didn't even care. I…."

Sam went quiet again. Ruby could feel his body trembling, but it wasn’t remotely cold. She took his closest hand in one of hers. With her free hand she touched the side of his face, discovering a warm tear on his cheek. She didn’t wipe it away for fear that Sam wouldn’t want Dean or Bobby to know that he was crying.

"I think…” Sam continued cautiously. “I killed one."

Dean exchanged worried looks with Ruby and Bobby. It wasn’t clear from Sam’s voice if he was having difficulty remembering through the pain, was distraught about the encounter, or both. In spite of the close bond that Sam shared with each other them, none of them really knew much about his feelings on Heaven. He had always keep those feelings close to his heart, only tipping his hand slightly when Ruby had brought it up months earlier.

Growing up Sam had seen evil and had had faith that some good must exist in the world to fight it. But that force of good needed to be something more than the everyday workings of men. He knew that hunters fought evil and he knew that he did good, but at a young age he realized that neither of those pictures encompassed the situations. Every hunter he had ever met had been flawed and was frequently broken. His dad had been obsessed and occasionally cruel. Dean was a borderline-alcoholic fueled by low self-esteem and daddy issues as much as anything else. Sam himself had been largely motivated by a need to overcome the darkness he’d felt inside.

But there had to be some uncompromising good; there was uncompromising evil, after all. He needed to believe that there was some sort of balance to the universe because maybe, even if he couldn't see it in his own life, there was some level of fairness. The universe wouldn’t be so brutal. He just was having a bad run of luck or had a horrible vantage point…. Yet, the angels didn’t care about his and Ruby’s good works. His icon of an unwavering source of good was actually morally ambiguous, and his faith was shattered.

"It was self-defense," Dean suggested as an excuse.

"It doesn’t matter." Sam rolled over to look at Castiel, who was starting to straighten himself on the couch. "They won't care, will they?"

"It is unlikely that your motivation for killing Uriel will be taken into account. Killing an angel is one of the highest crimes in the eyes of Heaven. The intention of the killer has never been a relevant factor." Castiel looked thoughtfully at the others before continuing. "However, this a
unique situation. All other instances have been committed during a time of war when the intentions were clear. It is possible that an exception would be made, but it remains unlikely. I witnessed the event and sided with you, but it is still difficult for me to accept what has happened. My brothers and sisters will likely be less forgiving."

"You killed one of the angels too?"

"Yes, and I will almost certainly be executed for it. But I will not forfeit my remaining life for judgment." He took a slow, still breath as he collected his conviction. "If I am destined to die, it will happen. Until then I will continue on in my duties, not in service to Heaven, but instead to its charges on Earth."

Sam carefully sat up with the help of Dean, then ran his fingers through his hair and over his damp face. He pushed the pain and betrayal of his faith to the back of his mind. He was tired of reacting and being one step behind. Now that they had become prey to something more powerful than demons or hunters it was all the more important to stay vigilant.

“How do we defend against them?” Sam asked with renewed focus.

“I have two angel blades, which are lethal to angels as well as most other creatures on Earth.” Castiel looked Sam in the eye. “But you do not appear to need an angel blade. Do you know how you were able to kill him?”

"I thought it was the demon beam." Sam looked between the angel and Ruby.

“I doubt that the Light of Hell killed Uriel. It has never proved capable of killing an angel before,” Castiel leaned briefly to one side in an armless shrug at a new thought. “If that has changed the result would be devastating for Heaven.”

"You mean in the war?” Dean asked. “The one that the other angel mentioned. Do you know what he was talking about?”

"Possibly, but my information is limited. I would have to speculate."

"An educated guess is a lot better than nothin'," Bobby encouraged him.

"There has been a rising sense of urgency in Heaven,” Castiel explained. “Many angels have been tasked with unusual missions that appear to be prefacing a significant undertaking. Until three years ago, there had not been angels under the orders of Heaven taking vessels on Earth in centuries. When I left Heaven, before arriving at your home, there were seventy.

“Then there is the matter of Sam and the child. Their mere existence is alarming. They have souls, which make them unlike any other type of creature of the Abyss. To my knowledge, the only beings capable of altering the fundamentals of the Abyssal are God and Lucifer. It is incredibly unlikely that God would make such a change without informing the Heavenly Host. The alternative, though, is deeply unsettling. It would indicate that Lucifer is acting in this world in spite of his imprisonment.”

"Lucifer—the Devil is real?” Ruby asked in surprise.

"Yes. He is my brother." Castiel paused for a moment recalling the archangel's fall. "There was a time when he was the most powerful angel in Heaven. He was the most beautiful, made of the First Light to illuminate existence. God loved him more than anything, until the creation of humans. Our father ordered that all angels serve, protect, and care for humans, but Lucifer refused. He loathed human imperfection and rebelled against the edict.
The others listened to this first-person account of the origin of the Devil. Dean and Bobby were both struggling to get used to taking biblical stories as something as practical as mundane lore. Ruby listened thoughtfully; in a real way, this was the origin of her species and when it came right down to it she could believe that magnitude of crazy. Sam had no trouble believing the story—he knew it was true. Whether it was from years of faith or some intuition, the story had the faint truth of some barely-recalled memory.

“There was an unfathomable war,” Castiel continued. “Hundreds of angels allied themselves with Lucifer against Heaven. In his fury, Lucifer corrupted a pure-hearted human into the first demon. He created his own kingdom and creatures, apart from Earth and Heaven. Hell would be the antithesis of Heaven, corrupting and stealing the souls previously destined for eternal peace.

“After a lengthy campaign, the Archangel Michael defeated Lucifer in battle. Instead of killing him, God trapped Lucifer in a personal prison. He has been bound since then and until recently I would have believed that he was entirely secure.”

"But then I came along and we don't know how," Sam stated, bringing the story back around to their single biggest omen.

"It is technically possible to release Lucifer from his cage, but it is very difficult. His cage is bound by many seals or rituals. Imagine them as locks on Lucifer’s cage. When sixty-six have been broken Lucifer may walk free."

Sam and Ruby looked at each other with mutual understanding and concern. Sam felt like his heart dropped a few inches. They had spent almost a year trying to stop some grand scheme without any motivation beyond knowing Lilith was up to no good. Now they started wondering just how grand the scheme really was.

"Sixty-six seals, not sixty-four?" Ruby asked in an uncomfortable, slightly high-pitched voice.

"Yes," Castiel confirmed. “Why do you ask?"

"Lilith—Lucifer's first demon—she's been making a whole army of demons run around Earth trying to do sixty-four tasks," she explained.

Castiel thought for a moment before acknowledging, "That could be consistent with the breaking of the seals."

"Except they're missing two seals," Sam pointed out.

"Not necessarily," the angel replied. “I believe that the first seal must be broken in Hell. I do not know what the other seals involve, but it is possible that the last one might also require extreme circumstances. If it could not be performed on Earth, then Lilith would not assign subordinates to pursue it on Earth."

"We stopped one of them. It can't be completed for almost three hundred years," Sam said in a mixture of hope and desperation.

"There are six hundred possible seals. They could simply find another."

Dean threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. "I'm sorry—so they only need to be hitting 11% and Lucifer gets out of his own private Hell or whatever? You've gotta be fucking kidding me.” He sighed, then muttered, “That's a dumb design."

The angel scowled at Dean. "Do not blaspheme in my presence."
"Is it blasphemous if I'm just saying something that's true?"

Castiel's eyes narrowed a little more, but he didn't argue.

“So, Heaven and Lilith are getting ready for some sort of knock-down-drag-out fight once Lucifer gets on the scene?” Dean refined the scenario aloud as he rubbed a minor headache forming below his temples.

“It appears that way,” Castiel answered.

“It’s gonna be a slaughter for the demons though.” Ruby pointed out. “Even if the archdemons can use the Hell-light beam on angels, Lilith only has a handful of archdemons and a few hundred demons topside supporting her. Even against only the seventy angels that were on Earth this morning, the demons would be completely outgunned.”

“Didn’t you say that Lilith was trying to capture the part of Hell housing the bombs?” Dean asked her. “Also, that she could kill a ton of humans up here to make her army in the Pits?”

“I mean it would take a while to get a decent number of new demons made,” Ruby clarified. “If you want them really competent, then it could take years—Earth years.”

"Maybe this is nuts, but if drinking demon blood makes you part demon, why doesn't Hell just dump a bucket of blood in a city's water supply?” Sam mused, silencing everyone in the room and drawing their attention. Dean and Bobby both felt a little sick at the idea. Ruby half-nodded, half-shrugged with respect for the brutal efficiency of the suggestion.

"To my knowledge, there has never been an instance of human turning into a demon as a direct result of drinking demon blood,” Castiel said, causing Sam to raise his hand to point out the obvious oversight in the room, but Ruby interrupted.

"I'm sure you have a nice big sample set on that one," she commented a little smugly.

"As compared to the historical population of Earth it is insignificant,” Castiel replied. “But there have been tens of thousands of examples.”

"No way. How is this something I've never heard of?” Ruby asked.

"The practice was most prominent in Scandinavia and Central America, both over a thousand years ago. The desired effects were not achieved and it lost popularity as specific religions evolved or were eliminated."

"What were the desired effects?” Sam asked, suddenly very self-conscious. Aside from the emotional train wreck that had just taken place, he felt pretty good—almost strong. If he had been alone he probably would’ve tried to use telekinesis, testing whether he’d improved with it overall or only when his adrenaline was pumping. But he didn’t want to make a scene or start using his powers for fun. That could be a slippery slope that he didn’t want to think about.

"To gain attributes of demons,” Castiel answered. “Instead it would frequently harm or kill the humans. As for your situation, it seems likely that there are other factors responsible for your ability to benefit from demon blood. You may have merely been exposed to demon blood as part of a ritual to make you Abyssal."

"You keep using that word,” Dean complained. “What the fuck is 'Abyssal'? I thought that was a language."
"Abyssal is both the language of and the classification of creatures of Hell," Castiel explained. "Demons are by far the most populous type, which is why the term 'demon' is frequently misattributed to other Abyssal. Most of the species became extinct centuries ago, and of the remaining species, all but demons and hellhounds have populations that are negligible."

"Hellhounds? You're saying that Sam is kinda like a hellhound?" Dean didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry.

"That comparison is unrefined. It would be similar to saying that humans are like dogs simply because you are both mammals," Castiel replied. "My characterization of Sam and the child is not so narrow."

"Sam isn’t necessarily a demon, so the kid isn’t necessarily a demon either?" Dean theorized.

Ruby threw a glare at him. "I'm still a demon, Mendel."

"Bite me," Dean jabbed back, but he’d honestly been so distracted by the talk of Sam and the kid that he’d forgotten about Ruby as a factor at all.

Castiel stared at Dean curiously. "Why would you request to be bitten?"

"He has a fetish—" Ruby started, but was cut off by Dean.

"She's joking."

"I do not see why that is humorous."

"Fucking chr—" Dean began.

"Ruby, try to lay off that kind of stuff," Sam added, cutting off Dean's blaspheme. "He seems pretty literal."

"He’s never gonna learn if we—" But Ruby was cut off again by Dean.

"You just want to be a bitch."

"Everyone just shut up!" Bobby shouted. The four others waited in silence for several long seconds to see if they’d successfully avoided being chewed out by the old hunter.

"Was that command directed at all of us or merely the demoness and Dean?" Castiel asked.

Bobby stared in open-mouthed exasperation for a moment. "You weren't even talking when…." He sighed and shook his head.

"That does not answer my question." Castiel pursed his lip. He could see from Sam and Dean's posture change that they had been made subordinate by Bobby's words. He suspected that any further speaking on his part would breach some protocol, but he hadn't finished pointing out Bobby's error. "Your statement was ambiguous."

Bobby covered his face with his hand and muttered something that Ruby, Sam, and Dean couldn't hear, but Castiel tilted his head in confusion.

"What is an 'idjit'?"

"If Lilith's demons are running around breaking Lucifer’s locks, then we need to get word to the
other hunters," Bobby said after restoring order to the four grown children in his company.

"We should proceed with caution. It is likely that Heaven has begun watching the people that each of you are most likely to contact," Castiel warned.

"You think that Heaven will be tapping our friends' phones?"

"Modern technology is not beyond the reach of Heaven."

"But you guys aren't as good with magic, I take it?" Ruby nodded to the blood wards on the walls. "That one angel didn't seem particularly tough against a suppuration spell. Are you guys vulnerable or do you just not know how it works?"

"It is rare that an angel's duties require more than the abilities endowed to it," Castiel explained. "The magics that the majority of us are familiar with are used to affect areas and objects, such as these wards."

"So you guys don't know much about hexes, enchantments, illusions, evocation, transmutation, abjuration—" Ruby listed the spellcraft categories off on her fingers.

The angel raised his head, slightly offended. "We are somewhat versed in defensive magics beyond territorial warding."

"So we might have an in with common magic?" Dean mused.

"Mundane spellcraft might be overlooked by my siblings, if it is sufficiently innocuous. Though it may not take long for my siblings to realize that we are using magic. It should not be considered a long-term solution."

"Here's the catch-22," Ruby groaned. "In order to cast a spell to communicate with the outside world we need spell components from the outside world. What're the odds any of us can get outside these wards without getting dog-piled by angels?"

"It is likely that I could go undetected as long as I am sufficiently discreet. I could retrieve the components that you need," offered Castiel.

"No offense, but you kind of seem a bit rigid to be walking into a magic shop without causing a scene," Sam observed aloud.

"You do kinda act like a narc—not a hunter at least, but you're just…." Ruby looked to the guys for help articulating her point.

"You talk too formal," Bobby suggested. "Do you even use contractions?"

"I do not know," the angel said, a little confused and defensively.

"Your body is also way too tense," Dean added. "You look like you're waiting for someone to tell you 'at ease.'"

"The way my behavior is perceived by a small number of humans is unimportant. If the witches will not sell me the components because they think I am a narc," Castiel overemphasized the newly-added word to his vocabulary, "then I will simply take it by force."

Ruby shrugged in acknowledgement of the practicality of his plan.

"That's subtle." Dean rolled his eyes, then gestured at Castiel’s body. "Whatever, you do your
thing. Own that whole awkward-vibe you have going on."

"What do you need?" Castiel asked Ruby, turning his body to visibly ignore Dean’s comments.

"Depends on what we can come up for as a plan. Bobby, angel," she invited. “I think we need to talk shop.”

"I think I’m a bit out of my element. Don't know much about sneakin' magic past angels," Bobby commented.

"Yeah, but we need to figure out a way of communicating that isn't gonna spook a hunter. You're the most paranoid hunter here so you just joined the planning committee." She smiled at the old hunter.

"Don't try any of our hunters in Texas. They’ve been working some real crazy cases, maybe a trickster or something. It'll probably be an uphill fight to convince them of anything this nuts," Dean advised, earning an approving nod from Bobby before being roped into the conversation.
While the others started talking about the plan to contact the hunter network, Sam decided to get up and stretch his legs. He walked around the shabby living room, taking in their surroundings as he tried to process all the new information. Sam stopped to stare at a corner of the floor that had two small pools of blood slowly discoloring the wood. Beside the blood on the floor was an angel blade, which Sam picked up. He leaned against the wall next to a window and examined the blade by the dim light.

The blade wasn’t as heavy as he had expected. He twirled it in his hand, appreciating its craftsmanship and balance. Carefully, Sam touched the point, which pierced the pad of his fingertip with almost no effort. He watched the drop of blood well up and frowned at it.

Blood had been on his mind a lot during the last few days. When it had just been him and Ruby, the demon blood in his system barely ever came up and when it did it passed without much more thought than would mention of Sam’s unusual height. It was inevitable that Dean would need some time to get used to Sam having demon blood, or based on what Castiel had said earlier, just being part Abyssal. It was new territory for all of them, but Dean probably had the most to struggle through. Though it was comforting to see that the mere talk of Abyssal didn’t make Dean leave the room or look particularly pained.

Sam went to wipe the blood drop on his pants, but he stopped when he noticed the multiple small stains all over his clothes. They were little red-brown patches of blood where his skin had broken while Uriel had been throwing him around and crushing him against the ceiling at Bobby’s house. Looking at the blade and blood stains made him think back to the fight against Uriel, or at least as much of it as he could remember.

After hitting his head on the mantle, things had become a bit fuzzier, but there was a larger obstacle in his mind. He had been knocked across the ceiling, felt the impact against his torso, then the sensation was gone. Abstractly, he knew that his body had been pressed against the ceiling and he’d been dropped onto the floor, but there was a disconnect between the pain and the knowledge of pain. It was a startling realization, that maybe he’d finally been pushed so far that his mind just refused to hold onto that piece of the memory. He could remember touching Uriel and wanting to stop him, but the sensation of what he’d done…. Sam held up his empty hand and stared at it thoughtfully.

“You okay?”

Dean’s question brought Sam back to the moment. The elder Winchester had left the others to strategize around what was left of a kitchen table to check on his little brother. He looked as tired as Sam felt, but hadn’t complained about it. Instead, he was checking to make sure Sam was okay, in classic Dean fashion.

“I just wish I knew what was going on with me,” Sam confided.
“Yeah. I’ve been wondering that same thing ever since you turned five. Seriously, Jem? You’re lucky Dad never caught you watching that.”

“More like I’m lucky you let me watch it.”

“Yeah…. Well, Dad didn’t get a say in everything.” Dean smiled helplessly at a thought. “When we saw him for the first time after he went missing, with the whole Meg thing, I thought he was gonna give you hell for growing your hair out.”

“He didn’t say anything, did he?” They both tried to recall, but neither could remember it clearly. Too much had happened since then. “That seems like forever ago. I mean, Dad only knew about me having visions, and that was way back when it was only a few months…. How badly would he freak if he could see me fighting now?”

Dean hesitated. The truth was that he suspected that John would experience an even worse meltdown than he had been having over the last few days. Sam had done things and could do things that would justify being hunted, and there were times when Dean had seriously questioned whether John had considered himself more of a hunter or a father. In the end John had aided his sworn enemy in exchange for saving Dean’s life, but in his last moments with Dean he had prioritized killing Sam if he couldn’t be saved… from what? Maybe one of the acts Sam that had committed in the last year and a half would’ve put him beyond salvation in their father’s eyes.

"Yeah. I thought so…. Honestly, I'm getting tired of all this powers stuff." Sam let out a small unenthusiastic chuckle. “You think you’re upset by the endless surprises….”

"Really? You can use telekinesis. That seems like it'd be pretty cool in a fight or just around." Dean tried to lighten the mood and be supportive.

"I know you were busy getting wailed on but—"

"I wasn't getting wailed on. I was holding my own."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "You spent most of the time on the ground."

"They might look scrawny, but those angels are tough and I went hand-to-hand with one."

"Fair enough.” Sam raised his free hand, conceding the point. “While you were masterfully fighting the blonde one, you might not've noticed that the telekinesis itself wears me out. That's not the kind of cost-benefit ratio I want for grabbing the tv remote from across the room.”

"I'm trying to picture us just sitting back, watching tv. How crazy does that seem right now?" Dean looked at Sam, who seemed to take on a slightly defeated expression at the acknowledgement of how bad things had gotten. He wanted to comfort his little brother, but he didn’t feel particularly hopeful himself and settled on generic optimism. "Things'll get better."

"I know. It's just—"

"Ruby? You okay?!"

Bobby’s alarmed tone caught Sam and Dean's attention from across the room. Ruby was slightly hunched forward at the table, bracing herself with one hand and holding her belly with the other. Her teeth were gritted and eyes clenched shut. She shook her head in response to Bobby’s question. Sam ran to her side and crouched down so that they were at comparable heights. Once he was beside her, she gripped onto his shirt.
“This... sucks,” she managed.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked as he touched her back and realized that her muscles were incredibly tense.

"Nothing is wrong. She is merely in labor." Castiel stated neutrally.

Sam looked up with a start. His eyes darted to Bobby and Dean, who were similarly surprised.

"What? You sure? Isn't her water supposed to break or something?" Dean asked in a slightly fast, anxious flurry. This was basically the same scenario that he'd been worrying about when Sam had first brought Ruby into Bobby’s house several nights earlier.

"Statistically speaking, it is actually relatively uncommon for the first—"

"Would you two shut up and try to be helpful?" Bobby snapped at Dean and Castiel, instinctually trying to silence any tangents before they ventured too far, then he turned back to Sam. "I thought you said there was another week or two before she's due?"

"Human gestation periods normally have a wide range of variation. Also, the child may not adhere to human gestational timelines." Castiel began explaining, but it wasn’t clear who all was even listening to him.

Sam had picked up Ruby part way into the angel’s comment and carried her into the cleaner of the two bedrooms. He gently laid her down on a twin-size mattress. Her body seemed less tense, indicating that she was between contractions. Bobby and Dean hurried in after them, but Castiel followed at a more leisurely pace. Sam knelt beside her and offered a hand for her to hold, but she shook her head.

“I’m pretty certain I’d break your fingers.” She smiled weakly. “I might be little, but I can still pack a hell of a punch.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Sam said as he gently caressed her wrist with his thumb and rested his hand on her forearm in lieu of actually being able to hold her hand.

“Any idea how long this takes?” Dean eyed Ruby nervously.

“Hours—it depends. Did it serious just come on all of a sudden?” Sam asked Ruby.

“I’ve been feeling weird on and off since the fight.” She shrugged.

“Okay, maybe ‘hours’ is on the high end.” Sam corrected.

“Fucking awesome,” Dean said as he bounced on the balls of his feet.

Ruby had another contraction, as Sam held onto her shoulders to provide stability and hopefully some reassurance. Bobby and Dean checked the apartment for anything that might be useful, while Castiel just stood around observing the situation. Everyone was a little too panicked to think of a better plan of attack until they knew how far along in the labor Ruby was.

"So much for finding a hospital," Ruby muttered after the contraction.

"Yeah. Well, we'll make do." Sam looked at his watch and tried to estimate how much time had passed between the contractions. Bobby and Dean came back empty handed except for Castiel’s trench coat.
"The time between her contractions will need to decrease by at least another minute at which point her dilation should be evaluated," Castiel said in an attempt to be helpful. Everyone in the room looked at the clear authority in the field.

"What do you know about delivering a baby?" Bobby asked.

"Do you want me to list every—"

"Do you know how to do it?" Bobby amended.

"I have seen the process of human birth thousands of time."

"Alright, you're in charge. Tell us what you need." Bobby waved the angel over toward Ruby.

"Whoa! I don't want some angel up in my vag!" Ruby tried to scoot away from Castiel, who stopped approaching her and looked around, uncertain of what he should do.

"It's not really yours—" Dean started to point out, but was cut off by Sam.

"Seriously?"

"I'm just saying that's not really her body so she shouldn't be so—"

"Not the time!" Sam yelled at Dean, then looked back at Ruby. "He might be an angel, but he's a lot more knowledgeable than us. You know it's the right answer."

After a few seconds of consideration, she relented. "Fine."

"So what, do we need some boiled water or something?" Dean asked.

"I will be able to sterilize everything," Castiel replied. "The only thing that I will need is something to wrap the child in. This room is 69°. It is likely that the child will be cold."

Dean took off the button-up shirt he was wearing over his t-shirt and held it out to Castiel.

"Can I borrow your coat?" Sam asked Castiel, who nodded consent. He grabbed the trenchcoat from Bobby and draped it over Ruby's lower-half for modesty, then starting taking off her pants and underwear.

She groaned and hissed at another contraction. When she was done Dean looked at the angel helping a demon through labor and elbowed Bobby.

"This is like the setup to a bad joke."

"Dean, shut up or I will seriously murder you," Ruby growled, causing Castiel to look up over the trench coat at her in concern.

"She's not serious." Sam tried to reassure the angel.

"I'm feeling pretty serious," Ruby muttered as Sam patted her shoulder.

For two hours, Ruby and Dean traded token insults and threats as the labor continued. Sam and Bobby gave up trying to stop them after realizing that it wasn't actually upsetting her and maybe it was at least serving a cathartic function. The contractions became more frequent and intense, eventually impairing Ruby's ability to speak at times. She made do by flipping Dean off between groans when she wanted to conserve effort. After a particularly strong contraction, Castiel looked
"You should begin pushing." Castiel instructed in flat tone without looking up.

"Shouldn't you be doing a weird breathing thing?" Dean suggested.

"I... don't need... to... breathe!" She yelled through clenched teeth.

"You should continue pushing," Castiel added.

"I... am!" She groaned.

"You most likely will only need to push one more time."

Ruby screamed a string of obscenities in Abyssal at the angel, causing Dean and Bobby to recoil slightly. When she finished, she exhaled while letting her head fall back on the mattress. Sam was checking her exhausted-looking face when the baby started crying. He froze for a moment and swallowed hard.

"If someone would take the child, I can heal her vessel." Castiel held out the small bundle.

Sam reached over and held his daughter for the first time. Ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes. She looked like any other human baby. A not insignificant patch of light brown hair topped her head. She wriggled slightly in the soft blue plaid flannel shirt, then opened her eyes. Little brown eyes blinked up at Sam's hazel ones.

"Hi," Sam said weakly. He didn’t even know what to do with himself; he was so overwhelmed with joy. A smile spread across his face and his heart fluttered with excitement. In that moment there wasn’t a single thing wrong in the world. His lips fumbled around the words, but eventually he managed a whisper, "I'm your dad."

One small arm escaped the top of her wrapping. Sam went to tuck it back in, but when he touched it, it grabbed onto his finger. He just sat there staring at her in awe.

"Your vessel is healed, but I left its mammary glands functional," Castiel explained to Ruby.

"Um... thanks."

"Ruby, you want to hold her?" Sam asked, finally temporarily breaking free from his blissful trance.

"In a few minutes. I need to recover for a sec. Anyway, I've been holding her for awhile," Ruby said, though she leaned over slightly to get a better view.

Sam beamed up at his big brother. "Dean?"

Dean looked somewhere between enchanted and terrified, but he knelt down next to Sam. He accepted the little bundle into his arms and awkwardly smiled at it.

"Hi... um, I'm Dean, your uncle." He laughed softly and looked over at Sam. "What's her name gonna be?"

"Sam, that's your call," Ruby said, before adding, “I get veto power though.”

"I was thinking Kaylee," Sam whispered without taking his eyes off his daughter.
"You're such a fucking nerd," Dean teased.

"I don't care. I still like it." Sam glanced over at Ruby, who nodded approval.

"Alright. Bring her over. I want to take a look at my girl." Ruby propped herself up against the wall. Sam passed her Kaylee and she smiled warmly at her daughter. After taking in the moment Ruby blinked, turning her eyes black. Dean flinched, fighting back some weirdly immediate instinct to protect his niece.

"You sure you should be flashing eyes at the baby?" Dean asked.

"It's not like she isn't gonna see them sooner or later," Ruby countered. "Anyway, I want to see what she looks like on the nonhuman spectrum."

"What?" Bobby and Dean asked in unison.

"You guys didn't think black eyes were just for show did you?" Ruby was too busy looking at Kaylee to bother rolling her eyes at Dean. Not that anyone would've been able to tell. "It's a power. You can see all sorts of stuff with them, depending on the demon."

"What are you looking for?" Sam asked. He wasn't nearly as disturbed by Ruby’s eyes and sat down next to her on the mattress.

"How much she looks like a demon to other demons and anything else that stands out."

"I could also examine the child for, I believe your kind calls them quali," Castiel offered. "It would be reasonable to assume that divine sight would provide different results than that of an Abyssal."

Ruby eyed the angel for a moment and then nodded consent. He had been able to identify the baby as having a soul before it was even born, so he would probably be able to spot more subtle characteristics than her. Castiel took a few steps forward to get a better vantage point. Ruby looked back down at Kaylee and smiled.

"Hey, kid. I'm your mom, the one that you've been riding around in. I'm gonna take a little peek at you, so try not to wiggle around too much."

Ruby pulled the flannel shirt back a little to reveal more of Kaylee and looked closely at her. Her expression was a combination of curiosity and thoughtfulness, with a hint of tenderness. Kaylee stared up at the solid black eyes without any context for their meaning and reached out with one hand. Ruby offered a finger for her to grab, but otherwise continued with the investigation.

"Well, any halfway-decent demon looking at her for a minute with black eyes is gonna know that she isn't quite human," Ruby told the others. "But it's weird. She definitely looks a little demon. She has the eye quali, so she'll probably be able to do black eyes. There's some other markings that kind of look like quali, but I'm not really sure what they means. You don't see this kind of stuff on a demon topside. It's hard to explain.... A little help here angel guy."

"The child may be able to manifest some of the classical physical characteristics of the Abyssal," Castiel speculated. "I am not sure to what extent though. She is not a demon inhabiting a vessel. That is her body, which could either make it harder or easier to manifest those characteristics. Demons can easily alter their appearances in Hell, but are frequently incapable of altering vessels on Earth beyond their eyes. While it is considerably harder to manipulate a physical body, it is not unheard of, and she is more fully integrated than a normal demon. That combined with the unknown variable of Sam's Abyssal qualities, she may be able to manifest more than her eyes."
“What else could she do?” Sam asked cautiously. He was grateful that she was born passably human to most observers, but the idea of her sprouting a pointed-tail during puberty made him nervous for her.

“She’s got some markings on her hands, feet, lips, eyes, top of her head, ears….” Ruby listed them off as she spotted the quali. Then she held Kaylee to her chest, and pulled down the flannel shirt. “Angel, you see anything on the backside?”

Castiel just stared at the newborn for several seconds. He slowly tilted his head to the right. His eyebrows furrowed and he looked over at Sam. Everyone watched Castiel’s unusual reaction with increasing alarm.

“Use your words,” Ruby encouraged.

“She appears to contain trace amounts of grace,” Castiel finally said.

“Some what?” Sam asked, worried about yet another complication for his daughter’s life.

“Grace. It is the energy and life source of angels.”

Ruby looked down at Kaylee a little uncertainly. “She’s part angel?”

“No,” Castiel corrected. “Trace amounts of grace can be left in a vessel after it has been possessed by an angel.”

“She’s less than an hour old; how could she have been possessed?” Bobby asked.

“Grace can also pass through bloodlines.” Castiel looked at Sam more intensely. “Have you ever heard voices? Possibly before blacking out.”

Sam leaned away from Castiel a little. “What? No!”

“It seems likely that you would be her source of grace.”

“What about Ruby’s body?” Dean suggested.

“Grace adheres to the soul. There wasn’t a soul in her body at the time of conception.”

“Can’t you just look at him and see? It worked on the kid.” Ruby looked back and forth between Castiel and Sam, while gently rubbing Kaylee’s back.

“The child has... angelic markings, similar to quali, that normally only angels can see and are incorporeal. I believe that being a naturally-empowered creature has allowed her the possibility of manifesting the angelic characteristic the same way that she appears to be able to manifest Abyssal ones. Sam was born human and his Abyssal powers are not nearly as integrated. His ability to physically manifest attributes is likely severely limited compared to the child. If he does contain grace it is not apparent on his surface.”

“Is there another way of checking besides just looking at me?” Sam asked with a growing sense of unease about the concept.

“It would require a very intensive and unpleasant process, which would temporarily exhaust my strength. That is why I asked if you have ever heard voices before blacking out.”

“Angels talk to their meatsuits?”
"An angel must gain permission to possess a vessel, Castiel explained. “You would have had to consent.”

Sam shook his head. "No. Apart from Meg, I've never been possessed—and I sure as hell didn't consent to that." Sam’s eyes evaded everyone else’s in a flash of shame.

"If that is true, then your grace was inherited from one of your parents."

"Our parents...." Dean paused, processing the implications. "So I might have some of that angel dust in me too?"

"It is possible, but it would have required that the possession occur before you were born. It is also possible that the possession occurred in a prior generation and one of your parents was merely a carrier of the grace.” Sam and Dean both frowned slightly at Castiel describing grace as a doctor might describe an illness. “Do you know if anyone in your family was diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder? That is the most common misdiagnosis of angelic possession."

"No,” Sam said only half-confident. “Our dad didn't talk about our extended family ever.”

"Dad wouldn't have let himself be possessed." Dean shook his head. “I don't care if the voice says it's an angel; he wouldn't have said yes."

"John only found out about demons after your mom died. He wasn't a hunter back then. You can't assume he'd think like one." Bobby reminded them.

Sam looked up at Bobby’s words and his mouth opened as his brain tried to order his thoughts into clear sentences. "Our mom...." Sam turned to Dean. "She knew Azazel, not the meatsuit he was wearing when he killed her. She recognized him."

Everyone in the room looked at Sam in surprise.

Dean ran through Sam’s words in his head, but it didn’t make any more sense the second time around. "What?"

"When Azazel showed me the vision of the night he gave me his blood.... It was the night she died. I saw it. She came into my nursery and he pinned her to the wall with his powers...." Sam became quiet recalling the scene, that had given him that same telekinesis. "She wasn't surprised by the telekinesis. I don't think she was scared, not for herself at least. When she saw him, she said, 'It's you,' like she knew him."

There was a silence that lasted a painfully-long stretch while everyone’s minds worked through the possible implications. Dean rubbed his stinging eyes, which had teared up slightly from fatigue and unsettling revelations. He’d just started getting his head around all this demon stuff, and now not only were there angels in the mix, but their parents had somehow been dragged in.

Their dad was one thing. He was at least occasionally the topic of discussion. But their mom was almost never mentioned. John and Dean had both often found it too difficult to talk about her without falling into grief. Sam on the other hand had almost no personal connection to her that caused him to bring her up. After she was avenged with Azazel’s death, Sam and Dean basically hadn’t spoken to each other about her at all.

"She knew something, about all this?" Dean wasn't exactly asking Sam, he was mostly working through it out loud.

Sam shrugged and shook his head, equally confused. "Maybe. At least about some of it. Maybe
she let in an angel at one point?"

“She always used to say that angels were watching over us.”

The plan to contact the hunter network was temporarily put on hold while Castiel ventured out of the apartment to collect food, new clothes for Ruby, and baby supplies. As it turned out, Dean was actually the most experienced of them at handling babies. Starting the night Sam turned six-months old, Dean had taken up most of the caregiving responsibilities for his little brother. Kaylee the newborn was a little different than a six-month old Sam, but Dean was also older and wiser. With Sam’s help they assembled a shopping list for Castiel and coached him through some of the basics of commercial transactions.

After sending their angel out into the world, everyone needed some time to unwind. Dean decided to take a long overdue nap on the mildew-ridden couch in the living room. He couldn’t justify using the queen mattress that was in one bedroom, and no matter how many times Castiel disinfected the twin mattress he refused to lie down where Ruby had given birth earlier that day. Bobby wasn’t tired and lacked much to preoccupy himself with, but opted to sit in a chair by a kitchen window keeping watch. He wasn’t actually concerned about anyone finding them; he mostly just wanted to give the new parents some privacy.

Sam and Ruby had been told to take the queen mattress since there were two—three of them. Ruby quickly used what was left of the sewing kit to reduce the waistline of her maternity pants as a stopgap measure. She found Sam in the larger bedroom, sitting on the queen mattress. Kaylee wriggled in his arms, as he shifted her in an attempt to find a better position. Ruby took a seat next to them and looked down at the newborn.

"We have a daughter," Sam said softly. The silly grin that he’d had all those month while touching her belly had evolved to the content smile of a proud dad.

"I think that's starting to sink in." Ruby brushed a little wisp of Kaylee's hair away from her face. Smiling at Sam, she then tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. "Looks like she's got your mane."

"As long as she doesn't get my height."

Ruby traced her fingertips along Kaylee's shoulder and arm, eliciting a little shift. A tiny foot broke free from the insufficiently-wrapped bundle. She tickled the foot, which made Kaylee's eyes open, though they didn't know how to focus on anything in particular yet. Ruby looked at Kaylee for a few moments, then her brow furrowed subtly.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked, noticing the change in her behavior.

"This is so strange." Ruby shifted awkwardly. "It's like she's mine, but... I don't see myself in her. I like this meatsuit and all. It's just that she doesn't look like me, the real me."

Sam nodded to express that he was appreciating what she said. He rearranged his arms so that he could hold Kaylee in one arm while using the other to pull Ruby close to him. She let herself be dragged a bit, then swung her legs across his lap. Resting her head on Sam's shoulder, she looked down at Kaylee.

"I wish that I knew what you see when you think of yourself. But when I think of you, it's not some meatsuit or some smoke cloud,” he told her. “It's you taking on half a dozen demons with a few potions, a knife, and your wits. It's you facing down two angels, or flooding Chattanooga to make me smile. I don't know if you've decided what you want to do, but my betting money is that,
if you stay, you'll see more and more of your tempest in her."

"You give her the soul and I give her the storm." Ruby smirked a bit.

"And she has your eyes, or at least the quali for it." Sam smiled.

Ruby blinked her eyes black, then leaned down toward Kaylee and softly said, "She's not even scared of me like this."

Sam took his freehand and tipped her chin up. Her solid black eyes were only inches from his own. He stared at her for an unknown length of time, making it clear that he truly saw her, then slowly cupped the back of her head with his hand. Without taking his eyes off hers, he leaned in and kissed her. They both closed their eyes as their lips parted and the kiss deepened.

Ruby bit Sam's lip when Kaylee started fussing, drawing both of their attention. Sam blushed a little while Ruby shifted her legs so that her left thigh wasn't touching his crotch.

"When we get a bit more privacy, maybe Dean or Bobby could watch her for a bit?" Sam raised his eyebrows hopefully.

"First, we figure out a contraceptive. I don't feel like getting sick to my stomach and huge again." Ruby looked down at Kaylee. "The only reason you're getting away with all that bullshit is 'cause you're cute."

Chapter End Notes

Have a little fluff to compliment your everything getting worse.
Defying The Odds

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castiel had been gone for roughly two hours when he reappeared in the living room with two large bags of supplies. Sam, Dean, and Bobby were discussing recessive genetics and whether Kaylee's hair might eventually lighten to be closer to Dean or Mary's. All pretenses of gruff masculinity had been thrown by the wayside after Bobby had referred to Kaylee as 'cutie pie' in a voice that was definitely directed at a baby. Ruby was hunkered down at the table trying to work out the design for a spell they could use to communicate with the hunter network, but she took a break to grab her newly-acquired clothes.

"How'd it go?" Dean asked as he approached Castiel, eager to inspect the haul.

"Human social interactions are unnecessarily nuanced." Castiel placed the two bags on the floor unceremoniously and didn’t make a move to begin unpacking or explaining what he’d brought back. "I now understand why your people commit homicide so frequently."

Sam raised an eyebrow at the angel from across the room. "You were making a run to the store?"

"If we could turn on the news right now would the headline be 'trench-coated man kills eight over onesie and yoga pants?'" Dean swept his hand in a gesture indicating a news-ticker on the bottom of a television screen, causing Sam to chuckle and Bobby to roll his eyes.

"I did not kill anyone."

"That's not evasive at all," Dean said, looking up from his crouched position next to the bags of supplies.

"My statement was intentionally specific." Castiel looked very thrown by the use of sarcasm, but gave up on his quest for insight when everyone just stared at him.

"Somebody write this down; we’re adding lying and sarcasm to the list of stuff we need to teach this guy." Dean held up a pack of diapers and a handful of baby clothes. “But first I want my shirt back.”

After dressing Kaylee in some real clothes, Sam joined Dean and Bobby in finally getting some food for the first time in over 24 hours—though none of them were really prepared to call it a meal. Castiel had sought food that didn’t require the many kitchen amenities that were lacking in their apartment hideout. The only food not resembling a nutritionally-inferior M.R.E. were a few apples. Castiel explained that angels didn’t eat, to excuse himself from joining them. Ruby also passed since it was no longer as important for her to eat and she wanted to get back to working on the spell as quickly as possible.

She worked diligently because their only plan hinged on her figuring out a spell that would work, and to her relief the guys seemed to respect her need for focus. Every once in a while she would
ask a question about the other hunters to Bobby and Dean or about angels to Castiel, but otherwise she barely stopped except to feed Kaylee. Once she had gotten the basic gist of breastfeeding, she held Kaylee in her non-dominant arm and continued writing drafts with her main hand. When Kaylee wasn't nursing, the baby was back with Sam, freeing up Ruby's full attention to the problem at hand.

After working ten hours straight, she cursed and flicked her pen across the room in something not quite rising to the level of rage. The guys looked at her from the circle they'd formed on the living room. Bobby had found a deck of cards in one of the closets and Dean had insisted that teaching Castiel poker would be an excellent lesson in deception. For better or worse, the angel didn’t seem to appreciate the nuances of the three card sharks' performances, but he made up for it somewhat with a superior grasp of probability. Dean had just finished winning a hand with a bluff when Ruby snapped. The men exchanged a quick glance of concern with each other as she took a calming breath, then got up and walked over to their gathering.

"Guys, we have a serious problem." She looked tired in spite of the fact that she didn’t seem to need sleep anymore. “I’ve been going over our spell options and even our best chance is pretty dicey. We have too much interference, would be obvious on the other side, or there’s not enough time."

"How much time do you need?" Sam asked, tackling the concept that was easiest for him to wrap his head around.

"For the good options, as time increases, so do the odds of success. Also the odds of negative effects go down. Probably….” She rubbed her neck as she thought. Sam gestured for her to sit down on the couch next to him. She complied and he rubbed her neck and shoulders. “A decently safe spell, maybe weeks or a month?"

"No way." Dean eyed a patch of moss growing on a nearby wall. “We're not staying in this dump that long.”

"I don't think we have time like that," Sam agreed. "Things are getting worse out there. Lilith's demons, they've been doing a lot of damage. I've been seeing it on and off since waking up. She might be done breaking seals before we could even warn anyone."

"Anything faster than that…. I don't like the odds." She leaned forward, temporarily interrupting her neck rub to emphasize her next point. "And a fuck-up won't just fizzle out. It would take a lot of juice to break through these wards. Spell failure with that kind of power would carry a high chance of at least one person getting maimed, probably worse."

"When you say you don't like the odds, how bad are we talking?" Bobby asked.

Ruby sighed as her shoulders slumped slightly in an ominously defeated gesture, then answered, "Fifty-fifty, less?"

Everyone quietly processed the latest piece of bad news. By that point it was hard to think of anything that could really shock them and disappointing turns kept coming with such regularity that they didn't pack nearly as much punch. Yet the sum of one struggle after the next had left them all too fatigued to really tackle the problem with any enthusiasm.

Bobby leaned against a wall and closed his eyes in frustrated thought. Castiel sat quietly, relatively unmoved by the revelation. Ruby slouched on the couch and watched Sam, who cradled Kaylee for some minor comfort. Dean pulled a quarter out of his pocket and held it up thoughtfully.
"Anyone feeling lucky?" He asked as he flipped the quarter, caught it in midair, then slapped it onto the back of his left hand. His right hand continued to cover it as he looked over at Sam.

"Heads," Sam said after a few seconds, playing along with the demonstration of the bleak chances.

Dean lifted his hand to peek at the result. "Tails."

"I know this might come as a shock, but luck has never really been my thing." Sam smiled weakly at his own attempt at using humor to lighten the mood, but it seemed a little too poignant to get any laughs.

"Who needs luck when you can see the future?" Dean muttered in an attempt to make Sam's rough history seem less like a forecast of future misfortune. He spun the quarter on the wood floor, but didn't bother to see which side landed up.

"How far does your precognition extend?" Castiel asked, drawing everyone's attention.

"About a week is the most warning I've ever had," Sam answered, then realized that the angel wasn't asking for purely academic reasons. "But I can't control it. What I see, when I see it, or for how long—it's all passive."

"Sneaking a peek would be a neat trick," Ruby admitted.

"Too bad we can't point the lens in any particular direction," Dean complained.

"Actually a variation on that plan might be feasible," Castiel replied. The others turned to look at him in confusion. "Angels have a different relationship with time than other creatures. With some effort, we are able to bypass portions of it."

Ruby sat up from her reclined position on the couch to stare at the angel. Bobby also straightened himself and opened his eyes, drawn back from his own thoughts. Dean looked to the others as he tried to figure out if he had just correctly understood what Castiel had said.

"You can time travel?" Dean could hardly believe the sentence had come out of his mouth, but a lot had been hard to believe lately.

"It is difficult, but possible," Castiel confirmed. "I am also capable of sending others to another time. If we are considering observing the future, then I would suggest that someone other than myself go."

There was another pause while everyone struggled to accept that Castiel seemed to actually be floating the idea. He was even getting into strategy a bit, though the logistics of time travel weren't familiar enough for anyone else to appreciate the merits of his suggestion.

"If you're the one that can control time traveling....." Sam ventured into the conversation, but wasn't entirely comfortable with the phrasing. "Wouldn't you be the best person to send?"

"The act of bypassing time will be debilitating to me without the strength Heaven had previously provided. It would likely injure me, leaving me vulnerable for one or more days. If I send someone else, I can recover safely in this time and retrieve them several days later."

"We're seriously talking about time travel?" Ruby asked.

"Is this really so much stranger than everything else that's been going on?" Sam shrugged.
"It's fucking time travel." Ruby threw her arms up a bit before crossing them in front of her chest. She chewed her lip anxious while shaking her head. "Our lives are like *Dark Shadows* and this just took a turn into some *Twilight Zone* shit just now."

"What's *Dark Shadows*?" Dean asked.

"Nevermind, you're too young to—"

"*Dark Shadows* had time travel," Bobby commented a little indignantly.

"Bobby, you watched—" Ruby began, grinning reflexively, but Bobby hastily interrupted her.

"Can we get back to the serious discussion?"

"A serious discussion about time travel." Dean huffed a false laugh while pitching the bridge of his nose. "Are we actually thinking about this as an option?"

"It would be nice to be one step ahead for a change," Sam muttered.

"Just a thought, but why aren't we talking about sending someone back in time to stop things from getting this bad in the first place? They could just…." Bobby trailed off as he realized that he wasn't sure where they should begin altering the past.

"In addition to the challenge of determining what is causally relevant, there are numerous paradoxes that could occur. It is very likely that any attempt to change your past would prove futile overall," Castiel explained.

"How is us changing our past different than us changing our future's past?" Sam spoke slowly to make sure he didn't screw up his wording, then reran the question in his head to be sure.

"Assuming that we are successful in changing events, the timeline would diverge from the earliest point of significant deviation. Altering the past would put us on a timeline that no longer exists, creating a paradox," Castiel explained. "In theory if one of us traveled to the past, then they might not experience the effects of the paradox, but they would be trapped there if their former timeline had been altered out of existence. If the earliest point of significant deviation occurs tomorrow, then we will simply follow that altered timeline."

"This is basically Doc Brown with the chalkboard in 1, right?" Dean asked his brother.

"I think so," Sam replied.

"But we're going first half of 2, right?"

"I think so."

"And Castiel is our DeLorean?"

The angel scowled subtly. "I am not a car."

Their discussion was briefly interrupted by needing to change Kaylee. Sam took the opportunity to show Ruby and Bobby what Dean had taught him a few hours earlier. While the others were distracted with the baby, Dean decided to ask the angel something that was bugging him. It wasn’t particularly important in the grand scheme of things and he didn’t want to derail the planning session, but as long as they were already distracted he might as well ask.
"How does an angel that was talking about fate come up with the idea to try to change the future?"

"Just because it may be difficult or even impossible does not mean that we should not try."

Castiel's voice and demeanor was pure conviction. It filled Dean with a combination of awe and caution. "Maybe altering the future is God's will?"

"Have you ever met God?"

"No."

"How do you know that God exists?" It was a sincere question. As much as Dean questioned the existence of God, he was respectful of Castiel's belief, probably more than any other being he'd ever met. The guy was an angel after all. But he just wanted to understand why the angel felt the way he did, especially without having seen God himself.

"I have been told so by my siblings who have interacted with our father," Castiel replied.

"And you just believe them?" He didn't mean for the question to come off as insulting, but Castiel didn't seem to take offense.

"Yes."

"Why?" Dean continued to press.

"They are my brothers and sisters; why would I doubt their word?"

"First of all, I'd like to point out one of your brothers is Lucifer." At his observation, Castiel glanced down at the floor in a strangely human reaction. Dean felt a little guilty for touching upon what seemed to be a matter of shame for the angel. "Also, I don't know how long you've been watching me and Sam, but I can write fucking annals of all the times and ways we've bent or broken the truth with each other."

Castiel looked back to him with an expression that Dean thought barely resembled hope. "And yet you trust him?"

"It's not easy." Dean shrugged his shoulders a bit. "But yeah, with my life."

"Why?"

"Because he's my brother…. I love him, even if he does drive me crazy." Castiel sat in quiet contemplation of Dean's words. "It's a little hard to tell with the fight and all, but do you have any brothers or sisters like that?"

Castiel thought of his sister Anael. Her leadership was inspirational, both in her strength and eventually in her compassion. She had been an outlier as long as he had known her, but she had kept her uniqueness hidden to everyone except her closest... friends? He hadn't even really been surprised when she fell and that had caused an unsettling feeling in him. For a long time, Castiel had wondered if he could've stopped her by either talking her out of it or turning her over to a superior. But he hadn't.

"I do not know. One of my sisters.... She fell not long ago. I knew that she was different. She did not hide herself from me. I suppose she trusted me with her life." Castiel's bright blue eyes couldn't meet Dean's. "I do not know if I would have done the same with her. Recently, I have felt.... I... feel that that is... regrettable."
Dean’s eyebrows raised slightly at Castiel’s confession, not because he was judgmental of the angel not returning his sister’s loyalty, but instead because Castiel felt guilt over it. He wasn’t an expert on angels by any means, but regrettting the lack of conviction to defy authority seemed to be a measure of personal growth. Maybe there was hope for the dopey, little angel yet?

"So, assuming this is the best idea we have, who all is going?" Ruby asked as they rejoined Dean and Castiel. Sam took a seat back on the couch, while Ruby perched on an armrest.

"A single person would be easiest for me to send and result in the least loss should the attempt fail." The second half of Castiel's statement carried an oppressive weight to it that gave everyone pause.

Kaylee whimpered softly while stretching her arms out of her wrap. Sam rocked her gently and offered her a finger to grab. Appeased, Kaylee rolled toward Sam's chest and fell back asleep. Sam smiled down at her for a second before returning his attention to the group, which had been watching him.

"I'm going," Dean announced as he looked at the new parents. "You two aren't going. That leaves Bobby and me. And, no offense Bobby, but I'm in better shape to be heading into the unknown. Also, for whatever reason the angels want to keep me from dying. So, hey, that might come in handy."

"Dean…" Sam struggled with what to say, but Dean waved his hand, dismissing any objection Sam might give.

"We all know I'm the right choice for this kind of insane stuff. Mystery, danger, getting my ass thrown somewhere by something that's not human— It's basically any other job," Dean joked in an attempt to lessen the gravity of the situation. No one did him the disrespect of pointing out the additional risks related to entering the unknown. "So how far should I go? A week? A month?"

"While there would be merit in focusing on our immediate actions, it might be wiser to arrive at a further date," Castiel suggested. "It is reasonable to assume that as time passes from the date of your disappearance, the fewer resources Heaven will be allotted to locating you. Unlike Sam and myself, you are not a criminal in the judgment of Heaven."

"I thought, as the Righteous Man, Heaven wants to watch over my ass," Dean speculated.

"Your protection is a priority, but you are not monitored continuously. It is similar to the protection afforded to prophets. When you are within close proximity of an archdemon or are critically injured Heaven is alerted and an appropriate response is dispatched. The only reason you were brought to the attention of Heaven two days ago was because the Archdemon of the Crossroads was detected.

“As such, I believe that you would not be actively pursued beyond the near future. Furthermore, a longer timeframe would provide a greater opportunity to observe the actions of Heaven and Hell. I think a more advantageous date would be five years from now."

"I thought we were trying to find a way out of here. How is he supposed to figure out what spell might work or not if he's years after the fact?" Sam had grown slightly more worried at the prospect that Dean might be going further ahead than a month or two.

"Probably the same way I'd do it if I was only a month ahead. Find us and ask?" Dean guessed.

"Or you could talk to the other hunters in the network. If Heaven is still looking for us, we’ll
hopefully be hard to find," Bobby added as an alternative.

"And you'll bring me back after three days?" Dean wasn't feeling particularly optimistic about the plan, but it was beginning to lose some of its edge. He was resigning himself to the situation and trying to convince himself that it really was just like a job. All he had to do roll with the punches and gather intel for a few days.

"Yes. No matter where you have traveled to on Earth, in five years and three days I will retrieve you," Castiel told him. "But you must be on Earth. Do not die or otherwise travel to either Hell or Heaven."

"Don't die. Check." Dean smiled nervously. "Piece of cake."

Dean had always hated goodbyes and in spite of the obvious risks he didn't want to treat what was about to happen as a one-way trip. He gently patted Kaylee’s head, then hugged Sam and gripped his brother's shoulder, reluctant to let go.

"It's silly, but something that I've been thinking about…. Mom used to sing ‘Hey Jude’ to you—I guess both of us—as a lullaby. You know, in case you can't get her to sleep." A vulnerable smile flickered on Dean's mouth, but his eyes were candidly remorseful. Of all the things that he could say to Sam, that had somehow seemed the most important. The idea that even if something happened to him, that Sam would carry on the strange little tradition he had built up in his mind over the last few days…. It gave him some level of comfort.

"You stay safe for a few days and you'll be right back here.” Sam tried to be reassuring. “You're probably a better singer than me anyway."

“Yeah. I’ll be back to stop you from butchering it.” Dean smiled, then lay down on the queen-size mattress and took a deep breath. After looking at his little brother and niece one last time, he tilted his head back.

Castiel leaned over him and placed his hand on Dean's forehead. "It is 1:45pm on the fifteenth. Remember that I will retrieve you at 1:45pm on the eighteenth."

"2014. Here goes nothing," Dean managed before the world fell out from under him.

Chapter End Notes

And this is where I alienate all my readers.

From the very beginning the plan was:

Act 1 - Sam's relationship with Ruby, growing into a more powerful confident person, & trying to get along with Dean without caving on his own personal growth. Most of Sam's growth comes from learning hard truths about himself & the situation.

Act 2 - Dean gets to see his own truths right in front of his face. He doesn't get to keep avoiding things because in End!Verse he's already at the punchline.

Act 3 - Another point of possible read alienation to be announced.

A few things:
1) I hate time travel logic in TV shows & movies because I think it's too full of paradoxes. Supernatural probably did it best (or one of the best) because they didn't bother explaining too much & it was semi-consistent. The time travel as discussed in this chapter has several holes, some of which will be filled with future dialogue as it benefits the plot. But some of it is just going to have to suck because I don't have a background in temporal-physics. So I apologize if you're like, but won't that mean x? I could probably have made the time travel more believable by cutting most of Cas' explanation, but I felt that made everyone's reactions to time travel less believable. Not that they're super realistic as is, but who wants to read about everyone freaking out for hours on end.

2) I'm debating whether or not to tag the story End!Verse (and other relevant tags as they're revealed). I mentioned this struggle between spoiling plot twists & attracting the right audience in a comment on a previous chapter. I'd be curious what you all think about it. Was this turn too much for you to take without warning or did the ambush work for you?

3) I imagine some readers might be a little upset that we've been spending so much time on Sam and just when he has the baby (and fulfills those Parent Sam & Fluff tags) I'm pulling the camera away. It's true that I'm going to be focusing on Dean in Act 2, but you'll still get Sam and some fluff. In Act 1 after Dean was reintroduced, the scene ratio was roughly 2 or 3 Sam scenes to 1 Dean scene per chapter. The ratio for Act 2 is more or less the reverse of that, once the setting is established a bit. So, if you don't see Sam for the next chapter or so, never fear. He'll be featured again soon.

I sincerely hope that your reaction to this chapter is "what the fuck happens next?" and not "what the fuck was that?" If you don't like the twist, sorry that I couldn't give you the closure you wanted. But this story is on rails and I'll just have to see if anyone is still enjoying the ride at the end of this.
Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

Dean rolled over on the lumpy, bare box springs of the bed he'd fallen asleep on, and noticed the mattress was missing. Looking around he realized that Castiel must've succeeded in sending him forward five years. The others were no longer standing around the bed; in fact it looked as if no one had been in the room for a long time.

As decrepit as the apartment had been before, it looked like the building was in a state of absolute ruin. A thick layer of dust and filth seemed to cover every surface of the room. Dean stood up, knocking all sorts of allergens into the air. He coughed repeatedly and peered through the small amount of hazy light that shone in the only-partially-unobscured window. Rubbing his already-watering eyes, he walked toward the exit, but only made it a few feet into the living room before the rotted wooden floor gave way under him. He managed to tumble with the fall to break his impact, but his lower back landed awkwardly on a small pile of wood.

After taking a moment to check himself for injuries, he got up and tried to wipe the grime off his clothing. Even though it was the early afternoon, the windows were coated with enough dirt and mildew to dim the entire interior of the building. He brought his arm closer to his face to try to identify the little thing moving along his sleeve. With a tiny cringe Dean hastily brushed the spider away. When he fully extended his arm in the sweeping motion he felt the unmistakable sensation of spiderwebs sticking to the back of his hand.

"Really?" he muttered to himself as he squinted to try and see where the web was so that he could avoid it.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness his heart sank. The top three feet of the room was covered in webs. When he'd fallen through the ceiling he'd dislodged a significant portion of the webbing, which hung down around his little bed of rubble. In all the chaos, dozens of spiders were scurrying along the webs and quite a few ran across the floor in search of cover. He didn't generally have a problem with spiders, but dozens of spiders was pushing it.

Dean covered his face, crouched down to be lower than the spider metropolis, then ran for the apartment's front door. Rather than having to stop and fiddle with the locks and doorknob, he decided that a swift kick would probably knock the door open.

Unfortunately, he overestimated the strength of the door and his foot merely punched through the wood. He teetered slightly on his back foot before falling forward, slamming into the door with his upper body. The door gave way and he fell clumsily onto a tiled patio. After frantically knocking away several large brown spiders that had joined him part-way through his escape, Dean caught his breath and tried to refocus on the job.

He needed to get to a computer, hop online, and catch up on current events. From there he would try to locate some of the members of the hunters network, who hopefully would know what had happened to his group or at least any major developments with the angels and Lilith. Ellen and Jo were his first choice, then probably Jody Mills even though she wasn’t technically a hunter. Failing
them, he had at least a dozen hunters' contact information committed to memory thanks to spending months helping coordinate their efforts. As the picture came together, he could try to move in from the periphery a bit. He had three days to find out everything he could.

To Dean's surprise it was incredibly easy to steal a car. The neighborhood seemed abandoned; half the homes were falling down from rot. The whole greater New Orleans area, where it turned out their apartment-hideout was located, was actually below sea-level and famously at risk for flooding during hurricanes, but only if the levee system weren't operational. He felt lucky that it wasn't hurricane season because the high-water-marked buildings and collapsed structures told him that there had been a major problem with the infrastructure in the area not too long ago. It took him a few minutes to find a truck that through some miracle still ran, then he headed toward the downtown area.

His heart began to sink as he drove five minutes without seeing signs of another living human…. Ten minutes…. Fifteen minutes. He expected to find abandoned cars in gridlock headed out of the city like in some horror movie, but didn't. Several improvised roadblocks were set up at major intersections, but each seemed to be in just as bad a state of disrepair as everything else. Occasionally, he thought that maybe it would be safer to sneak around quietly rather than riding through the city in a truck, but there was so much ground to cover and literally no signs of active life beyond a few dozen crows.

The downtown was silent. It was chilling to think that over two million people had lived in the area, and now it was a ghost town. He pulled over at a grocery store, and decided to look for a newspaper. Pistol at the ready, he reminded himself that headshots killed zombies, then scoffed at his own fear. What a cliché would he be if he really did have to face a horde of zombies?

He opened the door to the store. The shelves had been stripped clean with the exception of broken items, which were now caked in mold. The magazine shelves were equally sparse. But as he turned to leave he saw a message spray-painted on the wall of a building across the street. "Repent for Heaven has chosen this land to be cleansed of sin and sorcery."

Dean carefully approached the graffiti and recognized that he was on the border of downtown and the French Quarter. He'd spent three blackout-filled Mardi Gras in the French Quarter, a highly publicized capital of sin and sorcery if he'd ever seen one. His stomach sank a few inches as he reread the ominous message.

He ran a handful of blocks to the northeast, then froze. Tens of city blocks had been burnt to the ground some time ago. Blackened frames of buildings and piles of brick were beginning to grow over with vines and moss. Walking through the ruins, he turned into what must have been Jackson Square because it was in front of the only building still standing in the French Quarter, Saint Louis Cathedral.

The cathedral had several broken windows and a significant amount of graffiti on it. Red spray paint had been covered with several other layers, but Dean could make out the image of a large red cross. He wondered briefly if it had been converted to an aid center at some point, yet purple spray paint warned, "It's a trap." For a second his curiosity whispered for him to check inside, but he quickly thought better of it when he saw the rest of the park.

Apart from its location compared to the cathedral, the park was unrecognizable. Instead of a lawn, there was a single large mound covering the entire block-sized park. From several hundred feet away he knew what it was. There was no flesh left on the bones to provide the trademark stench, but he knew.
Dean fell to his knees. He didn't know if he wanted to cry or vomit. He did both. Something had gone very wrong and he had no idea what. Still shaking, Dean got back to his feet. He would grab a car and drive until he found people.

As he searched for a car that seemed to be in decent shape he heard a snap behind him, maybe thirty or forty feet away. He whipped around, aiming his pistol toward the sound, but didn't see anyone. The sound had come from the remains of what was probably a cafe. Several large industrial appliances were melted or rusting among metal chair and table legs that had lost their wooden surfaces in the fire. Dean kept his gun fixed on the area that the snap had come from, but silently sidestepped to gain a different view without getting any closer.

The cloud cover shifted, allowing a little of the afternoon light to come through. One of the still-standing refrigerators in the suspect area cast a shadow that caught Dean's attention. The shadow's silhouette included a person crouching behind the fridge... and it looked like they were holding an assault rifle.

Dean froze. The other person clearly knew he was there, or at least that he was in the area. Calling out to the person could go either way and he decided that he'd rather miss a possible connection than risk a shootout against a semi-automatic. He quickly looked around for a safe avenue of retreat. There was a nearby route that would provide decent cover and at least get him pointed in the direction of the truck he'd arrived in. Dean picked up a rock and threw it over where he'd been standing when he heard the snap.

As soon as the person's shadow turned toward the sound of the rock, Dean ran for cover. He ducked behind a car, then rushed towards an alley that still was partially protected by half-standing walls. His footing slipped on a pile of bricks, but he managed to correct himself without losing much speed. The sound of footsteps ran after him, but he didn't risk slowing down to look back. He zigzagged to make himself harder to hit at a distance.

About one block from the truck, he saw a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. A woman with short red hair in a green jacket was running parallel to him. She slid over the hood of a turquoise sedan and used it to steady what looked like a hunting rifle in his direction. Dean shot at her twice to provide himself some suppressing fire while he got behind a lone support pillar. He waved a piece of debris into her field of view, but she didn't shoot at his feign. Fearing that the first person would soon be flanking him, Dean made a break for the cover of a van roughly fifteen feet away. As he ran, Dean noticed that the woman wasn't crouched by the car as she had been a second earlier.

Once he was behind the van, he took a few breaths. She was out there somewhere and the person with the assault rifle could be bearing down on him any moment. The truck was only about a hundred feet away, but there was barely any cover.

He ran for it. After about twenty feet he heard some rubble shift to his right. He fired in the direction of the sound, but kept moving. About ten feet further he heard the sound of a gunshot and noticed the bullet impact the wall in front of him and frighteningly close by. He turned slightly to avoid a large rock, when he heard the second shot.

For a moment Dean thought that he'd been punched by a pursuer, but when he spun around and fell to the ground he realized that there was nobody that close to him. He looked down at his body and saw two patches of dark red spreading over his shirt. He dropped his pistol and tried to apply pressure to the wounds on his side, but the more blood he lost, the less strength he had. His head dropped backward, awkwardly coming to rest on some crumbling bricks.

His top priority during that job was to stay alive for three days and in less than a few hours he'd
managed to get shot twice. He felt like an idiot. Granted, it would’ve been pretty farfetched to assume that shit would be that bad. Maybe staying alive for three days was a feat in a place like that?

"You all saw it; he shot first. I'm still clean."

Dean heard a woman speak to his right and turned his head toward her voice. He saw the red-haired woman and an Asian man that had tattoos covering everything but his face casually walking toward him.

"Mazel tov. Let's just re—holy fuck!" shouted the man.

The pair ran to Dean’s side after getting a good look at him. They both knelt down to see how bad his injuries were.

The woman pulled a short-range walkie-talkie from her jacket, then ordered, "Bones, circle for anyone else. Fox, get the truck. We're getting him out of here. Now!"

While radioing the others, she reached for Dean’s wounds. He was confused about what she was planning on doing to him. After all, he was pretty sure she’d been the one who shot him. But he didn’t have the strength to fight her when she moved his hands. He didn’t have much strength for anything… and his vision started to fade.

Dean heard some rustling, and a large vehicle approach. He was picked up off the ground, then things became foggy. An unknown amount of time later he opened his eyes to realize he was lying in the back of a covered truck bed. The red-headed woman was kneeling next to him applying pressure to his gunshot wounds. Two other people sat in the truck bed with them, but Dean couldn't make out their features.

"How much farther?" the woman yelled through the small window into the truck’s cab. Someone inside the cab shouted an answer back to her and she looked down at Dean. "Come on. Just keep it together for a few more minutes."

He wanted to reply with some cute one-liner about not going anywhere, but when he tried to talk it just came out as a strange raspy gurgle. She smiled down at him. His cloudy brain didn’t bother keeping him apprised of his current circumstances beyond the fact that a beautiful woman was smiling at him…. But she had a smear of blood on her cheek. He tried to reach up to wipe it away, but she quickly shifted, ready to act if he was going to try something. Another set of arms held him down without difficulty. As he tried to move his hands, Dean realized that he was in manacles. He tried to get up, but several hands held him down and a dull pain in his side intensified.

"We should tranq him," suggested one of the men holding him down.

"How would we even know what to give him? He's borderline on passing out anyway. We're not giving him drugs until we know what's going on," the woman said as she continued to apply pressure.

"But, Sarge, look at him."

She leaned in to take a closer look at Dean’s face. "Don’t worry. He'll survive, and if not then he wasn’t worth us saving to begin with."

Dean was walking down a wooden pier that extended across a serene lake. He had been fishing
there once, when he was thirteen. Bobby had taken him and Sam there while their dad was on a week-long hunt out of state. It had been their little secret, a weekend away from the world of hunting.

Looking around he'd expected to see Bobby carrying a pair of rods and a tackle box or Sammy running around with a juice box in one hand and a paperback in the other. Bobby and Dean had done most of the fishing while Sam had just lay on the pier in the sun, occasionally reading interesting passages from his book aloud. Dean remembered that on that trip Sam was reading a book about pirates—probably *Treasure Island* or something.

But Bobby and Sam weren't there…. They were somewhere else... somewhere unpleasant. That filthy little apartment. He had left to go get some useful information. This wasn't really happening. The pier, it was a dream or memory. Well, not really a memory; he'd never actually been alone out there. This place was a source of comfort to him, and he'd gone there in dreams occasionally, but that was before Hell. Since then, even his nicest dreams seemed to turn….

Dean's pulse began to rise as he looked around, waiting for the beauty to be burnt and torn away before his eyes. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down his neck. He didn't want that sanctuary in his mind to be violated by any of the traumatic memories. The thought of watching that wonderful place be destroyed made him turn and run toward land.

He reached the dirt path and kept running. Beyond the unpaved parking lot. Beyond the picnic tables. Beyond the small grass field. Passing into the forest, where he and Sam had once played hide-and-seek against his better judgment. A hundred feet past the treeline he leapt over a fallen tree, then dropped to the ground. He pressed himself against it and tried to be as silent as possible.

Something was chasing him. He remembered the woman with the short red hair. She'd been chasing him earlier, but this wasn't her. It was something more powerful and terrifying... and strangely familiar. He couldn't tell if it was a memory from Hell breaking through and he didn't want to find out. The thing was getting closer; it could sense Dean as much as he could sense it. Instinctively, he knew that hiding wouldn't work, so he started running again.

The forest blurred around him as his recollection of that South Dakota forest failed and his imagination had to compensate. The snapping from the leaf-and-twigs-covered ground soon became the slapping sound of running on wet stone. He didn't want to look down. He already knew the liquid was blood. As he ran, he sensed the claws and metal hooks reaching out to grab at his flesh, missing by less and less distance with every attempt. Tears ran down his face and his lungs burned. A hook caught his right Achilles tendon and he tripped. Crashing to the ground, he cringed, expecting to land on the blood-covered stone of a dungeon floor or a bed of blades—but it was only fresh grass.

After a moment Dean opened his eyes to see that he was lying in an aisle of an old cemetery. He slowly stood up and took in the scene. To his knowledge, he'd never visited that cemetery, either on a job or to pay respect. A wrought-iron gate creaked as it swung in the wind and several crows cawed as they flew overhead. In spite of the presence of a gate and the birds, who could come and go as they pleased, Dean felt the strange sensation that he would never be able to leave that place.

He walked through the rows of headstones, but found that he couldn't make out any of the names. Even when he crouched down, with his eyes only inches from the carving, it was incomprehensible. His fingers traced the individual letters and he mouthed out the words, but something wasn’t connecting in his mind. He gave up on trying to investigate the details and opted to see if anything could be gained by an intuitive approach. Cautiously walking through the aisle of headstone, he tried to take in the entire bizarre experience.
Dean began running his fingers along the top of the headstone as he walked. On the fifth one he touched he immediately knew it belonged to his father. The realization made him shiver. They hadn’t buried their father. He received a traditional hunter’s pyre and his ashes had been unceremoniously scattered. The only thing resembling a burial was that Sam had placed John's dog tags below a patch of grass on Mary's grave. He had no headstone, no memorial to his life... except his sons.

The burden of that responsibility weighed on Dean. His dad had been a great man—one of the best hunters of their time. And his entire legacy rested on the shoulders of his two sons... though Sam had never taken that responsibility as seriously as Dean had. Sam had eventually given up at trying to meet their father's impossible standards. But Dean still struggled with being the kind of man necessary to honor his father—yet at the same time he was trying to accept Sam in a way that their dad had seemed incapable of. At times that conflict felt like a failure on Dean's part, that he wasn’t the type of man he should be…. Sometimes he wasn't even sure what type of man that was.

His hand recoiled from his dad's headstone and he looked at the others trying to understand what was happening. Even though he couldn't read the words he started to understand that every grave before him belonged to a member of his father's family. The collection extended into the distance, back to some point of significance that occurred long ago.

He turned around to see three headstones marking unfilled graves, apart from the rest. The middle of the three headstones had its name gouged out. Dean squinted in a futile attempt to read the erased name from all the way at the foot of its open grave.

"Do not concern yourself with him," said a voice that reverberated in Dean's very core. "He is already lost."

Looking up, Dean saw a being that he could barely conceive. He knew it was so much more, but his mind struggled to find a way to convey it. The result was something that resembled a human, neither male nor female. Its individual features changed if Dean tried to focus on them for more than a few seconds, but he knew in his soul that no matter what iteration he was seeing, this creature was fiercely beautiful.

It wore an ornate set of plate armor that appeared to be made of gold, but Dean knew it was harder than diamond. It wielded a flaming hand-and-a-half sword with a gold hilt. Elegant golden wings spread out from its back, reaching a span of maybe thirty feet. With each flex of the wings, Dean felt a sensation of power pulsate and wash over him.

The creature placed one armored foot on the defaced headstone and pushed it into the open grave. Walking over to one of the two remaining graves, the creature placed a hand on the headstone. Dean shuddered as he felt a hand rest on his shoulder, but there was no one beside him. He realized the creature was touching his headstone.

"I have been looking for you for quite some time." The creature spoke with an almost patronizing tone. "If you would tell me where you are, it would make everything much easier."

Dean thought back to being shot. He'd been in New Orleans... in the French Quarter. The creature gripped the headstone tighter and Dean could feel its anticipation. He resisted the creature and that train of thought. It wanted to know where he was, possibly where he'd been, and his instincts screamed against disclosure. Something was wrong. A lot of things were wrong, but this creature... it was the thing chasing him. It was hunting him.

"Do not fear me, Dean," the creature said, sensing his raising panic. "You and I will do great things together. You will see that in time. It is our destiny."
That Has Such People In It

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean woke up in a large metal cage. He was lying on his side, partially curled up in the fetal position. His torso didn’t hurt anymore, but he still started gingerly checking for injuries, only to stop when he noticed the weight on his forearms. His wrists were in manacles that were each attached to a two-foot length of heavy steel chain, which were bolted to the concrete floor. The cage was about seven feet in each dimension and housed in the center of a small one-room building.

The building looked worn, with rusted corrugated metal walls and a doorway that was covered by little more than heavy canvas cloth. It wasn't as warm or humid as it had been in New Orleans, which was a relief in the compact metal building. The only piece of furniture in the room, aside from the cage—if that could be considered furniture—was a wooden table. There were no chairs in the room, which Dean found strange because there were two other people sitting in the room with him.

A lean black man with a two-inch afro peppered with a few silver hairs and a goatee sat cross-legged directly in front of Dean, but outside the cage. His pants and boots appeared to be military, but he wore a badly-faded black t-shirt featuring a spiky pink ball and an even older-looking, slightly-oversized, tan jacket. Three necklaces hung from his neck; two carried pendants and one was a silver locket. The visible parts of his arms and neck were covered in tattoos that looked like runes. He was grinding something with a mortar and pestle.

On top of the wooden table sat a woman with pale skin and brown hair that reached her mid-back. She had dark brown eyes that were watching Dean like he was a bomb about to go off. She wore military-style boots, cargo pants that seemed to be reinforced with strips of heavy leather, a plain black t-shirt, and a black leather jacket. An old scar cut across her right cheek, and she wasn’t wearing any jewelry except for a necklace that matched one the man was wearing. She wasn’t doing anything aside from watching Dean and sitting with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"What the hell?" Dean muttered while pushing himself upright.

"Not quite," the woman replied.

"Sorry about the restraints, but we have to take precautions,” the man apologized without looking up from his work for more than a second.

"You guys shot me and chained me up. It kinda seems like I should be more worried about you than the other way around," Dean countered.

He was pretty upset and felt justified in giving these people as much shit as possible, but he held himself back from actively picking a fight. After all, he was the one chained up in a cage, but more importantly, he was alive and fully healed, which seemed surprising the more he thought about it. These people, or someone, had saved his life and he didn’t want to make them change their
mind(s) before his three days were up.

"You have to understand, you were wandering around in a hot zone," the man continued, trying to excuse the circumstances. "You're pretty lucky actually. They would've just left you there except for you looking like you do...."

"Looking like what?"

"Like Dean Winchester."

Dean paused for a second. This guy knew who he was—or at least who Dean Winchester was. The man put down the pestle, drew a lighter from his jacket pocket, and lit the contents of the mortar. He blew out the fire, but the bowl kept smoking slightly, then slid it toward Dean.

"The question is, what are you?" the man said as he looked up to meet Dean’s eyes. "We've tested you with iron, silver, largus root—all the usual tricks, and you've checked out so far."

Dean felt conflicted. On the one hand he didn't know who these people were and whether they were trustworthy. On the other hand he was at their mercy and out of options besides waiting the three days until Castiel retrieved him. His instinctive reaction was to be as obstructive as possible, but he felt... tired. A strange calm started to creep into his mind and he thought maybe time had slowed down slightly. Dean gazed down at the smoking mortar and frowned weakly.

"You're drugging me...." His head drooped an inch or two. "That's cheating."

"Maybe, but I'll try to spare you too much embarrassment. What species are you?" The man’s tone was a combination of reassuring and focused. He seemed to be making a concerted effort not to be any more threatening than he needed to be, which Dean noted.

Dean scowled, a little offended by the question. "Human."

"What is your name?"

"Dean Winchester."

The man glanced back at the woman, who shrugged. He tried again. "What name were you given when you were born?"

"I told you, Dean Winchester."

"What were you doing in New Orleans?"

"I was looking for help... or information about where to find help."

The man leaned forward to look at Dean with a newfound curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"I'm supposed to find out what happens, so that we know what to do."

"Who's 'we'?"

Dean couldn’t stop himself from rattling off the list. "Me, Bobby, Sam, some angel named Castiel, a bitch demon named Ruby, and my niece."

The woman hopped off the table and stood behind the man's left shoulder. Her posture reminded Dean of a soldier at ease. He began to suspect she was the man's bodyguard, but Dean couldn't see any weapons on her.
The man pressed forward with the questioning. "What do you mean by 'find out what happens'?"

"That angel, Castiel, sent me forward five years to get a sneak peek at the future so that we know who we can trust and what to do."

Apparently he had said something that the two of them found very interesting because the man turned to the woman for her reaction. The woman spoke to the man in a language that Dean didn't recognize. It didn't even sound like a romance language. The man nodded while releasing a soft sigh, then replied in the same language. They spoke for a minute and based on the conversation's tone, they were both concerned about something.

“What’s going on?” Dean managed to ask through his stupor, but the other two didn’t seem as compelled to give up information.

"Did anyone else come with you?" the man asked after finishing the conversation with the woman.

"No."

The man covered the mortar with his palm and whispered a few words. The smoke stopped as Dean's head began to slowly clear.

"I'm sorry about the smoke, but we had to get straight answers—"

He was interrupted by what sounded like a sudden gust of wind and wings flapping. Dean saw the canvas door ripple from the breeze. Two men began talking outside, but he couldn't make out their words.

"Shit," the woman said as she walked toward the door. "I'll see if I can take care of—"

But she was cut off when a man entered the room. His sandy blonde hair was short, but messy. He had unnaturally bright blue eyes, subtly pronounced cheekbones, and pale stubble along his jaw. There was a strange beauty to him despite the fact that he looked like he didn't own a mirror. He wore the same boots as the others. On his hips were two holstered pistols and what looked like a sheathed sword was on his back. His light grey jacket and pants were an unusual design that appeared to have light armoring on the outside of the limbs and chest. The jacket also had an extra panel of fabric that was almost a foot wide, which extended the length of the back, but was open on the sides. He stopped just inside the doorway and stared at Dean with a completely neutral expression that seemed oddly familiar.

"You're supposed to be CAG on the perimeter," the woman told the newcomer in a tone that clearly conveyed her disapproval.

"I put Moriel in charge. She's more than capable, especially during a ceasefire," the blonde man replied. The woman appeared to be his superior officer, but not by much if he seemed so calm rebuffing her complaints. "What is he?"

"As far as we can tell he's the real deal—or some variant of the real deal," answered the man on the floor cleaning up the mortar and pestle.

"He's human?" The blonde man tilted his head and took a few steps toward Dean. Once he was a little closer Dean realized that the newcomer was younger than his rigid behavior had initially led Dean to believe. He must've been in his late teens or early twenties.

"How many people know about this?" the woman asked the kid while gesturing at Dean.
"It's already on pirate radio. That's how I found out while on duty."

"So much for playing this one close to the chest," the man sitting on the floor complained.

"Talial, come in here," the brown-haired woman yelled, causing a short woman who must've been guarding the door to enter. She looked normal enough, but Dean felt his blood cool when he saw that she had an angel blade holstered at her side. He realized that Moriel and Talial sounded an awful lot like Uriel and Castiel. Maybe all angels names ended in L ... but that didn't fit with Lucifer. In any case he wouldn't have been surprised if the woman was an angel, which posed the question of what these other people were. The blonde kid talked about being human like it was something unexpected, but maybe he was thinking of something more mundane like a shifter.

The shorter, possibly-angel woman stood at attention in front of the brown-haired woman.

"I want you to go work crowd control on this situation," directed the brown-haired woman. "We can't have news of him getting out or we'll have a real mess on our hands."

"Yes, ma'am."

As Talial left, she didn't bother to address the men at all. Dean was beginning to suspect that the brown-haired woman was a higher ranking military figure in this organization. Though he noticed that her two apparent subordinates were both armed and she wasn't. It was possible that their group was big enough that she didn't actually need to fight or maybe she just wasn't geared up. The blonde kid had said something about a ceasefire.

This psuedo-military vibe reminded Dean of how Castiel talked about his garrison. That combined with the woman sporting the angel blade and all the angelic sounding names continued to give Dean a sinking sensation. He decided to just be direct about the situation.

"So, what," he asked his three captors, "I've been grabbed by angels?"

"Actually, the squad that nabbed you was two humans, a ghoul, and a demon." She made the comment without looking at Dean; she was too busy watching the blonde kid grimly.

Dean's face scrunched up slightly at what must have been a bizarre attempt at a joke. There was something about her that he didn't like, aside from the fact that she was one of the people keeping him in a cage. "Listen, lady. I've been through a whole lot of shit in the last few days. I'm sore as hell, and I don't know what the fuck is going on. So don't start making jokes. I saw the angel's blade and those names sound awfully angelic."

She stepped forward and squatted to be at eye-level with him. Her stare was incredibly intense, so much so that Dean felt he might have recoiled slightly. She had a presence that could command authority and she definitely had experience using it.

"I'm not joking." She was visibly frustrated by his accusation.

The man on the floor waved her off and tried to calm the situation. "Alright. Let's have a civilized conversation like we're all adults. Dean, you might find this hard to believe, but we're on your side."

"Really? Because I'm not getting that vibe." Dean rattled his chains.

"I think the situation is a bit confused. We need to make sure we're all on the same page before we figure out how to proceed."
"That doesn't sound ominous at all," Dean muttered, interpreting 'proceed' as possibly including dumping his corpse.

"What date was it when you left?" the man on the floor asked.

Dean furrowed his brow, confused by the question. He had already told him that he was sent from five years earlier. "December 15, 2009."

The three captors exchanged looks of surprise and interest.

"Well, there's your problem. On December 15, 2014, New Orleans was blacked out," the woman explained, then leaned over to the man sitting on the floor next to her. "I told you something was off."

"Was 'blacked out'?" Dean mouth went dry around his words. He had no idea what 'blacked out' meant, but 'was' he recognized with rising fear.

"In 2013, Heaven dropped the equivalent of a magic E.M.P. on an 800-mile diameter section on the southern United States, including New Orleans. No magic in that whole area until it fully wears off," explained the man on the floor.

"You missed your target," the woman added. "It sounds like you skipped along the timeline like a rock on the water until the anti-magic aura wasn't strong enough to keep you out."

"What?" Dean whispered.

"Welcome to December 15, 2039."

Dean's heart started pounding and he suddenly felt light-headed. He had been relying on being brought back by Castiel, who would be searching for him in December 18, 2014. He was twenty-five years past that and had no idea how he was going to get home.

"You okay?" the woman asked in an unexpected display of concern. "You look a little green."

"I was supposed to get brought back from 2014…. He's not gonna know where to find me." Dean tried to take a few calming breaths, but they weren't doing much for him.

"What do you think Dyl? Do we even have enough juice to throw him back thirty years?" she asked the blonde kid, who considered her question for several seconds before answering.

"One way or another we could probably make it work," Dyl speculated. "Kali would know better than me."

"We'll have to get her advice anyway on how to get him back without paradoxing the world out of existence or something like that," said the man who was finishing packing up his mortar and pestle.

"I'll ask if she can meet with us in the next few days," Dyl told them. "She'll be very interested to see what's happening."

Dean stared at his captors and blinked in disbelief at their willingness to get him back home. "I don't get it. Why are you people helping me? Who are you?"

The three of them exchanged looks, uncertain of how to react to Dean's questions. The two men ended up deferring to the woman, who shot them a look as if to call out their cowardice and shook
her head. She huffed a little laugh, then smiled at Dean.

"I shouldn't be surprised you don't recognize me." Her posture turned in slightly, for the first time betraying a lack of confidence. "The last time you saw me I was only a day or two old."

Dean stared at her in confusion that slowly transformed into shock. She looked like the meatsuit Ruby had been using with a few small differences. Her hair was a lighter brown, reminiscent of Sam's, and she had his nose and smile—when she did smile. She also seemed taller than Ruby had been; actually considering that her military style boots lacked a heel, she must've been about 5'10". For a moment Dean considered that maybe one of the reasons he had initially disliked her was the strong resemblance to Ruby.

Dean opened up his mouth, fumbled on his words, then managed to whisper, "Kaylee?"

"That proves it. He's really Dean! Only the folks and Uncle Dean call me Kaylee." She grinned at the other two men. She decided to clarify her statement after seeing Dean's dumbfounded expression. "Most people call me Kay, if that."

"Most people call you 'ma'am,"" Dyl corrected.

"I mean people that actually know me."

Dean was barely processing what had just happened. She was his niece, but she was thirty years old... almost the same age as him. She seemed to be taking it all a lot better than he was. Her comfort level with the insane situation made him feel even more concerned about what kind of a world he'd walked into.

"So, Cas sent you forward to get some ideas on what to do—" She began, but Dean interrupted her.

"Cas?"

"Castiel." She looked perplexed for a moment and then realized what the issue was. "Oh man. You've only known him for a few days. I guess you haven't given him the nickname yet."

"I give him a nickname?" Dean's eyebrows rose. "The nerdy, little angel in the trench-coat and I become friends?"

Kaylee looked at the other two men unsure how to respond. The blonde man's lips thinned and the other man shrugged helplessly. "Yes... you two are best friends," she answered. "This is so weird, giving you a future history lesson."

"Aren't you worried about 'paradoxing the world out of existence'?” Dean didn’t know if he should be covering his ears for fear of causing the universe to implode. He suddenly regretted not asking Castiel about a thousand more questions before agreeing to their stupid plan.

"You've already seen enough to probably screw things up. We might as well just go with it for now. If there's any risk of damage from talking to us, we can just wipe your memory before you go back," Kaylee suggested. "The whole clusterfuck-realization-events are probably just when you're actually making the jumps."

"Those would be the highest moments of risk," Dyl confirmed.

"Let's check with Kali before we risk Dean meeting Dean, just to be safe," the other man added, earning a nod of agreement from Dyl.
"Wait. I'm still alive?" It hadn't occurred to Dean that he would live to be sixty years old. He'd always assumed that he'd die young on the job... again. If anything, Sam was the one he had pictured— "Is Sam alive?!"

"You're alive. Dad's... alive. Mom and Cas too." Kaylee waved a hand in a gesture vaguely indicating a group of people somewhere else.

"Bobby?" Dean asked weakly, knowing that that would put Bobby in his late-eighties at best.

"Sorry. No.... He... went out fighting." Kaylee frowned slightly in understanding that that was hardly a comfort. After a moment of unpleasant remembrance, she looked up with a little more enthusiasm. "In your time do you know Tom?"

She gestured to the black man, who was getting up from the floor. He smiled at Dean hopefully, but Dean shook his head.

"No, I don't know any Tom," Dean replied.

Kaylee exchanged a meaningful glance with Tom, then turned toward Dyl. "This is Dylandiel or Dylan. He's...." She looked over at the blonde man unsure of how to introduce him.

"I'm Kay's second-in-command," he explained flatly.

"Wait, command of what?" Dean asked.


"Welcome to the Apocalypse."

December 15, 2009 1:15pm

Everyone quietly processed the latest piece of bad news. By that point it was hard to think of anything that could really shock them and disappointing turns kept coming with such regularity that they didn't pack nearly as much punch. Yet the sum of one struggle after the next had left them all too fatigued to really tackle the problem with any enthusiasm.

Bobby leaned against a wall and closed his eyes in frustrated thought. Castiel sat quietly, relatively unmoved by the revelation. Ruby slouched on the couch and watched Sam, who cradled Kaylee for some minor comfort. Dean pulled a quarter out of his pocket and held it up thoughtfully.

"Anyone feeling lucky?" He asked as he flipped the quarter, caught it in midair, then slapped it onto the back of his left hand. His right hand continued to cover it as he looked over at Sam.

"Heads," Sam said after a few seconds, playing along with the demonstration of the bleak chances.

Dean peeked at the result and told everyone, "Heads. We didn't get blown up."

"Now if only we could keep up the good luck," Bobby muttered.

"Holy fuck. That could make the difference." Ruby sat up as the cogs in her mind started spinning. "If we make a luck spell in advance, it could knock out some of the spell failure risk. The luck spell doesn't have to get through the interference of the wards and it can be obvious because it'll be contained to the immediate area. It might take a few days or so to design, but that's better than weeks or months and it could make this whole thing less suicidal."
It took a few hours for Ruby to work out the extensive list of spell components and equipment she needed to try making a luck spell. She explained that the overall process could take several attempts since the odds of executing a luck spell were low, but at least failure didn’t cause any damage, only lost time. The irony of needing luck in order to create a luck spell didn’t escape any of them. After Castiel returned with her supplies, she began laying out some of the components on the table.

"Hey, could one of you give me a hand with this?" Ruby held up a plastic baggie of mummified mice for the guys to see.

Dean kicked his feet up on the couch and grinned to emphasize how committed he was to not partaking in any activity involving dead rodents. Sam handed him the baby as a consolation responsibility, then joined Ruby.

She drew a series of runes on the table in chalk while Sam timidly cut the feet off the mice. Ruby had started instructing Sam about the tails when she stumbled slightly to her right. Her arms reached out for the tabletop, but couldn’t quite grip it for stability. She knocked over several bottles, one of which fell to the ground and shattered.

"No—No! Argh!" She hunched forward clutching her chest as she cried out in pain and anguish. Sam immediately stopped what he was doing and grabbed her to provide support. After a second she looked up at him with solid black eyes. "It’s the coven. Something’s wrong. I can feel it."

"Angels might be attacking it," Castiel suggested. "It is likely they would attempt eliminating parties that would give you and Sam quarter."

Ruby was shaking and Sam couldn’t tell if it was from pain, shock, or anger—likely all of the above. She pulled away from him, rushed around the table, grabbed one of the two angel blades, then disappeared. Sam looked around frantically. He knew that she had said she had a duty to protect them, but he had no idea that she’d be willing to potentially jump into a fight with an unknown number of angels. It was reckless, but he couldn’t just let her get herself killed.

"We have to go get her!" Sam pleaded with Castiel.

"Sam, you can't just chase after her!" Dean stood up in alarm, still holding Kaylee.

"It's Ruby!"

"But they're—" Dean began, but Castiel and Sam were gone.

Castiel and Sam appeared in the clearing between several of the coven’s houses. They were on the southeastern edge of the camp, away from the more active northern side that had the barn and community building. As soon as they had touched down it was clear that something was wrong. A significant plume of black smoke rose from one of the far houses, smelling like ozone, and a crackling noise came from an indistinct location.

Thirty feet away on ground was the body of a woman. Sam ran over to her and rolled her over to see if she was alive. Her face was frozen mid-scream, but all insight into her fear was gained by the shape of her mouth. Her eye sockets were hollow and scorched. He felt for a pulse, but found none.

"She was smote," Castiel said as he walked past him toward the main part of the camp. "There is nothing we can do for her."
Sam stared at the dead woman for a moment longer, transfixed. That was what Uriel had tried to do to him. The angel had tried to smite him. He’d somehow managed to defend himself and had even killed Uriel. He only hoped that he could figure out how to do it again. Castiel held their remaining angel blade and he was left to make do with his powers, as unpredictable as they might be. But he wasn’t scared for himself. Somewhere out there was Ruby and who-knew-how-many of the coven needing their help.

He got up and flexed his empty hands as he followed Castiel between the quiet buildings. After a few seconds they could hear the sound of fighting and a man scream. Rushing around the corner, they found a scene that made Sam sick and enraged.

The central clearing was littered with over a dozen bodies. Only a few feet to his right was the edge of the vegetable garden that Tom had taken so much pleasure in showing him a year earlier. Now it was practically a graveyard. Between the rows of vegetables were four children with empty eye sockets. Parts of the soil were deeply gouged and burnt, giving the distinct impression that some of the witches fought back. In fact, one of the bodies was unfamiliar and instead of having his eyes burnt, his skin had a blue tinge to it.

Castiel hadn’t slowed down at all while passing by the bodies. He walked with purpose, looking out for other angels while searching for Ruby or any other survivors. Sam was trying to fight through his shock, but it was difficult. When he found Pascoe, he fell to his knees. Small curls of smoke were still rising from the holes where Pascoe’s eyes had been. His left palm was intentionally cut open, probably for a spell.

As Sam was looking at his friend’s body, two angels appeared in the clearing. Castiel yelled a warning to him while parrying an attack. Sam turned just in time to see the second angel reaching for him. Rolling out of the way, Sam’s anger mixed with adrenaline and he telekinetically slammed the angel into the mud. He lunged at the attacker, landing on the angel’s chest, and gripped his throat. Two different instincts fought for dominance in Sam. The human side of him crushed down on the angel’s windpipe, while the other side of him wanted to burn the angel alive from the inside out. Light glowed below Sam’s hands as the angel spasmed, unable to cry out. Light shone from the angel’s eyes and mouth as the his body went limp and a pair of charcoal wings marked the ground.

Castiel had landed the killing blow on his own opponent, and looked over at Sam in time to see him use his new power on the angel. The sight was somewhat alarming, though Castiel couldn’t fully understand the reasons for his feelings. Another angel appeared beside Castiel and nearly landed a hit while he was distracted watching Sam. Sam got up and moved to help Castiel when the sound of a child screaming came from nearby.

“Go!” Castiel yelled as he blocked an attack.

Sam ran in the direction that the scream had come from, but he couldn’t find its source. He passed another group of bodies that included two children. It wasn’t clear how long they’d been dead. All the bodies were fresh. The screaming child could’ve been one of the two in front of him, or it could have run away or hid somewhere…. Sam turned and ran for the barn.

He dropped through the already-opened trapdoor into Tom’s ‘secret fort,’ landing behind an angel. The angel turned to face Sam, who placed his hand on the angel’s chest. Brilliant light came from her eyes and mouth before her body collapsed to the dirt floor. Beyond the body, Belda knelt with six small children huddled around her.

“Sam?” she whispered.
"Castiel, I need you!" Sam hoped he would be heard. After a second's delay Castiel appeared before Sam. "Get them to safety."

Dean had been pacing the small, dingy apartment while Bobby tried to busy himself with Kaylee when Castiel teleported into the apartment living room. He was about to throw up his hands and yell at whoever had returned when he saw that the angel was accompanied by a young woman who was surrounded by six children, including two infants she clutched to her chest.

"You will be safe here. I must return to the fight," Castiel told the woman before disappearing with no further explanation.

Dean looked down at the woman and kids. He hadn't been expecting kids. When he thought of a coven, he thought of old witches, not children. The woman wasn't even old; she was probably in her early twenties. Her face was steeled, but Dean could tell that behind the act she was terrified. The children were crying or frightened into complete silence. Dean crouched down in a non-threatening gesture.

"I'm Dean, Sam's brother. It's okay. You're safe here."

Sam ran to the community building, carefully stepping to avoid several bodies while crossing the clearing. He wanted to stop to check if anyone lying on the ground was alive, but by then he knew that angels wouldn't merely injure. Turning into the social hall, Sam saw an angel looking at the floor. Gabin's body was at her feet, eyes burnt out of the sockets. Sam ran in and mostly dodged her attack with an angel blade, only suffering a small cut on his left shoulder. He killed her with one luminescent grasp, dropped her, then knelt down beside Gabin. Sam ran his hand over his face in grief. His palm came back damp with tears and blood. He didn't know when he'd started crying and the way that the taste of blood fell into his lips he suspected that using his powers had caused another nose bleed. He wiped his face quickly, then made to get up and continue looking for Ruby when he heard a noise.

A quiet rustling came from a cupboard a few feet in front of him. He crept forward and opened the door slightly. Tom was curled up in the cramped space. His arms were wrapped defensively around his head and his whole body was trembling. He peeked between his hands at the sound of the cupboard door opening.

"Sam!" Tom squeaked in a startled gasp.

"Listen, I'm going to get you out of here." Sam looked around the room, which was blocked from Tom's view by the cupboard door. "I need you to do something for me. I'm going to carry you. I need you to hold onto me and keep your eyes shut. Can you do that?"

Tom nodded. Sam leaned forward and scooped up the young boy. Tom wrapped his arms around Sam's neck, then pressed his face into his rescuer's shoulder. Sam held him in his arms, but supported him in such a way that his right arm could still be used in a pinch. Sam stood and started making his way out of the room.

"Just keep your eyes shut until I tell you it's okay to look," Sam whispered as he carried Tom past his dead father and the bodies of a dozen coven-mates. Sam turned a corner to find Ruby. She had some blood on her and held a large tome.

"Did you find anyone else?" she asked.
"I had Castiel take some back to safety. Did you?"

His question only earned a shake of her head. He didn’t know what to say to her.

Ruby looked faint. Of course she did. Not only had she lost friends, she’d lost people under her protection—and on some additional level she’d actually felt it.

Castiel suddenly appeared next to them and said, "It is likely that more angels will be arriving soon."

"I don’t feel anyone else." Ruby referred to her connection to the coven. "I think we’re it."

"If this child is the last survivor, then we should leave this place," Castiel suggested.

Sam thought about trying to cover Tom’s ears, but it was too late. He took one last look around the once peaceful little community before they teleported back.

In spite of the woman and the traumatized children taking refuge in the large bedroom, Dean had fully intended to yell at Sam for running off, but he stopped himself when he saw that Sam was holding a young boy. Sam sat down on the awful couch and hugged the kid for a few long seconds.

"Tom, we’re safe," Sam said softly. "You can open your eyes."

But the boy didn’t look. He just kept his arms wrapped tightly around Sam’s neck.

Sam gently patted his back. "Tom, I need you to do me a favor. There are other kids here with Belda. She’s going to need help taking care of them. Do you think you can go help Belda?"

He felt Tom nodding. When the boy looked up at Sam, his eyes were pink, but his expression was resolute. Tom climbed down and walked into the other room, which emitted the quiet sounds of whimpering children. Sam looked down at his shirt and noticed two damp spots where Tom had been crying.

The concern and outrage that Bobby and Dean had felt at the reckless move was quickly replaced with sympathy for the devastation of everyone around them. Castiel was unreadable, but he did not make eye contact with anyone.

Ruby placed the tome down on the table, then clutched a glass bottle so hard that it shattered in her hand. Sam hurried over to her and tried to check her bleeding hand. She was too upset to let anyone help her, so she pulled her hand away from him, but didn’t otherwise retreat. He wrapped his arms around her to embrace her. She thrashed with rage and helplessness, but eventually she let herself be held and cried into his chest.

Dean tried to say something reassuring after the painful silence. "At least you saved the kids."

"The coven had 15 kids," Ruby said.

Dean did the math in his head and cringed.

After Bobby spotted Sam struggling with his powers-induced nosebleed, Sam had been instructed to take the smaller bedroom and get some rest. For two hours he lay awake on the twin mattress with Kaylee sleeping on his chest. He’d lost several friends that day—and those were just the ones
he’d known about. Castiel had said that the angels would go after anyone who would be likely to
give him and Ruby shelter. There were dozens of people that might be on Heaven’s hit list because
of him and he had no idea where they were to warn them.

While he was deep in unpleasant thoughts, the door opened slowly and Tom tiptoed in. The boy
approached the side of Sam's bed, then silently lay down on the floor.

"Are you okay?" Sam whispered.

There was a little shuffling sound and Tom peeked over the edge of Sam's bed. "I couldn't sleep." He
looked down in embarrassment. "I... I had nightmares."

“It’s okay. Everyone gets nightmares, but you’re safe here.” Sam tried to reassure Tom, but knew
that it didn’t mean much after the day he’d had.

“Could I sleep in here?” Tom asked quietly.

He didn’t quite know how to respond, but nodded. Tom lay back down on the floor. Sam looked
around the sparsely furnished room, sighed, then scooted toward the side of the bed that was
against the wall.

"Tom, you can get in the bed."

The boy climbed onto the tiny portion on mattress that was left. Sam felt a little awkward sharing
the bed with a six-year old, but he wasn’t about to let the kid sleep on the disgusting floor. After a
few minutes, Tom fell asleep hugging Sam's side.

For several hours Sam lay there, Kaylee sleeping on his chest and Tom sleeping next to him. He
thought about all the destruction that had been caused or might be caused because of him. His
family and friends were struggling to find resources that might be dying at the hands of angels at
that very moment. They didn’t have a long-term plan or a safe harbor sufficient to accommodate
the six adults and eight children in the apartment. With their contacts potentially being hunted by
angels, they didn’t have days to try to improve their luck.

After Tom was deep asleep, Sam carefully climbed off of the mattress, only stirring the boy slightly.
He stood alone in the negligible hallway for a few minutes holding Kaylee. When he was ready he
kissed her tiny forehead, then went into the living room. Ruby walked up to him to see how he was
doing, but before she could ask, Sam handed Kaylee to her. Holding the back of Ruby's head with
one hand, Sam kissed her deeply. Bobby, Dean, and Castiel all stopped talking and turned to look
at the strangely affectionate display.

"I'm sorry," Sam apologized to Ruby, who looked up in confusion at him. "I'll be back as soon as I
can."

Sam reached into his pocket and withdrew Crowley's talisman. He smiled sadly, then clenched his
hand around the metal disc.

"Wait—" Ruby tried to stop him, but Sam disappeared.
vignettes of the alternate history to that point. Alt!Verse histories will be in italics for easy distinction. They'll also begin with a date stamp for your sanity, since the vignettes will not necessary appear in chronological order. Obviously there's a certain amount in the very beginning of the alt!verse history that needs to be covered in order to explain how they get out of the immediate jam, but after that there'll be some non-linear segments.

Originally, the majority of this act was going to just exposition by 2039!characters, but that seemed incredibly unpalatable especially after so much exposition over the last 8 or 9 chapters. Instead I'm opting for the "show me, don't tell me" approach. Though I'm going to still include the character exposition in 2039, just maybe not in as much detail as originally planned. The inclusion of exposition might be a bit redundant at times, but I'm hopeful that it will help clarify some points that might be easily overlooked and also it'll provide a clear line of what Dean knows.

Also, there are some flashbacks to the alt!verse timeline that didn't seem necessary or appropriate to the main story, which I've collected in the second work of this series. Some of those "deleted scenes" contains spoilers for content in Act Two, so you might want to wait until you finish this act (you'll know when it's done) before hopping over there.
"The Apocalypse?" Dean couldn’t believe what he was saying. “Like the end of the world?”

After seeing New Orleans, he knew things were bad, but that was almost unbelievable—almost. He reassessed his idea of what was possible when he realized that he had just woken up thirty years in the future. There were probably going to be a lot of strange discoveries to come, so he tried not to completely freak out during the first ten minutes.

"There's more to it than just some big abrupt end," Kaylee explained. “It's not like one day a ton of people got raptured and the rest of us got rained on with fire. It's been a pretty involved process.”

"I think officially this is… what, the tenth year?” Tom guessed while getting up and stretching after sitting on the concrete floor for what must’ve been at least an hour.


Tom ran his fingertips along his mustache and goatee before muttering, "We're too old for this.” A smile flickered on his lips as he glanced around the one-room building quickly to see if anyone else was watching, then wrapped an arm around Kaylee's shoulders, pulling her into a half-hug. He made a little show of looking at the hair on top of her head.

“You can stop checking, Tommy. You’re the only one here going grey so far.” She laughed and playfully elbowed him before he let her go.

Dean watched their interaction and felt a little uncomfortable at the realization that he didn’t know the nature of their relationship, which seemed to be something more than professional. Their matching necklaces caught his attention again, with a new, unknown significance. He suddenly began to appreciate just how much he didn’t understand about not just this world, but also the people in it.

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Ruby sat on the shabby couch rocking Kaylee anxiously. In the two hours since Sam had left, no one had really discussed his leaving because there wasn't anything to say. It was obvious where he’d gone and they couldn't do anything to change that. Ruby was the only one that had the ability to go to Hell relatively safely, but she didn't know what the situation was down there and if she’d be able to get to Sam, let alone return topside. At that point they had to wait and see if he’d be allowed to return…. If not, they'd have one more massive problem to deal with.

Tom silently came out of the bedroom where Belda and Bobby were trying to wrangle the other children. He looked briefly at Dean and Castiel, who were talking about which angelic choirs were combat trained, then inched away from them. He crept up to Ruby and climb onto the couch next to her. He had been incredibly withdrawn since being rescued sixteen hours earlier, but he
seemed a little more at ease sitting next to a familiar face.

"Is that your baby?" he asked after quietly watching the newborn for several minutes.

"Yeah. Her name is Kaylee." Ruby managed a small smile. She was grateful for the distraction and conversation that didn't revolve around the angels who had slaughtered their family hours earlier. She lowered Kaylee slightly and turned her body to give Tom a better view.

"How old is she?"

"Just a few days."

"She has a lot of hair."

"Some babies do," Ruby replied. "I think you can blame that on Sam. He's her dad."

Tom nodded as he processed the information. Whether he understood genetics or where babies came from, she had no idea. He looked around the room thoughtfully and Ruby wondered if she'd accidentally brought up the painful facts that neither Sam nor Gabin were with them. She tried to think of something comforting to say, but Tom spoke first.

"She doesn't know what's going on?"

"I think it takes a while before babies really start understanding stuff, but I could be wrong." Kaylee slept in apparent peace, which seemed to lessen the subtle look of concern on Tom's face. "She's not going to be doing much for a while; mostly she'll be resting."

"I've met babies before. They need a lot of help until they're bigger," Tom commented in a very matter-of-fact tone. After a thoughtful pause, he looked up at her. "Can I help you?"

Ruby was a little surprised by the offer. She'd expected Sam and, to a lesser extent, the adults to be some source of support, but she hadn't expected a six-year-old to volunteer. Tom had been something of a leader among the children at the coven, but now that things had become serious he was apparently really stepping into the role of guardian.

"Sure. Do you know how to hold a baby?" she asked, causing Tom's expression to turn a bit uncertain. "That's okay. See how I'm doing it."

Dean had been watching the conversation from across the room while Castiel had continued to talk at length, unaware of his audience's distraction. When Kaylee was placed in Tom's arms, Dean walked over and sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of the boy. Tom leaned back slightly and watched him nervously.

"I'm Dean, Sam's big brother." The boy looked a bit confused by his claim to be bigger than Sam, so Dean explained, "I'm Sam's older brother. When I was a little younger than you, I helped take care of him as a baby."

"You must've been a buff four-year-old hauling a baby giant around," Ruby joked with a softness that betrayed her concern, fatigue, and gratitude that she wasn't having to expend the mental effort to trade insults with Dean.

"He actually was a runt until around sixteen. Kids at school used to tease him for being small. I guess he showed them." Dean smiled at the thought, then looked at Tom. "If you adjust your left arm it'll probably be easier to hold her. Can I show you?"
Tom nodded and Dean reached over. He shifted Kaylee's head slightly, allowing the boy's arm to relax a bit more. Tom looked down at Kaylee with a slightly furrowed brow.

"Are we really safe here?" he asked.

"For now. Those symbols on the walls are wards that are hiding us from those angels." Ruby said as she gently patted Tom's back.

"They weren't hunters?"

Dean's lighthearted guise was rattled by Tom's assumption. It was a strange feeling to be faced with the flip side of a hunt. A week earlier, he'd been mentally adding Ruby's coven to his bucket list—now he was nearly horrified at the suggestion that hunters could have committed the massacre. Maybe the boy didn't see any of the fighting or maybe he didn't know what hunters were like? It was surprising to think that Sam, who the boy seemed awfully attached to, hadn't corrected his misconceptions about hunters.... Granted, maybe Sam had never told Tom that he was a hunter.

"No. Hunters are just people." Ruby answered, taking some pressure off of Dean. "The things that attacked the coven were very powerful creatures. The coven didn't know how to defend against them, but we're safe here now. I'm sorry we couldn't get there sooner, Tom."

Ruby's eyes watered and her lips thinned. Dean tried not to look at either of them for fear that he'd also succumb to his feelings of guilt or pity. Tom leaned against Ruby's side and she wrapped an arm around him. After a long period of quiet, Tom looked up at Ruby.

"Where's Sam?" His voice was concerned, but not scared.

"He went to talk to a powerful demon to ask it for help," Ruby answered.

"Is the demon a nice demon?"

"That's a good question."

Sam found himself seated in a small, windowless office of sorts. The walls were made from light grey stone blocks that fit together nearly seamlessly. The room was just big enough to comfortably hold its limited furnishings: two floor-to-ceiling polished walnut bookcases, one six-foot-wide polished walnut desk, two matching guest chairs, and a more ornately carved polished walnut chair behind the desk. Sam was seated in one of the guest chairs, which felt a bit hard and too small. Crowley sat opposite him in the larger chair.

"I'm so glad you could make it." The archdemon greeted him with a broad smile. When Sam shifted in his chair, Crowley snap his fingers and he suddenly found the chair to be much more comfortable for no obvious reason. "Sorry about that; I forgot to dehex those chairs after my last appointment."

"Thanks." Sam was trying not to sound too snarky. He was there to ask for help, after all. "I need your help. My family's in trouble and I'm ready to deal if it means they'll be safe."

"I'm sure we can work out something."

"There are angels after us."

Crowley nodded as he thought for a moment. He seemed to process the statement better than Sam
had expected. When he finally did speak, he was perfectly calm and collected. "Angels complicate things a bit, but we may have some protections against them."

"You knew about the angels?"

"Not with any certainty, but when a creature attacks my territory you can bet I'll start doing my homework." Crowley's voice only revealed a hint of resentment at the violation before switching to a more reassuring tone. "Hell's defenses against angels have been increased considerably since the attack. I doubt an angel could last a minute down here, if it could get in at all."

Sam dwelled briefly on the 'here.' He'd expected to go to Hell when he had decided to meet with Crowley, but it was another thing to do it. He looked around the room again, taking it in with newfound curiosity.

Crowley observed the reaction and smiled mischievously. "Did you expect it all to be fire and brimstone?"

"I don't really know what I expected." Sam thought back to all the times Ruby had told him about Hell. Each time he had realized just how wrong his assumptions had been. Now he was struggling to just take the experience as it appeared.

"Tell you what, I'll give you a little tour of the Citadel—that's where we are—and maybe a bit of Central District. We'll skip the racks and all the unpleasant bits that your imagination is no doubt filling in. You get to see all the behind-the-scenes excitement and while I'm showing you around we can chat a bit. Then afterwards we can really get down to business."

"I'm in a hurry." Sam felt tenser with every new pleasantry. He'd already wasted too much time debating whether to come at all. Now that he was there he needed to get it over with fast.

"Time moves differently down here. On Earth you've only been gone a second or two." Crowley tried to put his mind at ease. "You can afford to look around. If you agree to my terms you will be spending some time down here. You should at least know that it won't be spent over burning coals."

Sam's desperation was becoming obvious, but he almost didn't really care. Lives were potentially on the line. "The angels could be hunting down my friends right now. I don't have time to go sightseeing."

Crowley thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. A blank sheet of parchment and a black fountain pen appeared on the desk in front of Sam.

"List the people you're interested in providing protection for in the interim. I'll send out the scouts to find them. If they're still alive, they'll be moved somewhere safe until we finish our business here. Fair enough?"

"They'll be 'moved,'" Sam repeated, eyes narrowing slightly. "You're going to abduct them?"

"That's one way of looking at it. Another is that I'm rescuing them." Crowley smiled, but his eyes were completely indifferent. "I imagine most of your friends won't be keen on demons knocking at their door, but I really don't care about their feelings. Any that we can save we will, but you're right that we won't be asking pretty please."

Sam thought about the indignity and chaos that might ensue, but compared to the risks of not accepting the offer of help.... He began listing a dozen hunters and the handful of other contacts he'd met through Ruby. As an afterthought, he added the names of two college friends that he
occasionally kept tabs on. If the angels were as tech savvy as Castiel had mentioned there was a risk of the friends being found in his recent search history on the laptop he had left at Bobby’s house.

As he started running out of names, he paused and slowly moved his hand to cover the list in hesitation. Crowley was watching him with something more than casual interest.

"You're going to use them as hostages." It wasn't a question. Sam knew that was exactly what he was giving up.

"If necessary," Crowley admitted. "But wouldn't you rather be bargaining for their lives than just forfeiting them in the first place?"

Sam pushed the completed list across the desk in resignation, then hastily added. "And I want any of the surviving members of Ruby’s coven given the same treatment. I don’t know their names, but I imagine you can figure it out."

"Maji deals aren’t as well documented as Crossroad deals, but we’ll see what we can manage."

The archdemon snapped his fingers again and the list disappeared along with the pen. "Now that the searches are underway, we can get back to business—"

"How long will it take?" Sam anxiously interrupted.

"Unfortunately, hunters can be difficult for us to locate or access at times. It might be hard to forcibly remove a hunter if there are salt lines or an anti-possession tattoo. That combined with the time difference…. I wouldn't expect to hear any news for at least a few hours our time, so you should try to unwind. Which reminds me—where are my manners?" The archdemon snapped his fingers again, summoning a platter of food, a decanter of an amber liquid, and two glasses. "Go ahead and have something. I know you're famished."

It was true. Sam had skipped a meal in order to give up his food to the children. Before that he’d only had two very sorry excuses for meals in the last two days. He didn't want to show anymore vulnerability or even really gratitude in front of Crowley, but he had no idea how long he’d be stuck down there. It was technically within his power to suffer through his hunger on principle, but he wasn't sure how much being stubborn would gain him.

"How did you know that I'm hungry?" Sam asked as he warily grabbed a finger sandwich.

"In Hell, with enough experience you can feel the pain radiating off of people. Different types of pain feel different," Crowley replied.

"Must be useful in negotiations," Sam commented between bites.

"It's delightful." Crowley unstopped the decanter and poured himself a glass. "Scotch, or do you have another drink of choice?"

"Just water." The last thing he needed was to drink hard alcohol on a nearly-empty stomach. Crowley grinned and nodded with approval at the wisely cautious answer. Sam ate another small sandwich, then realized how much better he was feeling. "Why are you being nice to me?"

"We both know that if you're desperate enough to contact me, then you'll likely say yes. The question is how much I can get out of you," the archdemon explained with the confidence of a villain in the final act of a James Bond film. "I’m willing to wager that I could gain more in the long term by making you happier and giving more in negotiations than by squeezing you for all you’re worth right now. You already want to kill Lilith, and the angels are after you. I think you'll
be surprised to find that team Hell isn’t so far from where you stand currently. So I’m being nice because I think it will pay off in the end. If you prove to be needlessly uncooperative... then I’ll need to rethink my technique."

Sam nodded in understanding. He was being manipulated through politeness, partially-veiled threats, and his own weak bargaining position. Crowley wasn't trying to enslave him; he was trying to recruit him.

Sam’s academic curiosity was starting to embrace the otherwise-disconcerting small talk. "How often do you use the carrot instead of the stick?"

"Only when I don't want to leave any bruises." Crowley sipped his scotch with a little twinkle in his eye. "And bruises are traded so frequently in Hell that they're practically currency down here."

"I thought your currency was souls—or is the act of torturing as valuable as the soul it's being inflicted on?" Sam had always thought of damned souls as the main goods of Hell, but he hadn’t really considered what purpose they served or the relevance of the torment inflicted upon them.

"This conversation is about to peek behind the veil," Crowley purred as he straightened in his chair with renewed interest. "Which I'll allow conditioned on a small agreement: many of the things that you see or hear about are extremely confidential—"

"You want me to promise to keep it secret?" Sam guessed.

"No. That wouldn't prevent you from still screwing me over if you wanted to. Instead, the small agreement is that: if we don't reach a formal agreement and alliance by the time you leave here, then you will have all of your memory between the end of this sentence and your departure from Hell erased. Okay?"

"Do I have a choice?" Sam asked, a little surprised.

"Not if you want my help," Crowley responded coolly.

He didn’t like the idea of potentially having his memory tampered with, but he couldn’t figure out a way around it. "Fine," Sam said through his teeth. He took a moment to unclench his jaw, then flexed his lips, trying to reduce any visible tension—not that it mattered. A few minutes earlier he’d been told that his discomfort was being telegraphed. He was screwed—he should start getting more comfortable with that feeling. It would undoubtedly become a very familiar sensation. "I agree."

The archdemon stood up and walked around the desk. When Crowley started moving toward Sam instead of the door, he briefly wondered if Crossroads demons had to seal every deal with a kiss, but instead Crowley just extended his hand to shake. Sam hesitated for a moment, then took it. A strange tingling sensation moved up his arm from the handshake.

"That's the contract being written onto your soul. It's much harder to feel on Earth and the process works differently up there, but it's basically the same idea.” Crowley gestured toward the office door. “Shall we go peek behind the veil?”
Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

Sam found that the Citadel proved true to its name. As he followed Crowley through the labyrinth of unremarkable, grey stone hallways, it took almost no time at all to realize that the complex must be massive. None of the rooms or corridors he had seen contained windows—he wasn't even sure if they were above ground. Granted, he had no way of knowing if Hell had a sky to distinguish the ground. The stone construction gave the entire place the feeling of a fortress or castle that had somehow been designed without a single aesthetic indulgence.

"This is the Citadel, the heart of Hell," Crowley explained. "It is about thirty square kilometers—think about half the size of Manhattan. Clearly, I won't be showing you the whole thing right now, but we'll hit a few of the highlights. The Citadel contains all of our administrative activities, most of our archives, and our most fortified locations. Beyond the walls of the Citadel is the Central District, which surrounds it on all sides, creating a large buffer zone from the Pits.

"Central District is Hell's metropolitan center. It's surrounded by another wall, which is currently the border between Lilith's forces and our own. Central is roughly the size of the greater New York City area. The majority of our less combative castes reside there, but don't take that to mean that every demon in Central is sweet. They just practice different kinds of cruelty."

"Thanks for the warning." Sam recalled Ruby's brief description of the Central District and its figurative bombs. "Ruby said that there's a prison in Central. Isn't that a bit redundant?"

The archdemon hummed with amused interest at the question. "I suppose it depends on how you look at it. Do you think Hell is a prison? Or maybe you think that we don't have criminals? Or maybe on the other end, that we don't have laws at all?"

"I'm sure Hell has laws," Sam replied. "Otherwise a bureaucrat like you wouldn't have so much power."

Crowley grinned impishly at his astute observation. "Yes. Instead it'd be someone like Lilith. I can't begin to tell you all the bolts that came loose under her brief guidance. It was like watching a child use a Gutenberg to make paper mâché."

Sam raised an eyebrow at Crowley's metaphor. To compare Hell to a Gutenberg Bible seemed like an awfully bold and vain move. Though he had to admit that in terms of the historical significance, the inner workings of Hell probably had a more significant impact than he'd thought. He'd never really given the mechanics of Hell a moment of consideration until recently, which was probably a testament to its effectiveness. Messing with a delicate system was understandably frustrating, but there had been something in the archdemon's voice that went beyond bitterness.

"Your thing with Lilith, it's personal, isn't it?"

Sam's question brought Crowley to a halt. "At the Crossroads, we're entirely business. But the High Council's chamber is not always ruled by calmer heads.... And when you kill my peers and
attempt to kill me…. Yes. It's very personal."

"How did you survive?" Sam asked, then quickly added, "I'm guessing combat isn't your strength."

"Combat isn't, but covering my ass is…. Maybe someday you'll convince me to tell you how. But for now, that card will stay up my sleeve." Crowley began walking again and Sam hurried to keep up.

"The archdemons that were killed— What even happens when a demon dies?" Sam had been particularly curious about the subject since becoming involved with Ruby. Neither of them liked to dwell on the possible long-term aspects of their relationship, but occasionally it did keep him up at night.

"When a demon dies on Earth it's not our mess to clean up, but if they die down here usually we have to deal with the shell of their broken soul—the part that walks and talks," Crowley explained.

Sam was a little disappointed that Crowley seemed to be more focused on the practical and physical rather than the subjective experience. In a way it made sense. The guy was some sort of politician or administrator of an entire plane. He had more pressing concerns than something so metaphysical. Despite not getting the answer he'd hoped for, Sam almost didn't mind that much since he was being provided new trivia.

Crowley continued, "Sometimes demons will smoke around down here without taking on a form. Rumor is that if you die like that you'll just disappear. But for the ones with form, lesser corpses are destroyed and honored corpses are entombed. There are less than eighty tombs in Central, featuring a rogues' gallery of Hell's heroes. Most prominent are the Knights of Hell—"

"Knights of Hell?" He remembered some mention of knights when Ruby was looking through the encyclopedia of Hell at Bobby's, but she hadn't elaborated on them at all.

"Very powerful demons, similar to archdemons, but they aren't chosen by their caste—they don't even have a caste. Each one was supposedly recruited personally by Lucifer. Every once in awhile a Knight or two will rise from their tomb in the service of Hell—"

"Rise up?" Sam interrupted the aside with one of his own. "They're like zombie demons?"

"Not really. The tombs are more like where they recover from the injuries. It doesn't matter how bad the damage, if you give a Knight enough time, they'll be back in fighting shape. Apparently the bastards are just really hard to kill."

While Crowley was expounding on some comparatively boring explanation about the theories of the Citadel's masonry, Sam was briefly distracted by an ajar door that opened into a massive library containing hundreds of shelves full of small glass vials. He peeked inside and saw a laboratory setup with several sophisticated workbenches. The equipment was a strange combination of science in the form of precision microscopes and sorcery in the form of runes on the work surfaces.

"One of Morrison's little pet projects."

Sam turned to find that Crowley had backtracked the twenty feet from where he'd last seen his guide, and was standing right behind him.

"Do try to keep up," Crowley instructed. "Or at least make sure we don't get separated."
"Don't want me seeing certain things?" Sam guessed.

"I'm more concerned about you being seen, but that's not actually what I had in mind." Crowley gestured for Sam to continue following him through the halls. After a quick glance back into the lab, Sam allowed the tour to resume. "It's easy to get lost in here—it's actually designed that way. I suspect the intent was equal parts defensive and malicious."

"I thought we were in the nice part of Hell." Sam realized the contradiction in his own statement. "Nevermind. I think I've figured it out."

"Relatively speaking, this is the nice part, but you'll find that everything here has at least some barbed edges. It helps if you can have a sense of humor or professional appreciation for the small torments. Lightheartedness is the most effective way to thicken the hide."

"Lighthearted in Hell." Sam wasn't sure he'd heard of something quite that absurd. "Seriously?"

"It might seem daft now, but hopefully after a while it will make some sense."

Turning a corner, Sam felt a strange sensation of disorientation. He could've sworn that they'd made five consecutive left-turns at relatively even intervals along their walk, but they hadn't retraced any steps. They hadn't taken any stairs and the floor didn't seem to be slanted either.

"Does Hell itself mess with your sanity or is it just the demons in it that do the damage?" Sam asked as he realized there weren't any signs or artwork on the walls to act as a landmark and all the doors were identical.

"That's a tad philosophical for my tastes, but I imagine that most things could drive a person mad if you let them get under your skin," Crowley replied. "You'd be surprised to see some of the dungeons that specialize in breaking souls with a gentle touch. They're not as popular as your burner or blades dungeons, but the results can be astounding."

"How long does it take to break a soul with the gentle approach?"

"Usually around 250 years, local time."

Sam ran the math. If Hell really had an innately toxic effect that was essentially a gentle torture, without reprieve he'd be looking at breaking in only two years, Earth time, on the low end. As he looked back down the unsettlingly drab hallway where they had just come from and realized that he couldn't even remember now whether they'd turned left or right five times in a row. He sighed silently, then continued following Crowley.

They entered a foyer that had at least a dozen other hallways and staircases coming off of it. In the large room there were a handful of creatures moving about. There was almost no uniformity in their appearances. All but one was humanoid. Four had nearly human faces, while the others looked as though they had been spliced with characteristics of animals or natural materials. The overall impression that their appearances gave was disorganized.

"What are they?" Sam asked quietly.

Crowley didn't bother stopping to maintain some polite distance from the creatures while discussing them. He continued walking, though he turned his body slightly to look back at Sam who followed him a few steps behind in mild hesitation.

"Who," Crowley corrected. "They're demons. Not everyone is skilled enough to maintain a more human exterior, and not everyone wants to. If you want to see the ones that are all spikes and
viscera, then I suggest the Pits. They love that sort of theatrics. In Central our demons might be a 
little easier for you to stomach, since they don't spend all their time mutilating souls."

Seeing demons in person, Sam started to understand what Ruby had been talking about months 
ago. She had told him that demons could take many different forms, but were often the reflections 
of their twisted and broken souls. He hadn't expected the demons to be literally twisted, but as he 
approached them he noticed that many lacked any appearance of symmetry. It made some amount 
of sense that without a high level of concentration or maintenance a self-created form might shift 
or fade from neglect.

Most of their appearances vaguely indicated some sort of gender, but a few of them were 
completely androgynous. If their form was a reflection of the self, then he supposed there was a 
broad spectrum of sexes in Hell. Sam had some trans and genderqueer friends back at Stanford 
and secretly empathized to the extent that any of them had body dysmorphia. Even before he knew 
about his demon blood or Abyssal qualities, he had felt like something inside him didn't quite 
match the exterior. In exposing its demons’ inner-workings and self-image, Hell seemed to have 
actually eliminated one of the major opportunities for an identity crisis that existed for humans. 
Sam smirked at the idea that maybe, on at least one point, Hell might be a more tolerant 
environment than Earth.

They entered a large hall that was clearly meant for official gatherings. Based on the locations of 
the heavy black metal chandeliers, the hall may have normally been filled with three columns of 
seats or long tables. Currently, the only object in the room, aside from the light fixtures, was the 
Seat.

At the far end of the hall was a fairly-utilitarian carved wooden chair that appeared to meld into 
the trunk of a massive tree unlike any tree Sam had ever seen. It must've been thirty feet tall with 
branches spanning forty or fifty feet, nearly filling the entire last quarter of the hall. The tree’s 
joints were gnarled, but there were no indications of aging or damage such as holes or cracks. 
The wood was pure black and it lacked leaves to adorn its many spindly branches. It almost 
seemed dead in appearance, yet Sam felt like that would be a dismissive assumption for something 
that had such an air of importance.

A male demon stood at attention next to the tree, roughly five feet from the throne. He looked like 
a somewhat short and stout human, but his skin was almost like grey marble in places. His mouth 
seemed lipless, making it more of a thin crack than anything else. Solid black eyes could barely be 
seen below his pronounced brow. He wore scale mail and held a two-handed maul, giving him the 
overall look of a brute.

“There it is.” Crowley’s voice carried a little pride in spite of how frequently he must have seen 
the Seat. “The very center of Hell.”

Sam pointed to the demon. “Guard?”

“Something like that. He's a Knight. The Seat doesn't actually need protection, but no one has 
succeeded in explaining that to Mir. Starting about three weeks ago local time, a handful of the 
Knights started waking up. This one—” Crowley pointed to the demon, who didn't react at all to 
being spoken about. In fact, as Sam approached Mir he got the impression that the demon hardly 
noticed them at all. “He just came straight here and hasn't moved since."

"He's a—" Sam realized that he was about to rudely talk about Mir as if he wasn't there. Turning 
his body slightly to face the stout demon, Sam started again. "You're a Knight of Hell?"
Mir stood a little taller, trying to instill even more dignity into his already professional stance. Sam couldn't tell exactly where his eyes were looking while they were solid black, but in spite of his head not moving, Sam got the distinct feeling that Mir was watching him.

“Yeah, this one’ll talk your ear off if you let him. I’m not even sure if he speaks Abyssal…. Or he could just be a complete cabbage.” Crowley said something that Sam assumed was in Abyssal, but Mir didn’t react in the slightest. With a quick shrug the archdemon turned and began walking towards a doorway on the right side of the hall. “If you’ll follow me. The High Council’s chamber is through here.”

As Sam turned to go with Crowley, a flicker of color in the sea of grey and black caught his eye. He stopped and turned his head back. For a second he could have sworn that the tree was white with thousands of small red flowers covering its branches, but when he looked back at it the tree was plain ebony. Sam frowned, started to turn again, then saw the flash of white and red from the corner of his eye. Looking back, it was plain once again.

"Cute trick," Sam muttered to himself.

"Did you say something?" Crowley asked from across the hall.

"Just that's a cute trick with the tree," Sam replied as he walked over to the archdemon to continue with his tour, but Crowley looked puzzled.

"Pardon?"

"The light and color flicker with the tree." When Crowley just continued to stare at him in confusion Sam elaborated. "If you look at it straight on it's black and plain, but out of the corner of your eye it's white with red flowers.”

The silence that followed made Sam incredibly uncomfortable. Crowley's expression made him wonder if he had just accidentally confessed to being insane— Maybe Hell was getting to him faster than anyone had expected? He wanted the silence to stop, but was worried that he might say something to make it worse. Yet the thing that did break the silence was arguably worse than anything Sam could have said.

Mir’s armor rattled and shifted as he turned to face Sam. The knight studied him for a painfully long moment, then gestured for him to come closer. Sam hesitated. Mir clearly had something in mind and it had been triggered by Sam doing something so unprecedented that even Crowley was at a loss.

"You heard the man," Crowley coaxed in a tone that assured Sam that he was equally uncertain of Mir’s intent.

Sam cautiously walked toward the mute knight. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but it unnerved him. When he got within about ten feet of the throne he felt strangely distracted. He had been focused on Mir, but his attention was gradually drawn to the tree. In an almost dreamlike daze, he fleetingly noticed he was barely aware that Mir and Crowley were still in the room…. There was something more important for him to investigate. As Sam continued forward, in the back of his mind he could hear Crowley telling him to be careful, but he didn’t feel in danger.

Without even thinking about it, Sam placed his hand onto the throne’s armrest. His eyes rolled back for a second as he felt a bit heady with power. Part of him wanted more, but the surprise of what he’d just done shook him back to reality. He recoiled in alarm and checked his hand for injury, but it seemed fine. Looking back to the throne, he noticed that the place where his hand had
touched the armrest had turned white, but quickly faded back to black once he had released it.

Crowley was frozen in wide-eyed shock. Sam stood awkwardly clutching his hand and shaking with nerves. He felt exposed—like a dream involving being naked in class. But this was so much worse in ways that he knew he couldn’t even imagine. His stomach sank a little further when he finally looked over at Mir. The knight had returned to standing at attention, but his insignificant mouth had curled into an unsettling smile.

“Well, that is very interesting,” whispered Crowley.

“Shall we talk initial terms?”

Crowley relaxed in his office chair, giving the intentional appearance of confidence. He had been a conscientious host so far, but they were about to get down to business and both knew that there was an imbalance in their bargaining power. Crowley had the knowledge and vision, while Sam had some not-yet-understood power. They could each potentially make the other’s lives easier or more difficult, but Sam had less of an idea of how to go about it. After netting out their strengths and weaknesses, Sam was pretty sure that he was still in the worse bargaining position, regardless of what had happened with the tree.

“Well?” Sam raised an eyebrow. “We aren’t going to figure this out right now?”

“In order to know what our long-term strategy should be we’ll need to do a significant amount of research and private negotiations with the other powers that be down here. I hadn’t expected it to be a very involved process, but I also hadn’t expected for you to have your little run-in with the Seat,” Crowley explained, causing Sam to cringe inwardly at the realization that it was indeed going to have significant repercussions. “Thanks to that new development, we’ll have to start from the ground up and I think we both will want some assurances in the meantime.”

He didn’t like the sound of that. “Assurances?”

“You want to secure protections for your people regardless of how long we spend working out the details and I want some guarantee that you’re actually committed to the overall venture.” Crowley softly tapped his fingertips on the top of his desk. “So tell me, knowing that we can add to the agreement as we go, what do you want to start with?”

Now that he wasn’t under as much time pressure and had seen some of Crowley’s influence, Sam took a moment to reassess his goals. Wishing away Lilith or some comparably easy fix was almost certainly impossible if only because Crowley would’ve had them take care of it in five minutes had that been an option. His host was smart enough to have already tried any quick resolutions, so Sam pushed the big picture from his mind. He had gone there to protect his family and that would stay his primary objective.

“I want my family—that includes close friends who aren’t blood relatives—safe from the angels and Lilith. I want them provided for—”

“You know the Citadel is probably the safest place when it comes to angels at the moment,” Crowley suggested as he began pouring himself a glass of scotch.

“I don’t want them held prisoner or restricted to Hell. Dean would probably....” The thought made Sam feel a little sick. “I don’t even want to think about how he’d react to being back down here.”

“You could split the lot. Dean and Bobby would be happier on Earth. Meanwhile, Ruby and the pup would be safest—"
Sam shook his head. "I don't want my daughter growing up in Hell."

Crowley looked up from his glass of scotch and raised an eyebrow as a hopeful smile spread across his face. "Is a cigar in order?"

"Let's get back to the terms," Sam evaded the subject.

The less that was said about Kaylee the better. Crowley didn’t continue to press the topic, though he did pour Sam a glass and placed it in front of his guest. Sam eyed the beverage, but didn’t refuse it.

"Anything else you'd like to add to your list of demands?"

After thinking for a minute or so, Sam replied, "The witches in Ruby's coven and anyone on my list that were killed by the angels—I want them resurrected and provided the same benefits we've been discussing for my other close friends and family."

"Can't do that."

"I know that the Crossroads can resurrect people." He still had the scar in the middle of his back that was evidence of one such temporary-fatality.

"It's not the fact that they're dead; it's the fact that the angels did it," Crowley explained. "We're in the early stages of developing our anti-Heaven capabilities. We can't undo their damage yet. That kind of magic could take a long time to make functional. If we eventually figure out a way to bring them back, then you can exercise the option at that time. Fair enough?"

Sam sighed. He’d hoped that he could just make the deal and fix everything, but it wasn’t that easy. Gabin, Pascoe, Seline, the children—almost all of the coven, and an unknown number of friends would remain dead indefinitely. The prospect of eventually bringing them back was more than nothing, but honestly he questioned whether that would be the right thing to do if enough time passed. If their souls weren’t in the Pit, pulling them back from Heaven or wherever might cause more harm than good. He’d have to talk with Castiel about the implications, but at least retaining the option was something.

"Fine," Sam agreed. "What do you want from me?"

"Your loyalty and obedience."

He glared at Crowley, but didn’t say anything. He’d been waiting for that moment since he’d arrived. Crowley had finally decided to take him for all he was worth and he was basically at the archdemon’s mercy, which was a terrifying thought.

Signing away his loyalty and/or obedience could mean any of a number of things, especially when magic was involved. It could merely be causing a breach of the contract if he failed to adhere to his duty—and what was the punishment for breaching a contract in Hell? Alternatively, it could mean having his mind altered to naturally feel loyal and obedient to another. Maybe he would still retain his normal mental capacity, but he would be physically incapable of defying. Sam hoped that they could settle on something that preserved his autonomy.

"When you say obedience...."

“I’m not talking about saying 'jump' and you jump. Think more like an extension of loyalty. You’ll make a reasonable and good faith effort to execute my instructions. Also, you’ll have a duty to inform me of anything that you think is vital to our purposes.”
"I’m not going to betray my family.” Sam’s eyes narrowed and some of the polite warmth in his voice was replaced with helpless frustration.

“That’s fair.” Crowley shrugged. “If you find yourself with a legitimate conflict of interest—something that would seriously harm your family—then you have to let me know and I’ll find a way to work around it.”

“You’ll go behind my back.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to find out. Close enough to fair?”

Sam thought about the conditions for a long while, then added two last points. "You won't do anything unnatural to my mind, without my informed consent. And you will answer my questions. If I'm going to be working for you I'm going to need a lot of information."

Crowley smiled in appreciation of his late additions. "I like your instincts,” the archdemon commented. “It'd be a shame to mess them up by fiddling with your mind. Let me get some people looking for your family’s sanctuary and we can hammer out the details."

There was a knock on the office door, then after Crowley’s invitation a demon brought in a scroll of parchment. Crowley took the scroll and read it for several minutes. One corner of his mouth turned downward. He asked the underling a question in Abyssal. The demon reported on something at length and Crowley nodded thoughtfully before dismissing the subordinate.

"The results from our rescue mission.” Crowley held up the scroll. "Which would you like to hear first: the good news, the bad news, or the unexpected news?"

"What marked the start of the apocalypse?” Dean asked.

He figured that if the three of them were measuring the passage of time down to the months, something had to have happened and their reactions seemed to corroborate his theory. Kaylee and Tom’s vaguely playful and relaxed demeanor dimmed slightly at a memory. Kaylee was the better of the two at concealing whatever unpleasant feelings had been brought to the surface. Her lips only briefly thinned before she regained a false air of composure. Tom looked down at the floor for a few seconds until Kaylee subtly patted him on the back in reassurance. Dylaniel watched them with what Dean suspected was concern, though the blonde kid was difficult to read.

"Officially, Lucifer getting out of his cage,” Kaylee said as she casually paced the room. “But it started brewing long before he made the scene.”

“You’re from 2009….“ Tom thought for a moment as he changed his frame of reference. “In your time things were just starting to go wrong, but things only really began escalating on Earth in 2012. Late 2013 was when the writing was on the wall, and the war more or less started in 2014."

"W-war?” Dean fumbled the word.

"Yeah. The way the apocalypse has shaken out so far is basically as a three-way war,” Kaylee explained. “We’re fighting for the sovereignty and survival of Earth against the forces of Heaven on one side and the followers of Lucifer—"

"And Lilith before him,” Tom interjected.

”—on the other,” Kaylee continued. “And when we say war, this is a full-blown war, with a lot of carnage all over the world. The cat’s out of the bag on the whole demons, angels, and non-humans
"Heaven and Lucifer's followers are looking to finish the apocalypse by engaging in a battle that will essentially destroy Earth, so our side has been fighting to try to prevent that final battle," Dylaniel added, then his tone turned almost remorseful. "So far, we've been successful at preventing it, but they're doing a good job of not leaving much left for us to fight for."

"There's been considerable death on all sides and a lot of humans taken out in the crossfire. There are some major populations of neutral humans, which we try to avoid—lest we bring the shitstorm upon them. Some humans side with us, others serve Heaven—very few serve Lucifer. It's pretty fucking complicated." Kaylee waved her hands to indicate a big mess.

"So you guys are in a three-way death-match between Earth, Heaven, and Hell?" Dean asked while trying to wrap his head around the alarming news. No wonder New Orleans had looked like the site of a massacre or war; it was exactly that. He'd always wondered what it would be like to live in a world where humans knew about all the things that went bump in the night. Now that he was there, he wanted out. Since hiding in the shadows wasn't necessary, it seemed Heaven and Hell had come out to play hard.

"Not exactly," Kaylee said as she stopped pacing and rested her hands on her hips. "Hell is officially backing the preservation of Earth and contributing demons to our side of the fight."

"What?! Why would they do that?"

Time travel was one thing. Meeting his adult niece… he could somehow roll with that. Even the fucking apocalypse was remotely imaginable. But the idea that Hell would be doing something to help Earth…. Well, that one archdemon in the suit had been anti-Lilith, but he was just some politician out to save his own ass. Dean tilted his head trying to imagine how they could've gotten from point A to B.

"Are you looking for the stated policy argument or the more practical reason?" Kaylee asked.

It was hard for him to imagine Hell having any sort of official policy other than being evil. "Practical, I guess."

"Because it was decreed by the King of Hell," she answered with a strange hint of amusement in her voice.

"I thought Hell was ruled by a council?" The archdemon had mentioned it when he popped into Bobby's house. That had been part of the foundation of the entire conversation.

"It was until it hastily switched over to a divine monarchy."

"So who is the King of Hell?" Dean's question elicited awkward smiles from Kaylee and Tom, while Dylaniel raised an eyebrow as he turned to look from Dean to Kaylee.

"Right now Hell has a queen, and you're looking at her," Kaylee said with a little shrug that didn't quite hide her pride. "But my dad's the one that made Hell back Earth in the apocalypse."
“Sammy….” Dean's shoulders slumped. Kaylee had referred to Sam as the King of Hell. That archdemon had been talking about Sam impersonating some demon or archdemon named Lucian, but that idea had been shot down… hadn't it? Anyway, the idea of King of Hell—Sam would never agree to serve Hell. Dean didn't feel confident in that thought, which hurt on too many levels. “What happened? How?”

“Everything kind of fell apart after the angels showed up,” Kaylee explained. “Things were pretty desperate—I’m sure you know if you guys went with a plan as crazy as time travel.”

“He doesn’t know about Tom.” Dylaniel pointed out the landmark of timeline divergence as he looked to Tom. “He doesn’t know about the coven or anything beyond that.”

Tom’s expression was grave and he absentmindedly clutched the silver locket around his neck. Dean started connecting a few dots. Tom had been preparing that smoke spell without any books or recipes in front of him and his runic tattoos screamed magical. He wasn’t armed, but didn’t seem to command the same authority that apparently allowed Kaylee to walk around without weapons. Now with the mention of a coven, it was clear that Tom was a witch and not just the person who drew the short straw on casting the spell. But Tom didn’t look that much older than Dean and they were surprised that he didn’t know him.

“Coven? What cov—Ruby’s coven?” Dean’s head was starting to ache. “What does that have to do with Sam?”

“Few days after Dad and Cas killed the first angels, Heaven decided to start killing anyone they thought might be helping them or Mom. The coven was hit along with around forty other people.” Kaylee quickly glanced at Tom to see his reaction, but he remained quietly composed. “Dad, Mom, and Cas managed to save Tom and seven other coven members from the attack on their camp, but it was…..”

Her mouth opened and closed a few times, unsure of how to describe the massacre that had occurred. Tom didn’t volunteer any details.

Rather than linger in uncomfortable silence, Dylaniel continued with the story. “Sam made a deal with Crowley's alliance of archdemons. In exchange for relative safety on Earth for them, he agreed to help Crowley’s side attempt to recapture and control Hell.”

Kaylee added, "But it didn't take long before it was obvious that Dad was more than just someone to impersonate an archdemon."

"What do you mean?" Dean wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he equally couldn’t afford to shut the new information out.

"He flourished in Hell.” She smiled with a little pride. “I mean, he was basically made for it."
"He ended up flourishing," Tom corrected. "You're making it sound like a cakewalk. You don't remember the first few months…. It took him a long time to adjust."

Once the boilerplate and basics of their contract were in place, Crowley insisted on running a few experiments to see how best to market Sam to the other archdemons within the Central District. After checking on the status of the personnel movement from the rescue mission, Crowley led Sam back to the throne room to explore the issue that was in the forefront of both of their minds.

As much as Sam could appreciate the need to find out what was going on with the tree and him, he wasn’t thrilled about the situation. He didn’t like the idea of performing for Crowley, but that was more or less the backbone of their agreement. For a fleeting moment, he considered trying to call off the deal, but he wasn’t sure if it was even possible at that point. He would just have to swallow his pride and play along. So far Crowley wasn’t being unreasonable, just being annoyingly thorough.

Sam eyed Mir for a few seconds before cautiously walking toward the throne. He could feel the subtle pull, but now that he was aware of it he found that he could resist the throne’s siren song with just minor effort. That time around, when he placed his hand on the black wood, he was better prepared for the slight rush it provided.

He turned to face the grand hall. It was a surreal moment to look out on the massive room at the center of Hell. No one else sat on the throne and the way everyone had given it at least a little respectful distance, Sam suspected that he was seeing a truly rare perspective. He was unique in what he was about to attempt and it scared the shit out of him. With an insufficiently-calming breath, he cautiously sat down.

The carved wooden seat had no business being so comfortable. It gave him a strangely familiar feeling, like he might have for the sensation of the Impala's seats. But he’d never been on this throne—or any throne—before. Still, it called back to something like a memory that made him feel composed and content.

Looking up and turning his torso slightly, Sam could see that the tree was slowly lightening. Within minutes its bark had turned the same white that he’d seen earlier from the corner of his eye. After a few more minutes, countless tiny red buds began to form on the smallest branches. He sat there in perfect silence watching them bloom with rapt attention for an unknown length of time.

When he finally managed to look away from the strangely beautiful sight he noticed the change in the rest of the room. Almost three dozen demons were standing in the great hall, staring in awe. While he had been distracted, various demons had been passing by the open doors to the hall and were drawn in by their curiosity. They hardly seemed to notice him. Their focus was entirely on the canopy of scarlet blossoms, which he realized was the most color he’d seen since arriving in Hell.

Crowley’s expression was both pleased and completely stunned. After a few minutes of initial shock, he turned to look at Sam with a slightly open-mouthed smile. Looking back at the reactions of the other demons, he noticed a female demon among the crowd and waved her over to him. He whispered something into where her ear should’ve been. She nodded to him before he walked up to stand beside Sam.

"Tell them all to leave. We need to talk," Crowley whispered.

Sam was a little confused as to why Crowley didn't just ask the demons to leave himself, but he went along with it. "Could you all go back to whatever it was that you were doing?" Sam said
uncertainly.

His words shook the demons out of their not-quite-trances. They quickly scurried from the hall, taking last peeks on their way out. Only Crowley, Mir, and the female demon remained. Crowley flicked a wrist, causing the doors to the throne room to close. With their privacy renewed, the archdemon got down to business.

"We need to work on your assertiveness," Crowley commented.

Sam threw him what Dean would’ve called a ‘bitchface.’ “Yeah well, I wasn’t prepared to work a crowd—and I get the feeling you weren’t prepared for them either.”

Crowley had mentioned wanting to keep Sam’s presence as secret as possible until they were ready to act. Only about twenty demons had seen him prior to the throne incident when he’d merely been walking around.

"The crowd was unexpected…." The gears turning in Crowley’s mind were ominously visible on his face. “We may have lost the element of surprise, but a bit of gossip might actually do us some good. I'll wager in about fifteen minutes all of Central will be talking about this." He chuckled. "Some of us used to call you the Boy King of Hell just to piss Lilith off. That might actually be the best game plan we have. I wish I could see the look on her face when she hears about this."

"King? You can’t be serious?" He slouched in his seat a little and covered his face with one hand. "I signed on to pretend to be some archdemon, glorified bureaucratic puppet with a name that your demons recognize. I didn't sign on for this." Sam gestured at the tree and throne, which he realized he was still sitting in. He hastily got up, suddenly very self-conscious of his behavior.

"Technically, you just signed up to be loyal and obedient to me," corrected the King of the Crossroads. "We didn't print your business cards yet. You getting stage fright doesn't change that. As long as it makes more strategic sense for you to take a different role, that's what we're going with."

"There's a difference between archdemon and King of Hell. You're putting my life at risk!" Sam threw his hands up as he yelled at Crowley.

The female demon shifted slightly, but decided to not to jump into the tense conversation. Meanwhile, Mir's head turned almost imperceptibly to give him a better view of Crowley.

"Please—your life was already at risk.” Crowley scoffed. “You really think that some hunter or angel or Lilith is going to want to kill you less if we call you an archdemon instead of a king? I'd wager Lilith's demons will be less inclined to kill you as king.”

"Why would you even want me to be king?” He couldn’t understand why they were even humoring such a crazy idea. “Don't you and the other arches want to be the ones in charge?”

“They'll still want a say, there's no doubt about that, but consolidated leadership could be just what we need right now.” Crowley nodded to himself, becoming even more pleased with his latest plan. “The whole system has been thrown into chaos and is divided. Even the friendly castes don't mingle with each other well. It's hard to rally a coalition government when you already have groups breaking away. But you don't belong to a caste; no one and everyone could look to you, if we do this right.”

Sam hated to admit that abstractly it was beginning to make even a little bit of sense. "I don't like it."
"Welcome to Hell."

Crowley motioned for the female demon to come forward. Unlike most of the other demons Sam had seen, she didn’t appear lopsided or vaguely disfigured. If anything her features were somewhat streamlined and understated. Instead of skin, her exterior looked like it was made of dark, smoky glass. A single smooth cowl of the same material grew from her upper back and shoulders, alluding to what might have been hair, but he wasn’t quite sure. Despite the inhuman effect, Sam noticed her symmetry and appreciated that she probably chose to look that way.

"This is Shola, one of my top aides.” Crowley’s tone was nearly proud. “She mostly handles unusual deals."

Sam recognized her... presence? "You were the one at Bobby's house."

"Yes.” She smiled politely. “I made the deal with your brother to assist him in locating you."

“She's very resourceful and, almost more importantly at the moment, she's generally considered nice.”

She gave Crowley a sidelong glance at the 'nice' comment, but didn't complain. Sam wondered how much of an insult that sort of comment was in Hell and if Crowley's willingness to throw the phrase around was actually a sign of confidence.

Crowley continued, “That's why she'll be assisting you until you get settled.”

“Settled?” Sam didn’t like the finality of his word choice. “I’m not staying here.”

“Acquainted,” Crowley suggested as a more palatable term, then waved his hand in an allusion to a bow. “Now if you'll excuse me for a bit, I need to check in with three of the other arches before the gossip runs too far afield.”

"And what am I supposed to do?” Sam asked as Crowley began walking towards one of the back doors out of the great hall.

"Exercise your patience. You'll need it in fighting shape," the archdemon replied before exiting the room.

As soon as the door had closed Sam let out a small sigh. He wouldn’t say that trusted or liked Crowley, but at least they had some minimal background. Now he had been left alone in a room in Hell with two strange demons. It wasn’t that he was scared of them—Shola was the ‘nice demon,’ after all, and Mir appeared to largely resemble furniture unless interacted with directly. He mostly just felt uncomfortable about nearly every other aspect of his circumstances. Well, at least the hall was otherwise empty, giving him some privacy.

After eyeing Shola for a little while he strolled around the massive tree, uncertain of what else to do. He dragged his palm along the bark, creating a fading white ring. When he completed a circuit around the tree, he sat back down on the throne to watch the transformation again. Within a minute of him getting out of the seat, it had reverted to its black coloration and the flowers had withered to ash that showered down into the dull stone floor.

"So, you're my handler when Crowley's busy?” Sam asked Shola.

"Essentially yes," she admitted. "But I believe that you will find me to be valuable beyond merely keeping you out of trouble."
“You two are expecting me to cause trouble?” Sam felt a little insulted, but in all honesty the thought had crossed his mind before remembering that he was under contract not to flip all the switches regardless of the consequences.

“Mostly by accident, but since you aren’t from around these parts, accidents are bound to happen.”

He nodded at her point. There were so many that things he didn’t understand; he barely knew where to begin filling in the gaps. Over time he’d almost certainly pick up a lot of the rules, customs, and subtleties, but for the time being it made a lot of sense to have a babysitter. At least Crowley had been considerate enough to find him one that was both apparently competent and not entirely alienating.

She stood about fifteen feet in front of him, alternating her attention between the tree and nothing in particular. An awkward silence stretched between them.

“You’re not really sure what to do either,” Sam guessed. “I take it that you normally don’t have to babysit people as part of your job.”

‘Babysit’ is a bit of a strong word.” She didn’t outright deny the characterization though. “I’ve had to handhold a bit for some of my contracts. I tend to have longer relationships with my clients than most Crossroads demon because of the unusual nature of my deals.”

“What about with Dean?”

“He was fairly hands-off. He was uncomfortable with the whole demon aspect. Bobby seemed very pleasant though.” She took a step forward. “I heard that they were involved in a fight with… the….”

“They’re both fine.” Sam thought he saw a small smile grow on her face as she nodded and looked at the floor almost bashfully. Her expression changed from comfort to something more unsettled.

"If I may, sir—"

"Fuck—please don’t call me 'sir.'” He cringed and recoiled into the throne. "Just call me Sam.”

She reflexively looked around the hall for anyone else that might be observing them, then took a few more steps closer to him and explained, "It’s customary for demons to adopt a different name than they used while alive. I believe that you’ll be asked to adopt Lucian in order to utilize the name recognition."

"I didn’t die.” It was disturbing that he felt the need to clarify his ongoing status as living. “I’m still me.”

"I know. I just thought I’d warn you, since the Council might force the issue."

"’Force the issue’ or force me ?”

"Both.”

He’d figured that would come up as a demand and he wasn’t even sure how he felt about it. There was something to be said for mitigating the association between the name ‘Sam Winchester’ and Hell, though he wasn’t exactly sure who he was trying to protect or impress. His family would know soon enough the mess he’d gotten himself into and beyond that who else was there?
The idea of word getting to Clare's gang of hunters that he'd become King of Hell was interesting. It'd probably give them a sense of validation that made him sick, but on the flip side maybe he could take comfort in the idea of them feeling like failures.

A bigger concern would be how that might impact Dean or, to a lesser extent, Bobby. Eventually the hunting community would find out and while he didn't particularly care, Dean and Bobby hadn't broken their ties. In fact, assuming that any of the network was still alive, the two of them were prominent figures in that organization. Maybe some of the other hunters could be made to understand... or maybe they could lie about him—say that he was tricked or that they had disowned him.

He sighed at the unexpected facet of his new existence. It was true that he'd closed the door on many of his relationships when he had started running around with Ruby, but accepting Crowley's deal was bricking over the door once closed. Regardless of what he let people call him, he would be condemned to a certain amount of isolation.

"Can you call me Sam?" he asked again with more vulnerability in his voice. "Even if it's just in private. I don't think I could take this entire place.... I don't think I could take all of this insanity without someone down here treating me normally."

"I'll do what I can to make this easier." Her smile had returned, but it had the unmistakable hue of pity. "If I may ask you a question—"

"If it's just us...." Sam glanced over at the ever-silent and stationery Mir, then shrugged. "If it's just us, then go ahead and ask. Don't be so damn formal with me. It makes me feel like you're drinking the kool aid."

She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated a moment, then asked, "Have you really seen angels?"

"Yeah. One of them is with my family. He's been helping to protect them from Heaven." His mind had immediately jumped to Castiel, but it was quickly replaced with thoughts of the other angels. Uriel and Tamriel, the massacre at the coven... the looming threat of whatever Heaven might do to them.... "I've killed several of them. Why do you want to know? I thought Hell has anti-angel protection?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about an attack. I was just...." Sam could somehow sense her shifting anxiously below her calm shell. "I had hoped— I believed it, but to know—they're actually real. I have so many questions. Do they hear prayers?"

"I don't know." He was confused by the seemingly random question and his inability to answer it. "I haven't asked Castiel about that kind of stuff. If you're really curious, I can talk to him about it next time I see him."

"Please. Could you... could you ask him: if they do hear prayers, do they hear all of them?"

Sam stared at her in mild disbelief. Her air of anxiety was replaced with a combination of passion and desperation. She had a vested interest in the answer.

"You pray?"

"Yes."

He stared at her for several seconds before he could manage to say, "But we're in Hell—you're a demon. Aren't angels and Heaven your natural enemy?"
"I certainly hope not." She exhaled something resembling a weak laugh, but he could tell that the thought upset her. Her shoulders sunk subtly and her shell lost some of its vividness.

"If you think that angels are good or something to admire, I hate to break it to you, but you're wrong." Sam's tone was bitter. "They killed children...."

Shola's brow furrowed in disappointed understanding. Closing her eyes, she processed the new information. Sam felt bad about breaking this to her, but he started feeling worse as he began to sense just how much pain the realization was causing her.

"The things that came here destroyed seven hundred demons and a thousand souls in a matter of minutes. They were horrific. That kind of...." She shook her head. "I don't want to be their enemy for so many reasons. They scare me. They scare all of us, but it's more than that. I think what they're doing is wrong, but they're angels and I'm the demon. What if I really am the villain after all? I've been trying to do my best to stay true in spite of the role that God has given me.... Maybe I've been misguided."

In many ways he could sympathize with her crisis, and in other ways he didn’t understand how she could have more faith in the angels than herself. He had felt betrayal and loss too, but she had turned the hurt inward. Sam had seen the differences between himself and the angels as a reflection on the angels because he was confident in his own position, but faced with that same disparity Shola felt it was a reflection on herself. It made sense that she would doubt herself before all of Heaven. She was a woman of faith trying to be the ‘nice’ demon in Hell.

"You're supposed to help me, right?" Sam asked, causing her to look up, drawn out from her anguish. "How long have you been a demon?"

"Earth time, a little over 500 years." She spoke softly, unsure of what he was getting at.

"Okay. You've been fighting for centuries or millennia to stay good in a place like this and I need your help to stay good too." She opened her mouth, but Sam cut her off. "I don't care if some creatures we don't see eye-to-eye with wear haloes. They can't help me down here. You're my best chance at trying to stop this place from changing me into something I don't want to be. I need you to help keep me good. Don't let their failure damn us both."

She thought for a long while as a soft smile formed at the little bit of confidence his faith had renewed in her.

"Thank you. Sometimes it can be hard to remember why we made the choices we did—that my truth is between me and God. I do it for us alone... not even for the angels." She chuckled. "Though I think it helps that my subordinates would eat me alive if I stopped being 'the nice one.'"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "I would've thought being nice was a sign of weakness in Hell."

"Maybe in some parts, but not necessarily in the Crossroads. Being a sadist makes the job easier, but I've never found it to be a requisite. If I had to be brutal to get what I want, then I wouldn't be very good at my job."

"Part of the reason you're nice is to show everyone else that you're better than them?"

"Only a little," she replied. "Mostly I like to be nice to show myself I'm better than I feared."

They descended the stone staircase into what Sam immediately recognized as a cell block. The
dim light and colder air gave an unnaturally constricting sensation that reminded him of being clutched by a ghost. One of the cells emitted the sounds of raspy breathing, which begged the question of whether demons really needed to breathe or if that prisoner was so badly injured that they reflectively manifested the symptom. Unlike the featureless doors on the levels above, these doors included barred windows. Sam touched the metal bars.

"Iron," Crowley explained as he followed an assistant down the hallway.

Introductions to the other Archdemons had been postponed until all of the allied archdemons could be assembled at once. Of the eight archdemons in the alliance, aside from Crowley, only four were in mostly-working order. Palim's successor was still being selected, Denerus was recovering from injuries, and Weller's caste had agreed to wait another week before officially changing his status from 'missing' to 'deceased.' Sam was given permission to return topside while the revised Council finished regrouping, but only after briefly consulting on an unusual discovery.

"How long have you known Tyson?" Crowley asked.

"Brady," Sam corrected. "We were friends in college, but I dropped out of communication with him after I started hunting again."

"Then why'd he make your list of people to save?"

"I've kept tabs on him. A few times I thought I'd eventually get back in touch with him, but things never really came together."

"Until now." Crowley smirked. "Lucky you."

Sam felt sick at the thought that that would be the first time in years that he’d seen one of the best friends he’d ever had—a friend now possessed by a demon working with Lilith. The whole thing was disgusting and heartbreaking. "Has he said anything?"

"Nothing useful."

They reached the last cell on the block and the assistant unlocked the door for them. Crowley entered, followed by Sam. The cell's walls, ceiling, and the inside face of the door were covered in what looked like razor blades that Sam was certain were iron. Two demons stood as guards just inside the doorway.

Seated in the lone chair at the center of the room was a demon that reclined with a proud sort of indifference to having been taken prisoner. His shell bore gashes and bruises that hinted at some earlier interrogation. In spite of his beating, he beamed with a smugness that Sam immediately recognized from some of Brady's less-flattering moments.

"Sam?" The prisoner grinned broadly. "Of all the people in all the places in all the worlds."

The demon's laughter made Sam's stomach knot in a mixture of anger and nostalgia. "What did you do to Brady?" His voice was quiet, which unintentionally gave the appearance of vulnerability.

The prisoner sat up, incrementally emboldened. "Please. I am Brady—or at least I have been since sophomore year. The whining little trust fund pissant, he barely even knew your name before I got to him."

"Why? Why did...." Sam couldn't understand why a demon would get close to him and not kill him. They'd known each other for almost three years. Brady had even been there for him during
hard times—done him favors—he’d— “You introduced me to Jess!”

“She was so pure and innocent... and trusting.” Below his shell, Brady flared with a plethora of unsavory emotions. "She thought I was her friend... when she let me in the night I killed her."

Sam stepped forward with a fist ready to swing, but Crowley moved to intercept him. He stopped himself, but looked to the archdemon for insight as to why he shouldn’t attack. Crowley had his back turned to Brady and mouthed the words 'not yet' to Sam. Sam looked back to Brady, still a bit unsure about why he was being asked to hold off on the beating. His rage was simmering below the surface, but shock and confusion were getting the upper hand. He visibly suppressed his anger long enough to ask, "Why?"

"Azazel needed you back in the game. You were his favorite after all...." Brady's demeanor turned sharp and resentful. To his surprise, Sam could sense the cloud below Brady’s shell glowering.  "But Azazel's dead and you—you're not the leader we were promised. The other demons, they might call you Lucian and think you're what we need, but I know you. I know your secret: you're weak. Everything I say is cutting you to pieces because you’re just some pathetic kid who always knew you were never good enough—not on Earth and definitely not here. You'll never have the strength Lilith has because you lack conviction—"

Sam grabbed Brady with his powers and squeezed. Brady writhed and screamed, but Sam silenced him. The urge to just throttle him was overwhelming—for Jess, for the betrayal, for serving him up to Azazel.

Crowley placed a hand on Sam’s arm, trying to calm him down. "Careful with the goods. We need him for information."

"He's not as high up the chain of command as you think." Sam may have been talking rationally, but anger was curling his lips into a snarl.

"How do you figure that?” Crowley asked with almost academic interest. “He was one of Azazel's agents at least eight years ago. That's a pretty small crowd.”

"He doesn't know what I've done—what I can do. He's heard some rumors, but if he knew what I've been up to he'd see how much things have changed,” Sam replied, then added bitterly, “We were best friends, after all.”

Crowley and the other demons eyed Brady, who shrunk slightly at being called out. Sam squeezed again, harder than before, and the surface of Brady's body began to flicker translucent as hairline fractures began to form. Below the damaged exterior, the smoky, corrupted soul swirled frantically.

"You're going to kill him," Crowley said in a raised voice that didn’t quite summon enough effort to be considered a shout. He wasn't particularly concerned for Brady, but the display of Sam's powers was mildly alarming.

"He wishes," Sam growled.

"Even if he doesn't know the latest on you, he might still have valuable information," Crowley warned in a tone that was so calm and mild that it was jarring within the vicious setting.

When Sam relaxed his grip on Brady he crumpled to the floor. Tiny wisps of smoke bled through the cracks in his shell before fading into nothingness. Sam could feel the two guards’ shock at the injuries he’d inflicted in hardly any time at all.
Not wasting his prisoner's moment of insecurity, Crowley stepped forward, then used the toe of his right dress shoe to tilt Brady's face up towards his own. "I suggest you prove me right, otherwise I'm going to just let Sam here work off some aggression."

"I've been stuck in Palo Alto—I haven't—" Brady began, but Crowley silenced him by placing the sole of his shoe over Brady's mouth.

The archdemon's brow furrowed at a thought. "I don't understand. You two haven't seen each other in over five years. So why are you still stuck riding the same meatsuit, living the tame life around the same neighborhood?"

"Lilith told me to stay in it and keep playing along—that we might need the body to draw Sam out."

"Draw me out?" Sam wanted to laugh at the thought. "I spent eight months chasing her all over the country. If she had trouble drawing me out, then—"

"She wasn't ready."

Crowley raised an eyebrow as he glanced back at Sam. "Ready for what?"

"For the final seal," Brady answered. "She wasn't ready to break it."

A chill went down Sam's spine. "What?"

They'd been wondering what the last seal might be. Castiel had suggested that Lilith's minions weren't tasked with it because it might not happen on Earth, but they had accidentally included an assumption into that reasoning. They thought their sixty-four seals intel was encompassing the entire picture of her minions' activities, but she really did have more special players on the sidelines waiting for their turn... and Brady's turn had something to do with him.

"When she was ready, your bestie Brady was going to go missing." Brady's voice rattled from his injuries. "We were going to make it a huge news story, so you'd hear about it. You'd investigate, be drawn out, and then she'd kill you."

Sam's rage had faded into dread. "The last seal is her killing me?"

"Or you killing her," Brady said with a twitch that might've been an attempt at a shrug before reciting, "'The first of the two seasons shall meet in battle and at the end of one, the sunrise on the field of death shall be the light of our father.' It doesn't matter who comes out on top. As soon as she's done with number sixty-five, she's going to come for you with everything she's got."

Sam appeared in the living room of the rundown apartment where his family was still hunkered down. It had been three hours since he had disappeared with barely a goodbye. Dean immediately got up from the kitchen table where he'd been talking with Bobby and Castiel. He quickly hugged Sam, though he caught the slight scent of brimstone and Hell's unholy ozone on him, which made him feel a little faint. Despite the painful memories the smell revived in him, Dean was relieved that he was back safely and tried not to immediately recoil in a display of repulsion. After clinging to him for a second, he let go of Sam, took a look at his reckless little brother, then shoved him hard in the chest.

"For fuck's sake, Sam! What did you do?" Dean yelled at him.

His anger came from a place of helplessness and fear. Knowing that, Sam didn't have any hostility to return and tried to accept whatever frustration was going to come his way. Bobby and Castiel
watched their interaction, but didn't attempt to get involved just yet.

"Did you get a good deal?" Ruby asked.

She was standing in the doorway to the hall, holding Kaylee. Her expression was unreadable, which signaled to Sam that she could easily be as upset as Dean. He'd seen her yell and fume with rage, but it was when she was too quiet that he knew to be concerned.

"We'll find out," Sam replied, unable to give her a better answer.

Dean covered his face with his hand. "Fucking hell."

Bobby asked what they'd all been wondering. "Did you sell your soul?"

"Not in the normal countdown-until-hellhounds way. I'm going to help Crowley—in Hell," Sam explained, causing Dean and Bobby to look defeated, while Ruby continued to have that unsettlingly-reserved expression. "In exchange, they went out trying to protect our friends that I thought might be in danger. There's a place where everyone can be safe and they have an idea for mobile protection too. It's not perfect, but it's better than being trapped in this shitty little apartment while people out there are dying and Lilith is trying to bust out Lucifer."

"How long will you have to be in Hell?" Ruby asked.

Sam’s mouth felt dry, but after taking a moment to gather his courage he said, "The current plan is six hours a day, Earth time; possibly more in an emergency."

Dean knew that time ran longer down there, but he'd never really bothered to figure out the ratio. 
"How long is six hours in Hell time?"

"About thirty days," Ruby answered.

Dean paced for a moment and bit his knuckle to stop himself from cursing. "So what, you get like eighteen hours up here for every month down there? For how long?" Dean asked, but he already knew the answer.

"If things get better down there, I might be able to be topside more." Sam’s eyes evaded everyone else’s. "But in terms of being on the hook for going down at all: until I die.... Maybe longer depending on which direction I go."

Sam talking around the issue of his potential damnation didn’t escape anyone.

"Dammit, Sammy! You should've talked to us first!" Dean's resentment of the situation was becoming muddied with his pity for his brother, but it also revived some of the feelings of betrayal. Sam had gone behind his back again. It was a forced and desperate decision, but it still hurt to be completely left out of the conversation. In spite of the pain, Dean tried to keep focused on expressing concern for Sam rather than real anger.

"I couldn't take it. We were trapped here while they were out there killing our friends because of me. We can't stay here forever. We needed to be able to regroup—have a place where we could bring our friends who're still alive. I had the chance to keep my family safe. What's to talk about?" Sam knew that it was a lot for them to hear, but he just spent what felt like days working to find them a solution and this degree of pushback surprised him.

"And what about you? Do you have any idea what spending all that time in Hell is going to do to you? You don't know what it's like down there." Dean's voice rose and cracked. It'd been one of
his highest priorities to keep his little brother from the Pit and through some crazy turn he'd managed to fail magnificently. It would have been funny if it wasn't so sad…. Sam always did have a way of beating the odds and ending up in outrageous situations.

"They're not going to be torturing me. I just have to helping keep the place from falling apart." Sam threw his hands out in mild exasperation. It was bad, but the deal wasn't anything like Dean's deal and he wanted to find a way to convince them.

"You just have to help them keep the torture machine running—and you think there's any way that that isn't going to eat you alive?!

Dean wasn't even thinking about Sam's excessive empathy, just the intrinsic stress and strain created by such an unhealthy environment. Sam had always been the sensitive one—the pure one, in an apparently backward way—and now he was going to spend nearly all his time in the most corrupting place imaginable.

"It might, but that's my burden to bear." Sam's voice grew defensive.

"Bullshit!" Dean shouted. "That's on all of us—you've got people in your life that fucking care about you and we're not turning our backs. You're prepared to sacrifice yourself for us. Well maybe we don't want to see you go through this!"

Kaylee started crying, silencing the argument. Sam closed his eyes for a poignant moment before looking at Ruby. She rocked their daughter a little, but couldn't stop the crying. Sam walked over and extended his arms, offering to take Kaylee. Ruby gave him their daughter, then watched him in contemplation for several seconds as he soothed Kaylee back to sleep.

"How long before you're due back?" she asked with a tension in her voice that worried Sam.

"I've got 12 hours to get us all moved over and figured out. After that I'm going to be gone for a day or so, then it switches to the six-hours-per-day rotation." He knew that Ruby could instantly convert the "a day or so" into the subjective span of several months, and that it would take Bobby and Dean no time at all to figure that out if they wanted to. If anyone was thinking critically enough they’d know that he was going to be facing something big.

Ruby glanced at Dean and Bobby, then looked back to Sam. He was standing uncertainly in the middle of the room. Kaylee was clutched almost nervously to his chest. The expression on his face was vulnerability and confusion. He was waiting for her to lay into him and she decided to accept his full attention.

"When we talked about whether or not to have the kid," Ruby began, "you said that I could leave if the situation wasn't right for me."

It was like Ruby had dropped a bomb with the sentence. Sam's heart lurched and he was suddenly faced with an entirely new type of fear. Dean and Bobby both froze, unsure of where the conversation was going and what the couple had previously agreed to.

"I could leave and, what," she continued, "Dean or Bobby would have to babysit almost half their time, every single day? You didn't even talk to them or me? I'm not saying that you have to take care of Kaylee 24/7, but they didn't sign on to have a kid and I never promised to stay."

Sam had been shaken to his core by the thought. "You... you might leave?"

"I'm not leaving; not anytime soon. But you better remember that this is a give-and-take relationship—same as between you and them." Ruby gestured at Bobby and Dean. "I'm gonna
keep trying to make this work, but if you make decisions about my life or Kaylee's life without at least consulting me first…. I don't know what I'd do. We're a team; remember that."

Sam nodded in solemn understanding. It was true that among the people currently standing in the room, he'd had the bargaining power with Crowley, yet he wasn't the only one with an interest in the outcome. He'd made such a big deal about wanting to support his family that he'd forgotten how much they supported him in return. Dean had barely told him anything about his time in Hell and Ruby still bore emotional scars even after having centuries to adjust. He wanted to help them recover from the trauma, but it hadn't occurred to him that they'd be trying to support him in real time, which could prove just as bad or maybe even worse.

After a few seconds, Ruby moved closer to him and wrapped an arm around his torso in a partial hug. His free arm pulled her tight to him and he kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry," He whispered into her hair. "I was just trying to make things better."

"I know. You always are."
"What was the deal?" Dean asked Kaylee, Tom, and Dyaniel.

He was looking at the concrete floor in something between disorientation and deep reflection. Sam had made some sort of deal, gotten himself in deep, and then what? What had it done to him? Tom had said that for the first few months it had really messed with Sam, but Kaylee barely seemed aware of that. It had changed him. How could it not? The questions were, ‘How much?’ and ‘in what ways?’ But more than that, Dean needed to know how it had happened, so that he could prevent it from happening to his own brother.

"It had a few changes to it while they were figuring out how to make it work. Basically, Dad took on the role of King of Hell, but for the first few years Crowley was the power behind the throne, until Dad got the hang of it." Kaylee spoke about Sam needing time to adjust to Hell as if it was an understandable character flaw, which made Dean scowl slightly "In exchange his friends and family were protected to the best of Hell's ability while still having autonomy."

"He traded his freedom and dignity for us to not be stuck in that apartment?" Dean thought he might've thrown up if there had been anything in his stomach.

"It was more than just that," Tom said in Sam's defense. "Maybe it wasn't perfect, but it was what we needed at the time. We'd all lost so much and the deal let us start rebuilding our lives."

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Catching the group up on Crowley's plan and the development with Brady was easier than Sam had expected. After the initial venting of frustration, everyone calmed down and tried to be supportive as best they could. They were all beyond fatigued, which let them take the news in relatively quiet contemplation. After the recap, Sam began talking about their strategy going forward.

"I hate to say it, but I think we have to plan like I really am Lucian. If we don't and it turns out to be true, we could get screwed fast."

"You playing along in Hell is one thing, but us going with it is another." Dean crossed his arms and chewed his lip slightly. "I don't care what some book or demon politician says. You're my brother. Neither of us want me treating you like you're some champion of Hell."

"I mean, you don't have to treat me any different—please don't," Sam told him. "It's just that for defense and strategizing going forward it makes a difference. The last seal is a showdown between Lilith and Lucian. If one of them kills the other, we have until the next sunrise before Lucifer is freed. If I'm really Lucian, I can't just be treating her like any other enemy." Sam rubbed the back of his neck. "I can't fight her on Earth, ever. And I can't let her get the jump on me. Somebody else has to be the one to kill her. She's too smart to fight me in Hell. There's no sunrise down there.
Morrison thinks it has to happen on Earth."

"So you went from being the best person to fight her to the worst," Bobby bemoaned.

"Until someone else shows up claiming to be Lucian I don't know what else to think," Sam replied apologetically. "Her betting money is on me and I don't want to give her a chance to be proven right."

"You're going to have to stay off the grid up here, until we can find and kill her for you," Dean said, then he remembered that the angels would still be hunting Sam even if Lilith was taken care of. "Sammy, you really have a gift for making people want to kill you."

"Yeah, I know." Sam rewrapped part of Kaylee's blanket. "I'm extra, extra out-of-commission on Earth…. It doesn't change that much when it comes down to it. The stakes are just higher if things go wrong with Lilith."

"I'll see if I can figure out how to ask around online about the demon scene on Earth without alerting the angels," Bobby volunteered.

"If Crowley's people turn anything up, I'll forward it to you."

Sam felt a little weird about already offering the services of demons, but he shrugged it off as something he’d need to get used to eventually. "But that still doesn't deal with how to kill Lilith. She's going to be pretty untouchable. And even if we could find her, I'm the only one that's immune to her light-beam thing."

"I am not entirely immune to the Light of Hell, but it might not kill me. I could fight Lilith," Castiel suggested. The angel had been silently standing back from the main circle of discussion and the others had largely forgotten he was even there.

"'Might not' kill you is a pretty big risk," Dean commented with renewed concern. "You're probably the most powerful weapon we have against Lilith and you're telling us that she might be able to kill you?"

"We do not know if the Light of Hell is lethal to all angels or if Sam's use of his power was unique in that way. Also, I am weaker since falling and may be more susceptible to harm."

"I'll reach out to Morrison," Ruby interjected. "Depending on what he’s already got in the works, I might be able to work on something to either help kill Lilith or angels—or maybe protect against the beams." She shrugged in response to all of the guys glancing at Kaylee. "Just because I'm staying doesn't mean that I'm gonna be a stay-at-home mom. I've got shit to do. Someone needs to level the playing field for you boys."

"Level the playing field for all of us," Sam added in an attempt to not exclude Ruby.

"Please, I'm good already. You never asked me how many angels I took down at the coven." She smiled softly up at Sam, who huffed out a little chuckle and kissed her forehead.

"So, what? Ruby, Bobby, and Crowley will research. Castiel is going to train or research or whatever to get ready for ganking Lilith. Meanwhile Sam’s going to try to convince Hell he’s Lucian?" Dean asked, refocusing the conversation.

"About that…." Sam began. "The surviving members of the Council want me to use the name while down there because of the weight it carries for some demons, but I'm not sure…." He paused for a moment to try to figure out how to explain the situation in a palatable way. "I'm not sure how much convincing it'll really take. There's something about me that I don't understand, but a few things clicked when I was down there."
"What?"

"It's not like I liked it. It's just that the parts of me that are strange up here weren't down there." Sam avoided Dean’s eyes while he was speaking, but after the confession was voiced he shook off some of the shame.

"You mean the Abyssal in you?" Bobby asked.

"I guess. I mean, I used my powers and it didn't hurt or make me tired. It felt...." Sam took a deep breathe while trying to figure out how to articulate his feelings. "I felt normal. I didn't feel... corrupted."

Ruby's warm attentiveness wilted slightly at his words at the thought that maybe on some level she’d contributed to his feelings of wrongness. He shot her an apologetic glance, but Dean didn’t notice the subtle conflict and continued talking.

"Sammy, you don't feel bad because you're surrounded by worse. You shouldn't be giving in to those feelings. If you start using demons as your yardstick about what's right, then you're gonna be in big trouble."

"I'm not just blowing off my morals. It's not really like that." Sam thought about telling them about Shola, but he didn’t feel like getting into the whole crisis-of-faith talk just then. It was a conversation better saved for a quiet evening, possibly over a beer... or an entire six-pack.

"I just don't want them suckering you in by playing nice or some other trick." Dean's voice had the softness of good-natured concern rather than being dismissive of Sam's willpower.

Sam smiled weakly at Dean in a way that he hoped was reassuring. "They're definitely trying to manipulate me. I know that, but it's more than that.... Hell and I fit together in a weird way—I can touch the throne." They all looked surprised by the news, but Ruby and Castiel were both visibly shocked. "I actually sat on it. The Seat, it's actually a big dead tree—well, it's not dead, not when I touch it. It's been dead for as long as any of the demons can remember, but when I.... It bloomed.... It was beautiful."

Ruby gripped Sam’s sleeve and moved her mouth, as if to speak, but the words didn't come at first. "But... nothing in Hell is beautiful."

"So we've got a new place to hide out and you said something about protecting our friends too. You mean some of the other hunters?" Bobby asked, eager to finally explore the positive side of Sam's deal.

"I tried to cover all the hunters that might be traced to me. I had Crowley’s people try to find and get them to safety. The ones they were able to rescue were moved to a secure location." Sam pointed toward a duffel that he’d brought with him but that went unnoticed in the emotional reunion. "We have some angel-caliber hex bags to avoid detection. Maybe Castiel can take Dean and Bobby to go explain things to them—Ruby should probably go too. There are two hunters and three of the expat coven members."

“Only two?” Bobby exhaled in anguish.

"Ellen and Jo?" Dean asked hopefully.

Sam just shook his head. He’d nearly broken down at the news that they had been killed. Based on Crowley's report they had probably died shortly after the attack on the coven. Even though he...
hadn't seen them in over two years, the thought of them being murdered and left to rot for a whole
day was incredibly upsetting. They were the closest thing he'd known to a mother and sister. They
really were family.

"I had their bodies moved somewhere safe. We can give them traditional pyres." Sam ran his
fingers through his hair. "I thought they'd have wanted—"

Dean turned away from the group, then yelled as he punched a wall, putting his fist through the
softened drywall. As he began pulling his bleeding hand from the hole, he gripped the wall and
rested his forehead against it.

Belda came out from the larger bedroom at the noise. "What happened?" she asked.

"We lost some more friends," Sam explained, causing her to nod with an intimate understanding of
the pain they felt. As she made to return to the bedroom, he reached out a hand to stop her.
"Actually, we managed to locate three coven members. Do you know Isabelle Blair, Florence
Marin, or Aimee Gramont?"

"Aimé! He's alive?" Belda covered her open mouth with her hand and then made a slight fanning
motion to dry her watering eyes. "He's my brother."

Dean looked over at her with a strange combination of gratitude and envy. She seemed like a nice
enough woman, who'd just been through an ordeal. Yet he couldn't help but feel like his life was
cursed to never catch the easy breaks. He wrapped a spare rag around his hand until he could ask
Cas to heal it properly.

"He’s safe. You’ll be able to see him in a bit, after we’ve relocated someplace safer," Ruby said in
reassurance. "Do you know Isabelle and Florence?"

"Isa’s a park ranger somewhere in Alaska. She’s really nice and outdoorsy...." Belda closed her
eyes while considering how much more to say. “She also had a reputation for being one of the
best recreational alchemists around."

"Recreational alchemist?" Dean asked.

"She makes drugs?" Sam guessed, recalling that over half of the adults in the coven had used one
variety of intoxicant or another at the bonfire.

"I always found her very high-functioning, but yeah." Belda shrugged. "Flo.... That might be
interesting. She’s an engineer, but I don’t know what she does exactly—other than something that
involves security clearance. It took a lot of work for the coven to get her through all of the
background checks. I’ve probably only seen her two or three times since she left for college."

"Did we just kidnap a spy?" Dean asked Sam, who looked surprisingly concerned by the thought
considering where grabbing Florence had fallen on the spectrum of his day’s events.

"She’s an engineer, so she’s probably a contractor," Bobby suggested. "But 'what kind?' is a good
question."

“You know what,” Ruby interjected. “Belda should go greet the three of them instead of me. They
haven’t seen me in this meatsuit and we shouldn’t be wasting time trying to get them to trust us.
Sam and I can watch the litter while you all are gone, then we can move everyone to the new
place in a few groups.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Belda asked, stopping just short of offering to stay.
“We’ll be fine. Just try not to take too long. Sam’s on a schedule.”

After handing out hex bags, Cas teleported Dean, Bobby, and Belda to the warehouse where the survivors were being held. Isabelle, Florence, and Aimé all immediately recognized and were briefed by Belda. Meanwhile, Bobby and Dean explained the situation to Rufus Turner and Tamara Chikenzie. In the end Rufus and Tamara both opted to take hex bags and do their best dodging angels on the road, but all three expat witches accepted the invitation to stay with the remnants of their old coven.

The sanctuary that Crowley’s people had found was a small lakeside resort in the middle of the Canadian wilderness that was warded in nearly every way imaginable. It wasn’t clear if the resort had been abandoned or if all of the previous occupants had been killed—Sam was grateful that no one asked. In some ways it reminded him of the camp that Ruby’s coven had lived in, which he hoped would make the transition easier for the children.

There were a dozen wooden cabins and what had probably been a visitor center. Half of the cabins were on the edge of the lake, complete with small piers. The cabins varied in size, between one and four bedrooms, and came fully furnished. To Sam’s relief, Crowley had held up his end of the bargain in ensuring the habitability of their new home.

Dean, Bobby, Florence, and Isabelle all took one-bedroom cabins. Bobby beat Florence in a game of target shooting for the nicer of the two one-bedroom cabins overlooking the lake, though Dean pointed out that Bobby’s win was by a very narrow margin.

Castiel didn’t claim a cabin since he had no need for possessions or sleep. Instead he seemed to be content merely loitering throughout the camp. While the others were figuring out living arrangements, he stood on one of the piers and watched the lake in contemplation of things that the others didn’t even guess at.

Belda suggested that she try to stay in the same cabin with as many of the children as possible. She claimed one of the four-bedroom cabins and attempted to divide up the rooms to accommodate all the children. She and Aimé each took a bedroom to share with one of the two infants. As she attempted to divide up the remaining two bedrooms between the five older children, it became obvious that they were staring down a tight fit with three kids in a single room. She decided to consult Ruby, who was looking through the smaller cabins.

When they had arrived at the camp, Tom had anxiously taken Ruby’s hand and opted to explore with her and Sam. After a few minutes of apparent safety, Tom had become emboldened enough to let go of Ruby, but he stayed close by. When Belda peeked her head into the living room of the cabin Ruby and Sam were looking over, Tom was off exploring one of the bedrooms.

“Rubahnali, can I talk to you for a moment?” Belda asked quietly, uncertain if the couple had claimed the cabin and she was entering their personal space.

“Sure, what’s up?” Ruby replied.

She stopped investigating the contents of the kitchen’s cupboards and walked across the combination kitchen, dining room, and living room. Sam came out of one of the bedrooms at the sound of voices.

“I was planning on using one of the four-bedroom cabins for Aimé, the children, and myself, but I don’t think we’ll fit. I was hoping to keep the older kids two to a room since most of them are still recovering—I think keeping them close together would be best for now. The whole trauma has
caused a lot of attachment issues and it'd probably be easier on them if they're close together until things get settled down,” Belda explained. “But I'm going to have to split them between two smaller cabins so that we don't have overcrowding in one of the bedrooms. Is it okay to take two cabins or do you think we should try to leave them open if we have anymore refugees?”

"I'm not sure who else would be arriving, but if it comes to it we could always move people around," Sam suggested. He wasn't sure who else would get pulled into their mess, but there was a possibility that once Bobby got back into contact with the hunters' network that there'd be a few more people in need of protection.

"Which cabins were you thinking?" Ruby asked as she considered the ones she'd been looking at for her, Sam, and Kaylee.

"There's a two-bedroom across from a three-bedroom on the end. I figure they should be as close together as possible, so that Aimé can get me if he needs help. Three kids with Aimé and four with me."

"You going to be okay outnumbered four-to-one? I know you'll be getting help during the day, but still," Sam said with a newfound appreciation for her endurance after watching the children when she was away collecting Aimé, Isa, and Flo.

"I'll manage or after the third night without sleep I'll start slipping them under your doors," Belda joked, but she did have small bags of fatigue forming under her eyes.

"We can figure out a way to make this work.” Ruby gave her a sympathetic smile. “You shouldn't have to take so much of the burden with the kids."

"Bobby and Isa have both offered to help with the children during the day. It's the nights that I'm more worried about. I feel bad for Aimé. He'll be juggling three without me—I know I'm only across the way, but he's only ever watched one kid at a time before."

Tom crept out of the bedroom he'd been looking over. He approached Belda cautiously in a way that reminded Sam of when he'd first met the boy. The three adults watched him as he shifted from foot to foot nervously. After a moment of hesitation he looked up at Belda with resolve.

"Could I stay here?" he asked, but only received confused looks. "With Sam and Ruby?"

The three adults exchanged surprised glances. Belda opened her mouth to say something, but it wasn't really her place to grant or deny Tom's request. Ruby looked at Sam, who raised his eyebrows and tilted his head in an armless shrug. Neither of them were particularly against the suggestion, but it was unexpected.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay with the other kids?" Ruby asked him.

Tom looked up at Kaylee, who was sleeping in Sam's arms. "Is the baby staying with you?"

"Well, yeah—"

"I want to help with the baby," he replied. “Dean said he was helping with Sam when he was even younger than me."

Sam thought back to Tom sneaking into his room at the apartment after having nightmares and suspected that the boy's motivation wasn't solely to help with Kaylee. He'd also been through a trauma like Belda had said, but instead of clinging to the other children, he'd been largely inseparable from his two rescuers.
Sam looked at Ruby, who gave a small shrug. She wasn’t indifferent as such; she liked Tom after all. He was a good kid that Sam had a nice little friendship with and he wanted to help take care of Kaylee. Even if it was a surprise to have him stay with them it wasn’t as bad as it had been a few hours earlier, when they were sharing an apartment with over a dozen people.

Once things settled down more and the kids felt safer, there would probably be a reshuffling of the living arrangements. At that point Tom could figure out what he wanted to do in the long-term. Until then, he could stay with them if he wanted and they would have an extra set of hands to help with Kaylee.

"Okay… Sure."

"I already found my room!" Tom shouted through the first smile he’d had since the attack as he ran into one of the bedrooms.

It took a few hours to get more or less everything sorted out in the camp. To everyone’s delight, all the kitchens and bathrooms in the camp came fully stocked. Belda made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the children while Isa made the closest thing she could to oxtail stew with the groceries available. Both sets of comfort food pleased their audiences, who ate together in the converted visitors center.

The dinner was cathartic in many ways. The children ran around playing tag, fueled by sugar and the thrill of having open space again. More in-depth introductions were made with Aimé, Isa, and Flo. A few beers were consumed, which opened the floodgates to embarrassing childhood stories. Eventually, Dean and Flo devolved into a friendly competition over who knew the most about firearms, which amused Sam and Bobby to no end.

As the sky darkened, the stress of the last few days caught up with everyone, resulting in an earlier night. Dean gave Sam a long hug and pat on the cheek before stumbling off to try to figure out which cabin was his. Bobby hugged Sam, then patted a few of the kids’ heads affectionately as he called it a night. Belda and Aimé herded the children off to the biggest cabin with only a few straying. Isa and Flo snuck off to Isa’s cabin while snickering and talking in Dagbani. After getting back to their cabin, Tom quickly hugged Sam and Ruby respectively then ran off to the bedroom he’d claimed.

Sam made a little ritual of putting Kaylee down for the night, for the first time in a real crib in something resembling a real home. He sang "Hey Jude" because Dean had mentioned that their mom used to sing it to them, but Sam wasn’t quite sure of all the words. After running out of known lyrics and probably repeating a few sections too many times, he switched to singing songs he was more familiar with. Kaylee finally fell asleep partway into "How Low" by Jose Gonzalez. He watched her silently for a few minutes before looking for Ruby.

He found Ruby continuing her investigation of the small kitchen. She stopped fiddling with the coffeemaker when he came in. He wordlessly wrapped his arms around her. She let him hug her without interruption for almost an entire minute before she spoke.

"Are you okay?" Her voice was soft with concern.

"No," he admitted. “I’m sorry about what I said earlier, about feeling corrupted."

"Is that how you really feel?"

"Yes and no? I’m grateful that you saved my life and I don’t rationally have a problem with it, but
there's this feeling. I've had it ever since I was a kid. It was like I knew there was something wrong with me.” He loosened his embrace a little so that he could look her in the eyes. “I remember I was just a kid reading about King Arthur and his knights— I always wanted to be Lancelot, but I knew that I never could because I wasn't…. I don't know, I guess, pure enough, if that makes sense. Since finding out about the demon blood, I've been able to almost feel it. It's like a poison that's pumping through my veins, but it doesn't hurt me. It just feels like something's off.”

He let go of her and paced slightly while rubbing his hands together anxiously. He'd never told anyone about the feeling before. It had been a private shame even before finding out about the blood—afterward it had been so much worse. If he'd have told someone earlier, could they have figured it out and how would've things been different? The weight of everything that had gone wrong crept onto his shoulders at the thought.

"And when you're in Hell you don't feel that wrongness?" She tried to understand, but Hell had a way of making even demons want to flee. The idea of feeling by some degree better for being there was unheard of.

"Pretty much. I feel a whole different type of wrongness." Sam walked into the dining area, sat down on one of the chairs and stared at the hardwood floor. "I'm scared that I can't handle this."

"It'll be hard. You knew that when you signed up for it."

"I killed Brady. I tortured him first," Sam confessed as Ruby sat down at the table next to him and took his hands in hers. "I'm sure Crowley will want me to make a few examples of captured higher-ups from Lilith's side, to help secure power when we make the push for control. He'll probably want to string up the bodies from the Central wall like Charlemagne. I don't know if I can do that."

"That's why you'll be gone for so long...." She could imagine some political theatrics within Central that would likely be fine, though there might be some resistance to the idea of a human leading Hell—possibly even just the switch over from republic rule to a monarchy would be enough to cause some drama. Then there'd come the announcement to Lilith's troops. Ideally it would cause division in her ranks, but there was a significant risk that it would just reignite the conflict. Sam would be down there long enough to poke the sleeping lion and see how it'd react. The question was how much his abilities could overcome his status as an outsider and Lilith's holy mission. So Crowley would put Sam's powers on display, including his most impressive ones. "You can kill, in Hell?"

"Yeah. It wasn't any harder than on Earth for me.... It actually was easier—natural." His lip trembled slightly. "I know that I've killed demons before, but this was different. Everyone down there is a demon. They aren't the ones coming in and causing carnage—that's me."

"They're in a war. It's not like they're completely innocent." She wanted to say something to make it easier on him, but she was having difficulty balancing reassurance and acknowledgement of his very real dilemma.

"I know. It's just... down there they have faces and names...." He struggled to talk around the tightness in his throat. "I found out that my best friend in college was one of Azazel's minions almost the whole time I knew him. I killed him. I keep thinking that in spite of the betrayal, he was actually one of the best friends I'd ever had. He was a person, not some demonic drone. You're a person."

"Sam, they're individuals fighting down there for whatever personal reasons just like any other war. If you weren't down there, they'd still be trying to kill each other, and our side would almost
certainly be the losing one. I'm not saying that you're going to single-handedly fight Lilith's army, but if you can bring some order and leadership…. I don't know. Maybe some blood on the hands might be the price for survival."

"They're going to break me—make me into something I don't want to be…. I don't want to be a tyrant, but how can the King of Hell be anything else?"

"You're stronger, smarter, and more good than you think. They don't need you to be cruel; they need you to be effective. Show them your value now and they may not even try to break you." She picked up his hand and kissed it. "I know you wanted to be Lancelot, but you're gonna have to settle for Arthur."

He smiled sadly at her. "In Hell."

"No job is perfect."

She scooted her chair closer to him and pulled on his shirt to bring his face to hers. Her lips closed the distance. It was a sad and longing kiss, which they seemed to be having a lot of recently, but it was also comforting. Sam regretfully broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers.

"They're pulling me back down in about an hour. I don't know—"

Ruby grabbed his face with both hands and pulled him into a desperate kiss. He wrapped an arm around her back, then pulled her onto his lap. His hand started sliding up underneath her shirt, but she stopped him. Sam looked at her in confusion until she took his hand and started leading him to their bedroom.

"You're going away for a few months." She pushed Sam backward onto the bed, then climbed on top of him. "That's worth me having to smoke out for a few minutes while you're away. It's not a good long-term plan, but right now I'm not thinking past the next hour."
Dean had mixed feelings about moving to the camp. It was true that they seemed to be fairly well hidden, but at what cost? Independent of everything Sam had given up for their protection, there were other downsides. Technically, they were in Canada—though it was hard to tell because they barely had any interaction with the locals. They were largely isolated, roughly an hour's drive to the closest town and about three hours to reach a decent-sized city.

He tried to make the most of it, but he found himself suffering from a case of literal cabin fever combined with a strange fatigue that seemed to come from domestic life. He may have claimed a small cabin for himself, but he barely seemed to get any privacy. At least once or twice a day he was enlisted to help supervise the kids. He didn't mind the children as much as he'd expected, but being on-call for babysitting quickly became an excuse to do very little otherwise and sink into a rut.

The change wasn't nearly as difficult for Bobby, but then again the old hunter had been something of a shut-in to begin with. After the first week, Bobby had fully embraced the role of substitute grandpa to the eight children. He would spend half of his days working what remained of the hunter network online and half teaching the children who were old enough to understand what he was saying. All in all, Dean was happy that at least one of them had a relatively easy time adjusting to the new arrangements.

Not surprisingly, it was difficult getting used to Sam popping in and out. The first few days Sam looked exhausted or occasionally distraught. He always needed to be around other people, and almost always with Kaylee. Dean found the behavior a little obsessive until he reminded himself that Sam was always returning after a month away from home. He tried his best to be there for Sam, but there was an uncomfortable disconnect in their experiences of Hell. Dean had been on the opposite side of the experience from what his brother was enduring. They settled for Sam confiding feelings and abstract concepts to him, while reserving more divisive and detailed confessions for Ruby.

After a week or so, Sam started being a bit less clingy and explained that he was starting to figure out how to partition the divided time in his mind. He wasn't really losing out on much of his family life, he was just having subjectively long asides. Dean didn't quite understand it, but as long as Sam was feeling better he wasn't about to complain.

Once the chaos had died down and everyone had fallen into a routine, Dean found himself more bored than he'd ever been in his life. It'd been over a month without a hunt, which was the longest period of inactivity he'd had since he was a teenager. Their only priority since the run-in with Uriel and Tamriel had been survival and getting stabilized. But now that that was over with, things had turned hopelessly mundane.
There was a knock on the front door to Dean's cabin. He looked up from *The Killing Joke* and eyed the door warily. It was about ten feet away from the couch that he was lying on, which meant it was about nine feet too far to be bothered with. Anyway, it wasn't like he locked the door. When your main threat was angels, who really bothered with a deadbolt?

"Yeah," he shouted, but when no one came in he tossed the trade paperback onto his coffee table. "Come on in, Cas."

The angel didn't bother opening the door, instead he just appeared in the tiny combination living room and kitchenette. Dean sighed, but didn't comment on Cas's continual inability to figure out proper etiquette for entering property or personal space.

"I need your help."

Dean stretched, but didn't really do anything that would give the false impression of him actually getting off the couch. He scratched the stubble that he'd accidentally neglected long enough that it was probably objectively a beard. It had become commonplace for Cas to ask for Dean's 'insight' at least a dozen times a day, but 'help' was a rarer request that usually implied some physical labor. At least the angel had stopped using the overly formal 'I require your assistance."

"What do you need help with?"

"I want to retrieve your car," Cas replied in a tone that should've been more excited about the prospective outing.

Dean sat up at mention of the Impala. "What?"

"Your car—"

"I meant why and how—and when. Just tell me what you were thinking of doing."

"It has been moved from Bobby's driveway to an impound lot within Sioux Falls. When I located it ten minutes ago, there were no angels within several miles. I doubt that it is being watched. I wanted to bring it here, but it is too large for me to teleport and I do not have experience operating an automobile."

"You want to spring Baby?" Dean's eyes glinted and he licked his lips excitedly.

After taking a moment to interpret Dean's question, Cas cautiously replied, "Yes, but we should be careful. Even though there may not be angels watching the car, we will need to be vigilant."

"Yeah." Dean hopped up from the couch and waved his hand in acknowledgement of whatever Cas had said. A quick peek in a mirror while grabbing his coat to confirm that his not-quite-beard wasn't sufficiently disgusting to delay him with grooming, then smiled at Cas. "What're we waiting for? Let's go."

They stood across the unlit street from the police impound lot. Sheriff Mills had ensured that Baby wasn't sold or scrapped, but she was too short on cash to bail the car herself. The Impala had become an object of speculation among the local police force when it was discovered that the trunk and glove box couldn't be 'found ajar.' It'd be obvious if someone tried to take a metal saw to it, but everyone decided to take at least one shot at picking the lock on Excalibur. The result was a little too much attention on the Impala, but at least the attention seemed strictly human.

"I don't get it. Why aren't there angels watching her?" Dean asked while looking down the street.
"They would not see the relevance of the object. There is nothing of objective value in car."

"All the power and minds of Heaven and they don't know to watch my most prized possession?"

"Sentimentality is viewed as an undesirable emotion. They do not understand the importance that objects can hold for humans. Attachment to things and people….” Cas thought for a moment before explaining, “Most angels will try to avoid considering those emotions and in the process underestimate them.”

“They think I'm too smart to risk coming back for her?” Dean paraphrased, earning an uncertain glance from Cas. Instead of saying anything to reassure the angel, he laughed and said, "Time to show them."

Cas teleported to the far side of the impound lot, then began pulling on car door handles until one set off an alarm. Dean watched as the cop in the guardhouse near the padlocked gate went to investigate. It wasn't exactly breaking into the Louvre, but Dean felt a little thrill as he approached the gate, large pair of bolt cutters in hand.

He was in and out with Baby in about thirty seconds. Half an hour later, Dean pulled into the gas station outside of Sioux Falls where they had agreed to regroup. Cas climbed into shotgun and they got back on the freeway heading southeast. They had agreed to take a long route back to the camp, to lose any would-be pursuers. After cycling through the radio stations for a few minutes, Dean opted to attempt some small talk.

"I don't suppose you could hop back over to Bobby's house and grab me some Zepp?" Dean quickly clarified, "Music—Zepp is short for Led Zeppelin, which is a band."

"I suspect that Bobby's house will continue to be watched for a long time," Cas said in an almost apologetic tone.

"I thought you said angels don't care about possessions? Why would they be watching Bobby's and not my Baby?"

"Bobby's house contains several objects that are potentially of strategic importance. Like I said, there is nothing of value in this car."

"How did you know?" Dean's brow furrowed slightly at the realization. “You must've known that before you risked scoping it out."

"I asked Ruby and Sam what they had left inside the car."

Dean glanced at the angel for a moment. Cas had researched the situation before deciding to get the Impala. It hadn't been the impulsive act that Dean had assumed…. Granted, after getting some of the adrenaline out of his system, Dean realized just how out of character impulsive tendencies were for Cas. Thinking about it, Dean had never actually gotten the answer to his question of why. It was obvious why he would want to rescue Baby, but Cas hadn't even ridden in the Impala until then.

"Why did you want to do this?"

"I heard Sam and Bobby talking about your discouraged state," Cas replied while looking out the window at the landscape. “Sam mentioned that you were probably missing your car and the freedom that it provided you."
“You wanted to cheer me up?”

Cas turned to look at him, then asked, "Did I succeed?"

"Yeah, Cas." He nodded. “Thank you.”

Dean turned the volume back up on the radio and began explaining different aspects of the songs. Cas listened closely, both to the music and to Dean’s commentary. After a few hours, they stopped at a diner for a quick breakfast. Dean managed to convince Cas to try eating something, under the pretense of pretending to be human while in public. As Cas warily reviewed the menu, Dean stepped outside to call and check in with Bobby. When he came back in, he had content smile on his face.

"Hey, Cas. How do you feel about taking a slight detour on the way back to hit a vampire nest for Bobby?"

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December 17, 2009

"Are you okay?" Shola asked Sam.

He was anxiously fiddling with his simple silver ring. After holding the band tightly for whatever comfort he could squeeze from it, he slipped it back onto his left ring finger.

"I'm a little nervous," he confessed.

"That sounds about right."

They were waiting in a minimalistic antechamber off of the main entry hall into the Citadel. He was grateful for the relative privacy. For what must’ve been a month by Hell’s standards he had been running a diplomatic gauntlet with various archdemons and bureaucrats. There had been introductions, lessons on protocol and history, debates about policy and strategy, and more. He was given a short reprieve to get ready for the big unveiling, but as much as he tried to relax he just became painfully aware that the clock was counting down.

“I’m not sure I can pull this off.” Playing at being the King of Hell was one thing; convincing anyone else was another. “They’re not going to believe it—I don’t believe it.”

“You need to remember that they want it to be true,” she suggested. “Play to their weakness—”

Sam huffed a pained laugh as he shook his head. “Hope is a weakness now?”

“When it hinders scepticism, absolutely,” Shola said as she smiled reassuringly. “Just carry yourself with some confidence and try to remember your little speech.”

"That’s probably the part I’m most worried about.” He shook his head in mild disbelief at what he would have to do. “They’re making me say that stuff.”

"If it makes you feel any better, roughly 98% of the people hearing it will get it altered through translation or as it becomes passed through the chain of gossip.”

“That’s comforting.” Sam rolled his eyes at the prospect of having an additional layer of helplessness with regard to the message he was supposed to give to all of Hell.

“It’ll mostly work in your favor. Like I said, the residents of Central all want you to be the leader we need. It’ll be the alterations that Lilith’s side will make that stand to be negative, but they are
probably already belittling you.”

“I wonder what sorts of thing they say about Crowley…. No wonder he drinks constantly,” Sam muttered even though he assumed that Crowley’s demonic fortitude left him mostly unaffected by the endless flow of luxury scotches.

Sam compulsively adjusted his clothes. Crowley had insisted that he wear something other than plaid and denim while working. To his mild horror the topic became quite an ordeal with every archdemon and high-ranking adviser putting in their two cents. The compromise ended up being something akin to a suit, but with a tailored jacket that extended to the knees creating an almost tabard-like appearance. The longer Sam was in Hell the more he recognized a vague medieval aesthetic preference from the castes that didn’t get topside very frequently.

At least two dozen suits had been created in different color palettes and with different accents, but for the big reveal Crowley had something special in mind. It was white with dark red embroidery that ascended the jacket, up to a high collar. The idea was to allude to the rumors that had spread after he was spotted on the Seat in full bloom. The red embroidery was mostly innocuous pattern work, but up close small red flowers were visible around the collar, cuffs, and bottom hem. The idea of wearing a white suit or something with flowers while addressing the armies of Hell seemed a little silly, but he wasn’t going to argue with whatever passed for theatrics in their culture. It could have been much worse.

After taking a deep breath, Sam stepped out of the antechamber door into the entry hall and was surprised to see Mir standing patiently on the other side. The knight was silent and reserved as ever, but the fact that he wasn’t beside the Seat for the first time since waking surely meant something. When Sam continued walking, Mir followed him a few feet behind and to the right.

"We’re trying to avoid the appearance that you need a guard,” groaned Crowley as he crossed the hall to meet Sam.

Crowley and the other archdemons had agreed that the best course of action would be to walk from the Citadel through Central to the wall, allowing the masses to get a firsthand look at the would-be King. Sam would be accompanied by the archdemons and a collection of trusted guards. It was suggested that surrounding Sam with guards would give an air of insecurity, so to his slight dismay the guards were instructed to stand at least thirty feet away from him and act more as crowd control.

"A knight is different than just some guard," Shola pointed out. "If he sees something in Sam, then it’s an asset to us."

"Lucian," Crowley corrected as he looked Sam over for flaws that needed to be dealt with. "Outside your present company you both follow the guiding principle of ‘fake it til you make it.’"

"You aren’t going to be joining us in this charade?" Sam asked, betraying his nerves.

"Nonsense. I just have a different mode of support. I can't lie for you, but I'll be there to give pointed suggestions and slide by on technicalities.” The archdemon smiled innocently. “You know: politics.”

The journey to the wall between Central and the Pits took an entire day. Luckily, fatigue and hunger didn’t seem to be an issue in Hell, unless it was part of a dedicated torture regimen. He found it a bit disorienting, losing all the normal measures of time: nights, exhaustion, and the need for meals. Without the indicators of time, tasks took as long as they needed to in order to be...
completed, and if it had took a week to walk to the wall then that's just how it'd go.

In the back of the procession were the prisoners that Sam was expected to execute. There had been many lengthy discussions about what was necessary to establish him as a powerful presence. The initial suggestion was the obvious choice to kill the highest ranking prisoners of war that they had. But Sam shot the idea down as merely making martyrs of them. After a long debate it was agreed that the approximately one thousand prisoners of war would be divided into four categories:

The highest ranking and most inspirational demons would be publicly buried away into the dullest prison possible, to live out eternity in crippling monotony. In truth there was a tentative plan to quietly execute them once they were out of recent memory. There had been a debate over whether they should be killed at all, but the leading theory was that the risks of keeping them alive outweighed the risks of public outrage if their executions came to light. Sam wasn't particularly thrilled with this determination, but it seemed to be a non-issue for the moment.

The most opportunistic of the prisoners were held apart from the rest with the intention of eventual recruitment. Crowley pointed out that for those who only wanted to be on the winning side, once the tides turned in the Pits, should be an incredibly predictable resource. If the alliance's forces could properly retake and entrench in the Pits, Lilith would have almost no leverage to outbid Sam and Crowley for the demon sellswords.

Sam firmly requested that the lowest ranking and common demons be given an opportunity to repent and join them. After torturing Brady and talking with several other demons, Sam had noticed that he could read demons' internal turmoil fairly easily. He suggested that even if it would took months or years... even decades, if Lilith's minions wanted to change their loyalty, he would hear every one of them out. The arches had initially disapproved, seeing the potential for pardons as a sign of weakness, but in time they reached a compromise. If Sam found one of Lilith's demons to be insincere, he would publicly execute them, which would reinforce his dominance. As much as Sam disliked the idea of more killing, he had to admit that it would likely cut down on false penance pretty quickly.

The last group was the prisoners that would be made into examples. They were the demons that no one on either side would mourn, yet everyone had heard of. The most vile and infamous officers that were hated by their underlings and enemies alike. Lilith's army would gossip about the executions, but it wouldn't cause any heartfelt outrage. Luckily, in Hell most demons had been tortured by their superiors at one point or another, so it was just a matter of finding the ones that had no remotely redeemable qualities.

After reaching the wall, Sam and his party ascended a staircase to a point where they could overlook both sides. It was the first time he'd seen Lilith's army. Beyond the wall, in the Pits, there was an expanse of probably ten thousand demons. The terrain was irregular, so he couldn't see as far as he would have been able to on Earth, but he knew that there were even more demons surrounding Central District on all sides. Many of Lilith's soldiers were in a state of casual alertness, waiting for some sort of action to begin. A few supply stations were visible in the distance, but generally it was obvious that they were at a stalemate. When the closest ones saw Sam and the archdemons arrive, they gave their hostile yet full attention to the new development.

He was shaking slightly, but from so far away he trusted that no one could tell. With just a few sentences he would be taking a new plunge into the madness that had somehow become his life. He'd been working in Hell behind the scenes for what was five weeks local time, but that was hidden away within the Citadel and the inner circle. This was going to start the more public phase of the plan. All the most popular rumors of Hell would be settled and replaced by new gossip and theories sprouting from the next few minutes.
The more unnerving part was that inevitably word would spread to Earth about the change in politics, but worse was how it was going to sound. He was going to have to feign a certain level of piety in order to utilize the brand of Lucian and strengthen the idea of a divine monarchy. That meant that he would have to reframe his past. As for his feelings on Lucifer, he’d have to outright lie. He tried to quell his anxiety for a moment before he began the performance.

"Many of you know me as Sam Winchester," he shouted.

Several demons on the wall acted as translators and cryers for the crowds. The odd hissing sound of Abyssal spread through both groups of demons as his speech was passed along. He could feel them all watching him with interest: one side hopeful, the other antagonistic— At least he had their attention.

“I was chosen by Lucifer to lead Hell. Before I could complete the trials put before me Lilith attempted to usurp control. She has only succeeded in dividing and weakening Hell. The archdemons beside me have endorsed my leadership and agreed to act as my advisors. With their assistance and with reverence to the will of Lucifer, I am here to accept my destiny. I have bound myself with oaths of loyalty to Hell. Know me now as Lucian, the true champion of Hell, who will bring the second season."

Cheering rose up from the Central side of the wall, but it quieted when Sam turned to specifically address Lilith’s army in the Pits. Every single soldier within view was watching him, and small murmurs rose from her army.

“Lilith has led you on a false crusade. If you sincerely wish to lay down your arms, I will spare your life.” He paused a beat as his offer of mercy elicited another, more startled murmur. "But I can see into your hearts and if you try to deceive me I will kill you: like them."

The ten prisoners were lined up along the edge of the wall so that they were clearly visible from the Pits. Sam waiting long enough to allow Lilith's troops to identify the officers, then he walked up to the first one. He gripped the demon by zir neck. His heart was pounding and he felt a tightness in his own throat, but he swallowed the flood of emotions. White light shone from zir mouth and eyes. After screaming in agony and convulsing for a moment, zie went limp and zir shell’s color became dull. Sam tossed the frail body from the wall and it shattered on the Pit floor.

Sam moved down the line systematically killing each prisoner in the same fashion. With each execution he felt a little more sick, but he made a point not to let it show on his face or in his posture. Both audiences whispered with each death, but a few vengeful cheers came up from the Central side when two of the more notorious officers were killed.

After throwing the last shell into the Pits, Sam looked out over Lilith’s army for a moment to let the situation sink in a bit more. Ripples of confusion, doubt, and outrage spread throughout Lilith’s troops. He could see a commotion on the far edge of his view of the Pits. Something was moving forward through the crowd, drawing the attention of nearby demons and causing exclamations to rise from the mob.

A man became visible as the focus of attention. His appearance was more human than most. He was large, muscular, and tanned with short black hair. He wore undecorated plate armor and had what looked like a claymore at his side. As he approached, Sam could see that he had a pair of black horns protruding from his forehead that were vaguely camouflaged against his hair.

"That's Joseba, one of the knights," Shola whispered from behind Sam for his benefit. "He woke up around the same time as Mir, but went out into the Pits. We haven't been able to keep track of him since then."
One of the higher ranking demons on the Pits side climbed onto a large boulder, then started yelling something to the crowd and pointing at Joseba. The crowd started cheering and chanting something in Abyssal.

Sam didn’t need to understand the language to know that Lilith’s side was rallying behind the presence of a knight. He looked to the reactions of those around him. Crowley and the other allied archdemons were doing an admirable job of hiding their concern, but Mir’s behavior was the most interesting.

Mir looked to a point on the wall that was completely void of anything interesting for several seconds, then he turned to look at Sam. The mute knight’s lipless smile had returned. He took a step forward to get a better view of Joseba.

Joseba continued walking through the crowd, but redirected his course to join the officer that had started the chanting. The officer started yelling angrily up at Sam’s group, having been given a new sense of enthusiasm by the knight’s presence. Joseba climbed onto the large boulder with the officer.

In a single flash of motion, Joseba drew his claymore and decapitated the officer. The chanting stopped immediately. Sam had to stop himself from letting his jaw drop in surprise. Several cries broke out and the demons around Joseba started scrambling up the rock to attack him. The knight swung the claymore again, killing five demons in a single stroke, then the mob moved in to swarm him. Sam felt the gentlest gust of air as some unseen entity moved by him quickly. It went straight over the edge of the wall and had come from... the area Mir had been staring a few seconds earlier.

"Should I be worried?" Sam asked Mir, who slowly shook his head in return.

Joseba was the center of his own battle, but a strange path was being cut through the crowd toward him. Sam couldn’t see exactly what was causing the disruption, but several demons fell dead in its wake. Joseba was pulled under the surface of the mob for a moment as the unseen entity moved to reach him. With a flicker, the new player became visible.

Her movements were inhuman as she sliced with blades that seemed to line her forearms and shins. The fighting style was reminiscent of Muay Thai and using tonfas. Her form was one of the least human Sam had seen since arriving in Hell. She looked more like a three-dimensional shadow than anything else.

Almost like a liquid, she slipped between demons, dropping them as she moved closer to Joseba. She began thinning the herd around him. After shaking off three demons, he joined her in slowly moving toward the wall.

Mir turned from the show to face Sam. The knight locked eyes with him, then tilted own his head toward a nearby gate tower. Mir began walking to the tower without waiting to see what Sam would do. Sam hurried to follow him.

They descended the tower's staircase and approached the large iron gate. Twenty demons were guarding the gate on the Central side. The guards looked at Mir and Sam, uncertain of what was happening. Shola ran up behind them, having noticed that Sam had slipped away during the excitement.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Not really sure yet," Sam replied. When Mir raised his maul into a fighting stance and began
walking towards the gate, Sam said, "Fuck. He's serious— Shola, tell them to let him out."

Shola hesitated only for a second before yelling orders at the guards. The guards looked between
each other before looking to Sam. He didn't care if they didn't understand his words; he started
shouting at them to raise the gate. The demons took the hint and began lifting the gate and moving
into defensible positions. When the gate was raised, they got their first ground-level view of the
fight.

There was a massive brawl located roughly eighty feet in front of the gate that was centered on
Joseba and the female demon. To Sam's surprise, Mir continued to almost stroll, instead of opting
to run, into battle. A few of Lilith's demons realized the gate was open and tried to rush in. Mir
calmly swung his maul, shattering shells with near indifference. The Central guards hurried to
defend against any incoming attackers. Just before Mir reached the edge of the mob, he turned
back to look at Sam expectantly. The knight contemplated something for a moment before turning
to join the fight. Based on the hilt and handle sticking out of Mir's back, he'd been stabbed while
eyeing Sam.

He could see that Joseba and the female demon were almost halfway through the mob, but they'd
been slowed down by some sort of reinforcements. Mir was helping clear the way for them, but he
lacked a certain speed that was helpful when so overwhelmingly outnumbered. Against his better
judgment, Sam ran through the gate.

Sam had never actually been on a battlefield before. There was a seemingly endless threat before
him, but he couldn't just leave the knights out there. Despite the fact that they were stronger than
normal demons, the three of them being outnumbered so overwhelmingly leveled the contest. In
the fight before him, he could see that abstract knowledge incarnate.

He knew that he was more powerful than a normal demon, but when stacked up against a horde....
His job was to be a figurehead, not to fight the actual war. They hadn't tested his combat abilities
in Hell or his vulnerability. Unlike everyone else there, he was still alive and could potentially be
killed by mundane injury. In Hell, with the exception of by special weapons, Sam or a knight, it
was incredibly difficult to kill demons. So he didn't venture too far into the fray, but enough that he
could assist Mir, who had become engulfed.

With a thrust of his hand, Sam telekinetically threw five demons off of Mir. To his surprise, he
couldn't see where they landed, though it must've been at least fifty feet away. He continued
throwing demons out of the way, trying to help clear a path. But now that he was out on the field,
he could see why the reinforcements were proving such a nuisance.

Five massive, taloned and fanged Torquean demons had moved up from the reserves to assist in
subduing the knights. Joseba attempted to kill one, but he was visibly injured and was having to
make an effort just to continue moving. The female demon dropped one of the Torquean without
much difficulty, but she was hindered by continuing to assist Joseba. Mir shattered another
Torquean, but became bogged down by the lesser demons again quickly.

One of the Torquean moved to bring down a sickle on Joseba's head, but Sam grabbed her. He
used his powers to lift the powerful demon into the air and crushed her, which drew a lot of
unwanted attention to him. The two remaining Torquean and a group of at least a dozen demons
moved to rush Sam.

Instinctively, Sam held up his hands to them. Brilliant light shone out before him. Screams and
hissing swelled up from the mob. He couldn't tell if the hissing was an expression of anger or the
sound of burning flesh until he smelled scorched skin and brimstone. He lowered his hands to see
that the group that had been charging him was nothing more than ash.
The nearby demons stopped mid-frenzy. Several of Joseba's attackers gave up their assault and hurried backward into the crowd. The shadowy female demon finished off the remaining few who continued to harass Joseba, while Mir killed the last demon he was fighting.

Sam looked around and realize that he and the knights were being given a wide berth. Lilith's troops didn't even attempt to charge the still-open gate into Central District. The immediate army was suppressed with a seething tension. They had adopted a defensive posture and were waiting to see what Sam and the three knights would do.

But with Joseba and Mir both injured, the priority was to safely retreat back into Central. The female demon helped Joseba through the gates while Sam and Mir covered them, but no attacks came. Once the four of them were through, the iron gate was lowered.

Sam looked at the scene on the Central side of the gate. All of Lilith's troops that had rushed the gate had been subdued. Beyond the guards, who were binding their prisoners, was a crowd of Central demons. There were a few hundred who'd risked watching the fight from ground level and eyed Sam with curious wonder. Crowley stood next to Shola on the front edge of the audience with a small smile that helplessly formed on his face.

The female demon lifted Joseba's arm off of her shoulders and let him fall onto the ground. The injured knight looked up at her with a near-smile of gratitude. She softly kicked his ribs where a chunk had been taken out of both his armor and him. He cringed and grinned at her while clutching his damaged chest.

"Tora?" Crowley asked the shadowy demon, who nodded toward him and responded with something in Abyssal. Crowley looked to Sam. "I've always been curious to meet the Knight of Shadows. She's a hard one to coax out of hiding."

Tora offered Joseba a hand up and Sam was briefly surprised when her slender form was able to aid the much larger, armor-clad man so easily. While helping him up, she asked Joseba something in Abyssal. He smiled, gripped his claymore, then replied to her.

"She asked what he was doing among Lilith's army," Shola translated for Sam. "He said that he was just looking for his sword."

Chapter End Notes

A quick note, I'm using zie/zir/zirs/zirself for the gender neutral characters. As mentioned in a previous chapter, demons' sex exists on a spectrum because it is a manifestation of their identity.
"So... Sam was in Hell—" Dean began.

"Only part-time—he was around a lot," Kaylee said a little defensively. "He was a good dad. Always made time for the family, even if things were difficult."

That was some small level of comfort. Sammy wasn’t trapped in the Pit the whole time and he seemed to have enough freedom that his daughter hadn’t grown up alienated. As someone whose dad had been somewhat absentee, Dean was sensitive to the impact that that could have on a person. He supposed that Sam must’ve also been aware of that throughout Kaylee’s upbringing and probably made a concerted effort to compensate for whatever time away was necessary.

"And what happened to me?" Dean asked.

With a slightly better picture of Sam’s starting place on the board, Dean thought of himself. Things had been dire when he’d left 2009 and trying to imagine where his life would take him was difficult at best. Even if Sam made a deal that helped protect or hide him from angels, what did he do going forward? Was hunting even a viable option? He wasn’t sure what the state of the hunting community would’ve been. Apparently a number of hunters had been killed along with Ruby’s witches. Were there any remnants of the network left intact and if so, would any of them still be willing to work with him or Bobby once they’d found out about the whole mess with Sam?

"You started hunting with Cas," Tom explained.

Dean raised an eyebrow at the idea. "Hunting with an angel?"

"Angels make good allies in a fight."

“I’ll bet," Dean said as he looked at Dylaniel, then went to rub the back of his neck, but the chain on his manacles stopped too short. In the shock of finding out about the apocalypse, Sam, and Hell, he’d almost forgotten about his unpleasant surrounding. He looked at his three friendly captors and rattled his chains. "Since you know I’m not a spy or something, can we continue this little chat with all of us outside a cage?"

Tom took a step toward the cage door, but stopped for a moment reconsidering it. He glanced at Kaylee and Dylaniel with an expression of uncertainty. Dylaniel hadn't moved any more than flicking his eyes to Kaylee. She shifted her weight, hands resting on her hips and stared at Dean thoughtfully.

"Here’s the thing,” she started in an ominous manner. “I don't know you, but I do know my uncle and he can be a stubborn son of a bitch.”

Dean leaned his head forward in disbelief at the direction their conversation was going. He’d thought that with him being something like Kaylee's uncle, things were good, but maybe they weren’t. His mouth opened and closed a couple times, trying to figure out if he should beg or
argue.

She didn’t give him the chance before continuing her warning. "You're in our time and our base, and I'm not going to have you running around fucking up all our hard work."

"Fucking up—you're going to leave me here?!"

"No, but we're gonna set some ground rules before you get the cuffs off." Kaylee turned to Dylaniel. "Call for Salviel."

Dylaniel didn't move, but instead closed his eyes. A moment later Dean heard the flapping of wings and suddenly another woman was standing next to Dylaniel.

She looked Hispanic, in her late thirties or early forties, with black hair in a pixie cut. A scar trailed from the bottom of her left ear across her neck down to her right clavicle. She was wearing lightly armored clothing that was similar to Dylaniel's except that her pants were brown and the jacket was black without the strange extra panel of fabric on the back. Her hips carried dual angel-blade holsters. She stared at Dean for a moment before nodding in greeting to the others.

"I imagine you've heard the rumors about him?" Kaylee asked the new arrival.

"Yes, ma'am. They're saying that a person matching the commander's description was found. I see that's true."

Dean's ears perked up at her mention of 'commander.' He made a mental note of that.

"Yes, we have a little case of angelic time travel," Kaylee confirmed. "He's from the past, so you can see the importance of keeping him in one piece. I'm assigning you to guard him for the duration of his stay. He's not to leave your sight unless one of the three of us tells you otherwise. You will assist him with whatever he needs—within your judgement. Make sure he follows the rules."

"Understood," Salviel replied, then looked over at Dean with skeptical curiosity.

Kaylee turned back to Dean and began explaining the terms of his release. "Rule number one: don't try to sneak away because Salviel's one of the best we have at tracking and I'm perfectly fine with her dragging you back with both legs broken if it means keeping you alive." Her tone was slightly condescending and he wanted to be entirely offended, yet a whisper of doubt told him that he might've otherwise tried to slip away for a bit out of pure defiance. "We're currently located on a secure base, but a forty-five-minute walk in any direction will put you considerable danger. The last thing any of us need is you getting captured."

"Captured?" he asked as he realized that they were in a war zone and he looked like one of the commanders for this side. That could be an issue.

"By agents of Heaven. Finding you would be one of their top priorities if they knew you were here. They'll want you alive, but they'd settle for you dead."

"Top priorities?" Dean’s stomach dropped. Back before sending him to the future, Castiel had theorized that the further ahead he traveled the less Heaven would be interesting in him. “What's Heaven got against me?"

"A lot," Kaylee replied bluntly, then only slightly elaborated, “Uncle Dean is number one on Michael's shit list, which makes you number one-and-a-half."
"Michael? Like Archangel Michael?" Dean rolled his eyes and threw his hand up in exasperation—or at least as far as he could while in the manacles.

"Yeah, that one—"

"Also, Lucifer's side'll absolutely kill you, but not before they destroy your soul. Can't have you getting into Heaven," Tom added in an attempt to be helpful.

Dean buried his face in his palms. Somehow he’d managed to truly piss off some big bads—granted if he was some higher up in the whole Earth army group, then maybe that made sense. Though being number one on an archangel’s shit list sounded like quite the feat.

"Hey, Dyl, do we have anyone that still has ears on angel radio?" Kaylee asked.

"There are four recruits that are recent enough to try," Dylaniel replied. "I can have them monitor for any news about him. If anything breaks, we can pull security from one of the quieter bases to reinforce our defenses or we can take him to the bunker."

"Thanks." Kaylee nodded, then speculated, "If he’s already on pirate radio there’s a good chance it’ll slip out."

"Talial might be able to contain it, but we’ll listen just in case," Dylaniel assured her.

Dean was distracted by imagining the ways he could’ve managed to piss off two different archangels, when he was drawn back by the mention of pirates. "Pirate radio? You guys have pirates now?"

"'Pirate radio' means an illegal radio broadcast," Tom clarified. "Angels can communicate telepathically and we call the frequencies that Heaven broadcasts on 'angel radio.' So when our angels started using their own frequency, they named it 'pirate radio.'"

"Fallen angels can sometimes still hear angel radio for several months after they’ve fallen," Dylaniel added. "Heaven has a difficult time removing an angel from their system without the angel being in Heaven."

"Newly fallen angels are given a little extra protection—kept away from the general population for awhile," Kaylee explained. "It’s both to protect them from Heaven trying to pick them off on the battlefield, and because falling can be a pretty big shock to them. The non-combat angels can be confused and really naive for awhile— Actually, I’ve got rule number two." She turned to address Salviel. "Don't let him fuck anyone."

"Excuse me?" Dean asked.

"There might be a few people that would be interested, especially the angels—possibly angels that have no idea what they'd be doing."

Her comments made him wonder if angels were actually capable of giving informed consent about things like sex. That was a nightmare he had zero interest in. He made a mental note that angels were categorically off-limits.

She continued, "I don't want you knocking any of my people up or causing similar drama. Also, letting someone have sex with you feels like an invasion of my uncle's privacy."

"But it's my privates, not his."
He understood that the angels were off the table and honestly the idea of getting laid while on the mission hadn't even crossed his mind until then, but having someone be instructed to prevent the possibility was kind of offensive. He was an adult and if the option to have a one-night-stand presented itself, it was his right to decide whether or not to enjoy it.

"Yeah well, he doesn't fuck around and you're not showing the masses what they're missing. That's a condition of you getting out of the cage. Your choice." She stared him down and none of the others seemed to be interested in pleading his case.

Worse than the mere hypothetical cockblock was the realization that his comfort was being subordinated to the other Dean. It made sense in a way; he was the outsider, but adhering to the rules in general wasn't the same as being expected to emulate another person's behavior.

None of these people knew him. They knew some later Mirror-Mirror version of him. Kaylee probably wouldn't have any memories earlier that a few years old, which was several years after his time. Judging by his silver hairs, Tom was older than her, but probably not by much. Yet he'd never met Tom and wasn't entirely sure how much he'd interacted with the other Dean. The angels didn't count either because no matter how old they were, he'd only ever interacted with Castiel before traveling to 2039.

"Fine."

"Why am I so popular with the angels?" Dean asked as Tom removed his manacles. Michael hated him with some sort of fiery passion, and some of the fallen angels apparently would be interested in fucking him. Surely something had earned him such intense reactions from the winged community.

"It's a little complicated, but it generally comes down to Dean having a better rapport with the fallen angels than most other humans," Tom started to answer, then smiled at some thought or memory and looked at Dylaniel, who pursed his lips slightly.

"It's hard for me to picture myself getting along real well with angels. Two-thirds of the ones I've met have been dicks—possibly three-thirds," Dean replied. He couldn't quite peg Castiel. After remembering that he'd met more than three angels he looked over at Salviel and Dylaniel. "No offense."

Salviel and Dylaniel glanced at each other, but neither said anything. Kaylee chuckled a bit and shook her head at the comment.

"Well, you didn't exactly get by on your charming personality alone," Kaylee clarified. "It helps that you're special."

"The Righteous Man?" Dean asked, hoping to finally get some answers. He’d been wondering for several days what that whole ‘Righteous Man’ thing was about. It hadn’t occurred to him that he might be able to find information about it in the future, but then again he wasn’t expecting to be in a situation where he was allied with angels. Castiel hadn’t known the significance behind the title, but he’d just been one angel at the beginning of something very big.

"Kinda, but that's skipping ahead a bit," Kaylee said. “I get the feeling we're gonna need to take this step-by-step with you."

"No offense." Tom unconsciously mimicked Dean, then offered him a hand up from the concrete floor, which he accepted. Dean dismissed the potential insult with a shrug as he stretched and
cracked his back.

"Have you heard of angelic vessels?" Kaylee asked.

"You mean an angel's meatsuit?" Dean asked as he followed Tom out of the cage.

"Don't call them that," Salviel said with a small scowl of disapproval.

Dean looked at her a little confused by her statement, but Kaylee continued talking.

"Vessels," Kaylee corrected. "But a similar concept. Unlike demons, angels can't just possess someone—"

"Yeah," Dean replied, grateful that he knew something about what was being discussed. He recalled Castiel asking Sam if he'd ever heard any voices before blacking out. "Castiel—Cas said that angels need permission first."

"More than that, angels need compatible vessels," Dylaniel explained. "The vessels need to carry a trace amount of their angel's grace in order to fully integrate with their angel. Without full integration, both the vessel and the angel are weakened, so angels try to avoid it. Archangels can't even do it without destroying the incompatible vessel immediately."

"Grace travels through bloodlines, so you get situations where a single angel has one or more families that they can possess," Kaylee added.

"The grace that Cas found in Kaylee and Sam…." Dean thought back to the grace that had been found in baby Kaylee. They had figured that her grace had come from Sam, who may have inherited it himself.

"Your dad's family carries Michael's grace."

"Mich—Archangel Michael— I'm his vessel?" Dean reminded himself that in this time there was also the other Dean, Sam, and Kaylee. "I'm one of Michael's vessels, along with Sam and Kaylee?"

"You are, but dad and I…." Kaylee rocked on her heels and gave an unsettling shrug. "We're a different story."

_____________________________________________________

September 19, 2012

"We're going to Santa Fe."

"What's in Santa Fe?" Cas asked as he looked up from his paperback copy of Shards of Honor.

"Someone I really want to kill," Dean replied.

_He threw the newspaper onto the motel bed next to where Cas was sitting. The front page story was about a jewelry heist at store called Johnson's Family Antiques that was foiled when the burglar accidentally shot himself in the crotch. The headline read 'Burglar lost johnson, family jewels.' There was a large color photo of the store and a crowd looking on as the burglar was being wheeled out on a stretcher. In the middle of the crowd in the photograph stood a man with a broad grin on his face. It was the trickster that had killed Dean over a hundred times a few years earlier. The experience had traumatized Sam, and Dean wanted some payback._

_He called Sam's direct line. The phone clicked and hissed for a moment, indicating to Dean that the call was being rerouted to Hell. The line would take a few seconds to adjust for the time_
difference, but he imagined Sam always got the worst side of the deal. He probably had to wait an extra several minutes between Dean's sentences to have the speech converted up x120 speed. Fuck—Sammy probably treated every interdimensional phone call as playing pen pals.

"Hey, Ishmael. Get your ass to Santa Fe. I found Moby Dickhead," Dean said once the line became clear.

"Dean, what the hell are you talking about?" Sam asked.

"The trickster, he's in Santa Fe. He got photographed and I spotted him in the newspaper."

"It's a trap."

"Sam's tone was blunt. In the background Dean could hear some shuffling of papers. Sam usually had a little negativity during or shortly after working, so Dean didn't take the objection as a full-on rejection.

"There's been all sorts of weird stuff going on in that area and this is the first spotting. He could've just slipped up. The guy makes mistakes."

"We're being hunted by angels, demons, and hunters," Sam pointed out. "You really think that there's going to be something lining up for us like this that's not a trap?"

"He's a trickster. That's polytheistic pagan territory. He's not some angel or demon or hunter. Why would he work with them?" Dean countered. When Sam didn't have a good counter argument, he continued, "Come on, it'll be fun. You're like a wizard. We've got Cas—hell, you can even bring one of those knights if Crowley won't let you out to play without a chaperone."

After a few seconds, Sam said, "This is a bad idea."

"That's not a no," Dean replied as a little smile started forming on his face.

"You're set on doing this, aren't you?"

"100%"

"Put me on speakerphone."

"Sam waited. Dean waved over Cas, then switched the output to the speaker. "I'm bringing Tora. We find him, kill him, then we're gone. Cas, if things go wrong we'll hop around and meet back at camp. Okay?"

"Do you really have to bring Tora? Can't you bring the one that doesn't talk?" Dean's chipper mood dimmed slightly at the idea of spending time with her. She didn't like him. She didn't seem to like anyone other than Sam and even that seemed like a stretch.

"She's the best I've got at dealing with illusions and magic. I'll ask her to not talk as much around you if you want," Sam suggested as a compromise.

"Just teach her English," Dean told Sam for what seemed like the hundredth time. "Teach all of your knights English. As is they're a pain in the ass to be around."

"I'm going to need some time to wrap things up down here, then I'll be ready..." Dean could hear Sam assessing some small mountain of work "...in maybe ten minutes your time. Where do you want to meet?"

"There's an IHOP at the corner of Richards and Certillos," Dean replied, earning a chuckle from Sam.
“We’re seriously going to have our pre-hunt tactical meeting in a pancake house?”

“You caught him eating pancakes once before. Maybe we’ll get lucky?” Dean grinned at his quick justification.

“Dean has also been wanting pancakes for two days,” Cas added, deflating Dean slightly. He threw Cas a look of mock betrayal, which caused Cas to shrug.

“That doesn’t make it any less of a good idea,” Dean defended.

“See you guys in ten.”
Dean and Cas left their belongings at their Cincinnati motel room except for three angel blades. Cas teleported them to an alley about a block from the Santa Fe pancake house. After grabbing a booth, Dean recapped his previous encounters with the trickster for Cas.

He wasn't particularly concerned with the trickster spotting them. The trickster's modus operandi was consistent with not being able to pass up the easy target of Dean or Sam. Either intentionally or accidentally one of them would probably catch his attention, so it might as while be in the form of bait. When it came down to it, the fight would probably be telegraphed in advance. The card up their sleeve, though, was that they were collectively much more powerful than the last time the trickster saw them.

After a few minutes, Sam walked in. He was wearing his casual topside clothes of blue jeans and plaid. A woman that appeared to be in her mid-twenties and of Native American descent followed him in. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She wore hot pink and yellow polka dot stockings under cutoff jeans shorts, and a turquoise Go! Team hoodie. Her exterior was entirely carefree, but by the way she was casing the restaurant Dean knew it was Tora.

"Real subtle. Of all the women in town, she had to grab a powerpuff girl," Dean commented.

Sam shrugged as he slid into the booth and said, "Whatever. I don't tell her how to do her job."

Tora sat down next to Sam in the booth, separating him from the aisle.

"Yeah, you do." Dean gestured at Tora, earning him a glare from her. "You're her boss."

"I tell her what to do," Sam corrected. "She knows best how to get it done. If she thinks that body will work well, then that's up to her."

"It's got a soul in it, doesn't it?"

Sam pursed his lips slightly at Dean's question and gave a small, helpless shrug. "Soulless bodies in decent shape are hard to find. If you want help on short notice, this is what we have to deal with. She knows to go easy on it."

A waiter stopped by their table just long enough to drop off menus for the new arrivals. Sam picked up one of the menus and tapped it on the table a few times.

"Are we actually getting food?" he asked before opening the menu. "Not that I'm complaining. I just wasn't expecting to eat so soon."

"Never hunt on an empty stomach." Dean smiled. "Unless it's ghouls—maybe skip lunch then."

"Is she going to eat too?" Cas asked. He had contemplated skipping his custom of eating with others while at restaurants, but thought it might seem odd so close to breakfast time while at a
pancake house. Though, he didn’t know if Tora also refraining from eating would make him less or more conspicuous.

Tora was diligently looking around the restaurant and hadn't touched the menu, not that it would've done her much good beyond the few pictures. Sam leaned closer to her and whispered some Abyssal to her. He was hoping to spare Dean the uncomfortable feeling the language produced in humans, but Dean still shuddered slightly. She thought for a moment, then nodded. Her hand waved at the menu with indifference.

"Yeah. She'll eat, but she doesn't care what. She hasn't been topside for a while, so anything'll probably be a treat."

Dean chuckled at Sam's answer. When he saw everyone looking at him confused about what was funny, he smiled. "Sorry, just the idea of a knight of Hell getting a treat. I pictured a cartoon demon with an oversized lollipop."

Sam and Cas smiled, but didn’t seem as amused as Dean would’ve liked. Unseen under the table, Cas patted Dean's knee reassuringly. Tora looked at Dean suspiciously, but otherwise didn't react.

"Speaking of sweets, any knocked-over candy shops or other leads?" Sam asked.

"Not yet, but there's a cupcake baking competition downtown starting in an hour," Dean said with an innocent grin.

Sam frowned back at him. "Trap. I'm calling it right now: trap."

"Yeah, but it's one of his traps. They're like stories you'll tell the kids some day."

"You getting killed in front of me hundreds of times was fucking hilarious." There was a little more moodiness in Sam's voice than Dean had expected.

"I know you're still pissed at the guy. That's why we're here." Dean's smile faded in concern. "You need to loosen up. Is... work getting to you?"

Sam sighed, then leaned back in the booth slightly. He chewed his lip a little while trying to decide how much to share. Dean rarely asked him about 'work' because it was something they could almost never see eye-to-eye on. Yet Dean was sympathetic to his struggle, even if Sam seemed to be bearing it fairly well most days. So on the unusual day when Sam was clearly agitated, Dean would make the goodwill gesture of at least asking.

"Something's wrong with our inventory—or worse: the numbers are right. You'd think that they closed the pearly gates with the uptick we've been seeing lately." Sam rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to relieve some stress. "I mean, like, all dogs aren't going to heaven."

"Heaven never accepted canines," Cas said in confusion.

"It's a movie reference, babe," Dean said as he waved his menu impatiently trying to signal their waiter.

"Do canines go to Hell?" Cas asked Sam in legitimate curiosity.

"Um... no? We don't really have animals." Sam furrowed his brow, then leaned over and whispered to Tora again.

The waiter approached their table, but looked faint as soon as he was in the area of effect of the
Hellish tongue, and hurried away without stopping to get their order. Dean watched the waiter retreat as Tora whispered something back to Sam.

"We've got hounds and imps, but we think they're both native," Sam elaborated for Cas, then noticed Dean's irritated expression. "What?"

Dean bounced his knee in annoyance, then collected all the menus. "Alright, I'm gonna go chase down the waiter and put in our order because this wait is un-fucking-bearable. Cas, you still want french toast?"

"I think so," the angel replied.

"Pancake is in the name of the restaurant—throwing that out there," Dean reminded him while resisting the mild exasperation he was experiencing.

"I appreciate that, but I'm curious what makes the toast French."

"I don't know if French toast is actually—" Sam started, but Dean cut him off.

"Look it up on your phone while I'm ordering. Let me guess." Dean put two fingers to his forehead feigning a psychic reading. "Egg white garden omelette."

"And a cup of coffee," Sam added, a little peeved at being so predictable.

"Everyone's getting coffee. I don't care if half of us don't sleep, caffeine all around. As for Tora, any idea what I should order for her to eat?"

"Anything," Sam answered, releasing Dean to pursue their waiter; then he turned to ask Cas, "He's pretty excited about killing the trickster, isn't he?"

"The way everything has been going lately, Dean needs an old-fashioned hunt," Cas speculated. "Nearly a quarter of our cases in the last few months were human—and those were just the ones we initially mistook for supernatural creatures."

"I heard about the bombing at the World Series and the subway shootings along the east coast. Things are getting bad up here, aren't they?"

Cas glanced nervously at Dean, who was still talking with the waiter across the restaurant, then asked, "This escalation, is it your people?"

"No, not on that kind of scale." Sam shook his head. "We're still going through reconstruction in the Pits. There's a token level of disruption topside, to help us maintain our presence, but we just don't have the manpower to spare on anything more than that right now."

"Do you think they're Lilith's people?"

"Maybe, but I'm not sure where she'd get the extra manpower either. She's also pretty immobilized by our grappling," Sam leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Have you heard anything from your contacts in Heaven? We're trying to keep up the show and our defenses are mostly intact, but I'm not sure we could take a hard hit right now. If you catch wind of anything…"

"Right now I believe that a direct assault on Hell is not a priority of Heaven, but I will let you know if I hear anything."

"Thanks Cas."
Unsurprisingly, there was a security checkpoint at the entrance to the convention center. Rather than pull some sleight of hand getting their weapons through, they opted to just teleport inside. Despite the rigorous check getting inside, there were still a considerable number of security guards patrolling for a baking competition. Though Dean supposed that nowadays a little extra security at large gathering seemed like a fair policy decision.

Dean put his hands in his jacket pockets and held them closer to his torso until they could find a quiet place to prepare. They turned into an alcove that contained a bank of dusty pay phones. He opened his jacket and pulled out one of the two angel blades he wore in a custom shoulder holster.

"You sure the angel blades will work on a trickster?" Sam asked.

“They've worked on everything else and they're a lot easier to hide than those big blood-covered spikes," Dean pointed out, then dangled the spare blade in front of Tora. "Now remember: play nice."

She took the blade, twirled it a few times, then looked at Sam. One corner of his mouth turned downward and he shook his head at her. She pointed at Dean, then stabbed the wall next to her without taking her gaze off of him. The tip of her blade was embedded directly between the eyes of a man on an advertising poster.

"Just because she can't kill you doesn't mean you should make her want to," Cas warned.

“Come on. She's kinda a bitch and you know it," Dean said in his defense.

"You're kinda a jerk," Sam countered. Dean looked to Cas for back up, but the angel was intently without comment. "Anyway, the trickster's somewhere around here, so the last thing you need to be doing is setting yourself up for some ironic justice."

"Fine," Dean conceded the point, then got down to business. "If we see anything suspicious, we try to casually separate it from the civilians before we start poking it with pointy sticks. The last thing we need is for a dozen mall cops to be taken out in a blaze of glory because our cover's blown and Tora ends up stab-happy."

"She knows to not use lethal force on civilians. Anyway, it's not like we're going to get the drop on this guy, so we better be ready for it to go sideways." Sam raked his fingers through his hair, then spoke to the ceiling. "Hey trickster, if you're watching us can you remind us that I get an 'I told you so' when you eventually screw us over?"

"Cute," Dean muttered.

"Oh, you'll see."

They walked through the aisles of the exhibition hall looking for anything out of the ordinary. Sam, Dean, and Cas looked for bizarre situations, though it was made difficult by the absurd surroundings. There were stages with demonstrations, dozens of competitors' stations, advertising stands, mascots, and overly enthusiastic baking fans. The entire setting was cheerful chaos.

While the guys were looking for the trickster, Tora was only focused on possible threats. When they reached an area that contained several workstations with large chef's knives, she placed a hand on Sam's arm. He stopped to look at her, but Dean kept walking. Once Dean was positioned to be walking into danger first, she shook her head and waved at Sam to dismiss his attention.

Despite the potential for danger, Dean was so delighted by the outing that he had a spring in his
step. He was on a hunt with both Cas and Sam, and he got to eat cupcakes while at it. If he ever got snagged by a djinn again, he was pretty sure his wish would be some variation on that day.

After popping a miniature red velvet cupcake in his mouth, he turned around to see that Cas and Sam were both gone. Tora was standing about ten feet behind him frantically looking around. She rush forward to Dean and said something in Abyssal. He cringed at her words, but she mercifully stopped talking. In a surprisingly desperate attempt at communicating she said something in what sounded like Japanese.

"I don't understand you," he said, but she just shook her head at his indecipherable statement. She cursed, looked around, cursed again, then turned her eyes black. Dean thought of the hall full of civilians and potential witnesses.

He grabbed her upper left arm from behind and immediately knew it had been a mistake. She spun around in a blur of movement that he barely had time to register. For a moment he was worried that she had mistaken him for an attacker and would stab him. But he quickly realized she was just angry at him when he saw it was the butt of the angel blade coming at his face. He threw up his hands in forfeit and the slim hope of blocking the hit, but she somehow stopped herself just short of making contact. She was scowling so hard that he could see one of her eyelids twitching. He pointed at her eyes, then the nearby civilians.

"You can't go walking around here with your eyes black," he whispered to her even though she couldn't tell what he was saying. She narrowed her eyes in annoyance, then disappeared.

Dean imagined her teleporting back to Hell to get reinforcements. That was just what he needed on a stealthy little hunt: the armies of Hell bearing down on a county-league baking competition looking for their missing king—not that it was stealthy anymore. The trickster knew they were there and he had Cas and Sam.... Maybe letting a hundred demons turn the place inside out wasn’t the worst idea.

But just as Dean was mentally preparing himself for the demonic horde, he bumped into something that he couldn’t see. He took a hard jab to the stomach that knocked the wind out of him followed by a huff. Tora had just turned herself invisible. Sam had said she was the illusion expert, but Dean had assumed the expertise was more academic.

The merits of her new, subtle approach were dampened though when Dean realized that he’d completely lost track of her. He was alone in the trickster’s trap and he was arguably the least capable at fighting him. Unfortunately, with no one left to consult, Dean could only think to play along and continue the hunt. Eventually the trickster would bring him into the game in a more active way.

He turned a corner and began walking down a corridor of stalls. After a few minutes he realized that with every step he took, the exhibition hall became quieter. When he looked around more diligently he noticed that there were fewer and fewer civilians nearby. Soon he couldn’t see another person at all. An unnerving silence filled the hall and he readied himself for the shit to hit the fan.

The faint sound of ticking began to emanate from one of the stages. Even in spite of the otherwise silence, it seemed to spread unnaturally through the hall. His instincts told him to head away from the ominous sound, but he needed to find Cas and Sam. With his angel blade at the ready, he followed the ticking. It came from a stage that was entirely bare except for a small table with an old-fashioned wind-up kitchen timer.

He approached the timer cautiously, then saw that it only had two seconds on it. As far as he
could tell there wasn't any bomb attached to the timer, but it still made his heart skip a beat. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to dive for cover or break the damn thing. A quick look around gave no clues as to what he was supposed to do. Turning back to the timer, it struck zero and buzzed.

Dean cringed as he waited for whatever was supposed to happen, but nothing came. With an attempt at a calming breath, he turned to see the trickster standing on the far end of the stage from him.

"No dynamite or cream pies? No joke? No fucking lesson to be learned?" Dean asked while trembling slightly from adrenaline and anger.

"You want a lesson? How about ‘Don't go walking into traps'?" The trickster rolled his eyes at Dean, then snapped his fingers.

The table disappeared, replaced by Sam and Cas. Sam was lying unconscious on the floor, but otherwise looked fine. Beside him sat a bound and gagged Cas, who struggled against his bonds. Dean took in the fact that Cas was unable to teleport out of his bindings, something that he'd never seen before. The subtle display of power made Dean's stomach drop, but he tried not to show the worry on his face.

"Well, I'm glad you're all finally here. We need to have a little talk." The trickster's tone was slightly annoyed, but oddly soft…. He wasn’t being his normal snarky self and that was more than a little unnerving.

"I don't have anything to say to you," Dean said as he gripped his angel blade.

The trickster held up his hands to symbolize non-hostility, then gestured to Sam. "Listen, I'm sorry I had to knock out Sleeping Beauty, but I couldn't risk him shooting first."

"And why'd you take Cas?"

"Mixed bag. Partially to take the angel out of the equation and partially to see what you'd do with just the demon. I'm not gonna lie. I thought about having some fun with you—maybe taking off that anti-possession ink of yours—but I promised myself I wouldn't mess with you guys too much, even the knight…. Speaking of which…." The trickster looked around the room for a moment, then shrugged. "Anyway, I'm serious when I say that we need to talk. No tricks, just information."

"Bullshit."

"I don't want to be in this situation any more than you do, but I need your help. And you need mine even if you don't realize it yet."

The trickster turned his head toward a sound that Dean didn't catch. Instantaneously, the trickster was several feet to the right of where he'd been standing and Tora was made visible. She had been in mid-jump, with her blade less than a foot from where the trickster had been standing. As soon as she landed, the trickster snapped his fingers and a devil's trap appeared on the floor around her.

"I could kill you or turn you all into chinchillas, but I'm not going to," the trickster continued. "Just give me a few minutes and if you still want to take a shot at me—well, I’ll be gone before you could even try, but I won’t even whammy you on my way out the door."

Dean looked at his three helpless companions, then said, "I’m listening." He eyed the trickster as he knelt down next to Cas. When he saw that his nemesis wasn’t trying to stop him, he began cutting Cas free of his bindings.
"Let's get Gulliver up first," the trickster suggested. "Sam needs to hear this too."

It was going to take a minute for Sam to fully recover from being knocked out. The trickster refused to snap him right back to wide awake and insisted that Dean and Cas keep Sam from launching into a fight before he was completely released from the stupor. While Sam was struggling to get himself upright, Cas looked between Dean, who was visibly concerned, and the handicapped Sam. Cas glared at the trickster in relative helpless frustration, but in return the trickster beamed with a strangely proud smile.

"Castiel, you really grew up," the trickster observed.

"Do I know you?" Cas was wary, but his head tilted, subtly showing his curiosity.

"Right—you wouldn't recognize me like this." The trickster seemed almost disappointed at Cas’ lack of recognition. "I'll give you three hints: I'm older than you. I'm supposed to be dead. And I play a mean horn."

All the skepticism and anger in Cas’ expression faded into shocked confusion. "Gabriel?"

"Good to see you, little brother."

"Brother?" At the word, Dean looked up from helping Sam, who was barely sitting. He had trouble processing anything more than the fact that the trickster was an angel. Instinctively, Dean moved to be between Cas and the possible threat.

"Relax, Deano," Gabriel said. "I'm not here to hurt anyone—least of all Castiel. I actually like him."

"Cas, who is this guy?"

"He's Gabriel, the archangel." Cas stepped around Dean, toward his brother. "But you died in the war?"

"Less died, more fled. It was chaos back then; you remember. I just needed to get away and, well..." The archangel's smile turned a bit sad. "You know how it is. You can't go back either, even if they'd take you back. Freedom and emotions... All the fun bits."

"So, you're a fallen archangel?" Sam asked as he gingerly tried to stand up. "What do you want with us?"

"I want you two idiots to not get caught. Here's your reminder that you get an 'I told you so.'" Gabriel told Sam. "That whole lesson about not walking into traps—I mean it. I know you're chasing payback or a thrill or something—you know what's a safer thrill? Cocaine."

Gabriel looked over at Tora, who had been standing perfectly still with her eyes shut since being trapped. The archangel watched as the trap flickered, then disappeared. He raised his hand to snap his fingers, but hesitated when she didn't attack him right away. She instead looked to Sam, who signaled for her to wait. Gabriel lowered his hand, then turned his attention back to the conversation.

"I don't get it. Why do you care about us?" Dean asked.

"As is, Michael and Lucifer are on lockdown, but if you two get nabbed it could be a game changer," Gabriel replied.
"I get that Sam might be involved with Lucifer’s last seal, but how are we keeping Michael on lockdown?"

"That whole last seal mess aside.” Gabriel waved his hand to dismiss that entire headache of a topic. “Who do you think Michael and Luci’s vessels are?"

"The grace in you both...." Cas was too busy putting the pieces together to finish his sentence.

"Ding! Ding! Ding!” Gabriel exclaimed excitedly. “May I present Dean Winchester, the last surviving vessel of the Archangel Michael, Commander of the Heavenly Host, the Sword of Heaven, etcetera.” He gestured toward Dean as if he was showing off an item on a late-night infomercial. Then he turned to Sam. "And Sam Winchester, one of... two vessels of the Archangel Lucifer, Master of the Abyss, the First Light, etcetera. You get the gist."

Dean and Sam exchanged looks of concern. For over a year, they had been aware that they were both vessels, but they’d all assumed that they shared the same angel’s grace. The idea that it was the grace of two different angels and that the angels were actually archangels was huge news that they weren’t sure how to process.

"This doesn't make sense," Cas objected to the unpleasant suggestion. "Sam can't be Lucifer's vessel. That entire bloodline was killed after the war. Lucifer's grace didn't survive his imprisonment."

"Well, he made some more. It seems about thirty years ago, one of Luci's groupies managed to have a chat with him. After that, he went around finding kids with the right grace and tried to corrupt it."

"Azazel?" Sam asked weakly.

Gabriel’s face scrunched up a bit as he tried to recall. "I think that was the name."

"What do you mean 'right grace'?"

"He needed the grace of another archangel—the vessel had to be strong enough to survive the corruption. A lesser vessel wouldn't do. The whole process killed ten of my vessels." Gabriel looked a little sad at the thought. "Eight of Raphael's, and four of Michael's—very distant relatives of yours. Sam here was the only survivor. He’s got the fully augmented grace. Luci has a bloodline again."

"So, if Lucifer gets out of his cage he'll try to possess me?" Sam speculated.

"You or your kid, with your consent of course."

Sam looked like it was taking all his conviction to not teleport straight home to check on Kaylee, but he managed to conceal his fear after a moment.

"And if there's gonna be a showdown, Michael'll be wearing me?" Dean asked, but he already knew the bleak answer. It was the worst thing he could think of, so of course it'd be true.

"Now you're getting it.” Gabriel clapped his hands together, then pointed to the brothers. "And you guys can't let that happen. If both of you turn meat puppets, the world's gonna burn. So, again, say it with me: don't get caught."

Cas had easily understood the implications of Sam and Dean consenting to being possessed, so he had directed his thoughts to the less obvious. At the lull in the conversation, he turned to Sam with
an answer to a question that had been troubling both of them for almost three years.

"If you're Lucifer's vessel, then that would explain your light weapon. Vessels are weak reflections of their angel's virtue. Normally that doesn't manifest, but archangel's vessels are considerably more powerful than lesser vessels. It could result in your unusually powerful light weapon. Lucifer was a being of immense power that manipulated light. He was able to smite lesser angels without any effort."

"Yeah. Wielding the First Light sounds dramatic enough," Gabriel agreed with a quick nod. "I didn't get to see many of Luci's vessels before they got wiped out, but throwing around the light rings a bell."

"What about Dean?" Cas asked as he glanced at the hunter.

Dean stepped back a little defensively. "What about me?"

"You also have an echo of archangel mojo: Michael's mojo," Gabriel explained. "Traditionally, the Sword of Heaven can bless their weapons. I know, really exciting, but that's what you get for having the most boring archangel."

"Bless weapons?" Dean raised an eyebrow. He was barely on board with the whole angels and Heaven thing, but the idea of getting dealt an ability that was straight out of a Dungeons & Dragons manual made him uncomfortable. Powers and interplanar stuff was Cas and Sam's thing. He was a boots-on-the-Earth kinda guy.

"If you do it right, any weapon you use could be as lethal as an angel blade," Gabriel clarified.

"I could gank an angel with a gun?" Dean asked with quickly growing enthusiasm.

"If you bless it first."

"How do I do that?"

"How should I know?" Gabriel shrugged. "You aren't one of mine."

Dean's excitement was extinguished in an instant. "Well, fucking great. Let me call up Michael and ask him how to kill his cronies."

"We might be able to find some information on it," Cas suggested. "Unlike Lucifer, Michael has a long history of vessels. It's possible we could find one—"

"Oh, that reminds me," Gabriel said, then snapped his fingers.

Dean, Cas, and Sam all suddenly clutched their chests and staggered in pain. Tora didn't wait for Sam to give the okay. She lunged at Gabriel, but he disappeared and was replaced by a six-foot-tall plush toy angel. She didn't resist her momentum, but instead swung her blade upward cutting the toy from crotch to top of the head. She rolled as she landed, then sprang up ready to take another swing before the two halves of the toy hit the ground.

"Is she trained to go straight for the goods on guys?" Gabriel asked from behind Sam.

Her eyes turned black and she disappeared. Gabriel blinked away just before she reappeared, swinging through the space he'd just occupied. A devil's trap appeared on the ground around her, but nearly instantly flickered out like the last one.
"Dammit—call her off, Sam. I was helping you guys." The archangel's voice pleaded, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Tora blinked to a new location and took another swing, which stopped part way through the stroke with the sound of metal colliding with metal. Then she looked around the room, seemingly searching for him again.

"I don't want to hurt her," Gabriel warned.

By that time the pain in Dean, Cas, and Sam's chests had dissipated, allowing them to stand up straight again. Sam called to her, which immediately stopped her frenzy. He gestured for her to calm down. She tucked her angel blade back into her hoodie, then moved to stand at attention next to Sam.

"What the fuck did you do to us?" Dean asked as he rubbed his ribs.

"I engraved a ward against angelic scrying on your ribs. Now you don't need those annoying hex bags," Gabriel said as he reappeared before them. "I took the liberty of amending the engraving a bit to let Castiel and me locate you. Now I don't have to spend a few months rolling out the red carpet next time."

"Next time?"

"Yeah. You chuckleheads are too important to leave alone. I'll be checking in on you every once in a while." Gabriel moved to snap his fingers, but stopped when he saw that Cas had opened his mouth to speak.

"Thank you, for helping us."

"I'm not just doing this for you. Like I said, I have a good thing going on here. I have friends—or at least people who don't want to kill me—and a lady—actually, I'm not entirely sure she's a lady...." Dean and Sam exchanged glances. "Anyway, the last war.... Our family was killing itself. I don't want to see that again."

“Okay.” Dean tried thinking through Kaylee’s explanation about his family’s vessel thing, but he still didn’t feel like he was getting the half of the picture. “So Sam and Kaylee are Lucifer’s vessels and I’m Michael’s vessel, but how much does that really mean to angels? Why does anyone other than me give a shit if I’m a puppet as long as Michael isn’t actually pulling my strings?”

Dean could see people caring that he was Michael’s vessel, if there was a chance that he’d say yes to being possessed, but that didn’t answer the question of why he was so popular with the fallen angels. It did sort of answer the question of why Michael might be angry with him and singled him out above everyone else. Like Kaylee said, the other Dean was a stubborn son of a bitch and Michael had probably been discovering that over the course of years, if not decades.

“Angels don’t treat vessels the way demons treat the bodies they ride,” Kaylee explained. “Angels think of vessels differently than other humans. They even treat vessels different depending on the choir of the angel linked to the vessel. It’s all very nuanced and sometimes confusing, but they take it very seriously.”

"Michael is the most powerful of all the angels, so the Sword of Heaven is generally considered the most powerful of all vessels," Dylaniel added.
"That's debatable," Kaylee countered with a sidelong glance at Dylaniel.

"The Sword of Heaven?" Dean asked.

"You get a ton of fancy titles because you're Michael's vessel. All the archangel vessels have pretentious titles," answered Tom, earning him a smirk from Kaylee.

“Anyway, most angels cling to the chain of command like a security blanket. So from a fallen angel’s perspective, with all things being equal, Dean was a more important human than anyone short of a prophet. Michael might've hated his defiance, but any angel who was willing to fall saw him as the most respectable human.” Kaylee rocked her head side-to-side, rethinking her choice of words. “Or at least a good place to start.

“Angels would fall and seek him out—not to mention Cas, who was the most famous fallen angel aside from Lucifer, but who was infinitely more likable. The fallen angels admired Cas’s independence and Dean’s leadership. That made them the semi-official leaders of the fallen angel presence on Earth. Hence the fan club.”
Taking A Gamble

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

Dean rubbed his wrists, which had turned slightly pink and irritated where the manacles had been. He started mentally reviewing all the new information that he’d learned and was trying to figure out what to ask next while the others patiently watched him process the information.

Sam’s involvement with Hell was obviously huge on a personal level, but the development with the fallen angels seemed to be pretty important too. After all, he’d seen more angels than non-angels since he’d arrived in 2039. He was debating how to prioritize his line of questioning when the chorus from *Long Hard Road Out of Hell* interrupted his train of thought. Kaylee pulled a cell phone from her jacket pocket.

"Dean, you might want to cover your ears," Tom suggested before plugging his own.

Kaylee answered the call and began carrying on a conversation in Abyssal. It only took a word before Dean pressed his hands to his ears, which helped a little. Kaylee mouthed 'sorry' to them and Tom just calmly shrugged back. After a few minutes she finished the call and Dean uncovered his ears.

"Sorry about that," she apologized. "I've got to pop in downstairs for a few hours."

"Normal stuff or did something come up?" Tom asked so casually that Dean briefly mistook 'downstairs' as referring to somewhere other than Hell.

"One of the units in Argentina that was wiped out the other day was almost entirely from the same caste. Their arch is having a fit—understandably," Kaylee conceded. "But I need to go calm zir down and I'll probably have to get an audit going to make sure we don't have any other castes so densely packed."

"With so many different factions in the army it's very important to make sure the physical locations have a diverse population," Dylaniel explained for Dean's benefit. "It's good for diplomacy and range of abilities, but it also mitigates the odds of losing entire species or groups in a single battle."

"Yeah. Preserving lives is just as big a part of this as taking them." Kaylee muttered.

Dean wasn't sure how he felt about her comment. It made sense, but the way she spoke about killing came off a bit callous. Granted, they were in a war, of which he'd never seen a single battle. That sort of thing had to cause some jading. He decided not to say anything.

"Are you guys gonna keep going with the briefing?" she asked Tom and Dylaniel. "I kinda feel like I should be around for that."

"Go take care of the Hell stuff. We've got plenty of other things to do that need to get done sooner or later," Tom suggested, then looked at Dean. "You need some food or sleep or something?"

"Or something." He did feel a little dazed by the entire experience. His world had been turned
upside down and he was having a hard time internalizing the information. A lot of ground had been covered in very little time and the implications hadn't sunk in yet. He knew he had a million questions, but, as he'd learned a few minutes earlier, he barely knew where to begin. It seemed like every new discovery led to a dozen more points needing clarification. "Maybe some food."

"Okay. I'll be back as soon as I can." Kaylee reluctantly nodded in acceptance of the situation being taken out of her hands.

"We'll manage, Kay," Tom reassured before she disappeared. When she was gone, the witch checked his watch, then told Dean, "It's almost midnight, so the kitchen is gonna be closed for a few more hours, but we could probably scrounge up something. Full meal or just a snack?"

The prospect of having something to eat was a little intimidating, but at the same time he knew that it'd been so long since he'd eaten that a little sustenance was necessary. "I don't think I can deal with a whole meal right now."

"I can go find some food," Dylaniel volunteered. "I could also check on the availability of quarters if you'd like to sleep."

"I'm a little burnt out, but I don't think I could sleep if I tried."

"I bet Kit is holed-up somewhere running a card game," Tom suggested excitedly. "Dyl, are you officially off duty? You want to join us?"

Dean's brain could barely wrap itself around the idea of Dylaniel gambling before he answered.

"Yeah, alright. Let me get out of my gear and pick up the food. I'll meet you there," Dylaniel replied, then disappeared.

The thought that an angel was changing clothes temporarily derailed Dean's brain. In the several days he'd known Castiel, the angel's clothing hadn't suffered any lasting wear or dirtying despite being used to clean up a substantial amount of blood.

"Salviel, do you want to play?" Tom added hopefully.

She shook her head. "I know better than to gamble with you guys, but I'll observe."

Tom led Dean and Salviel on a winding search through the base looking for the game. The base turned out to be the remains of some abandoned, small town center. The one- and two-story buildings had been reinforced with metal paneling and covered with wards. In the moonlight he could see a few guard towers peeking above the roofs, each manned by at least two people. The streets were mostly empty with only the occasional person moving down a side street. Every block seemed to have a portion of the sidewalk dedicated to something resembling a little memorial, or possibly a magic setup, involving flowers, statues, and candles.

Dean quickly discovered that the location of the game traveled from week to week due to both a lack of unutilized space and also some level of secrecy. Even though it was night and the streets were mostly clear, Tom looked around for observers before ducking into cellars to check for action. There was almost a speakeasy vibe to the entire outing. After four false attempts, Tom finally emerged triumphant.

The cellar was mostly full of wooden and plastic supply crates, some of which had been picked through. A few of the crates against one of the walls had bright orange writing on it which warned, ‘Contains rock salt: store away from exits.’ In the far corner was a circular plywood table with
eight folding chairs. The game was already going with three players, including the dealer.

The dealer was a slightly tanned man in his mid thirties. He had dark brown hair that hung shaggily around his forehead and ears. He was lean and dealt cards incredibly gracefully for someone whose eyes seemed to dart around the room habitually. His clothes looked like military surplus that had been worn until they had somehow softened in spite of their rigid origins.

Another player was a woman of Asian Pacific Islander descent. She had muscular arms for a woman, one of which had a tattoo of the United States Marine Corps emblem. Her hair was buzzed short, matching the military appearance, but her clothes threw Dean. She wore a pink and orange sleeveless sundress, which looked a little aged but still maintained a bizarre level of cheeriness in the otherwise depressing environment.

The last person was a red-headed woman who looked strangely familiar, but Dean had trouble placing her. Some unidentifiable image was cracked, peeling off the front of her black t-shirt. She had beautiful and bold calligraphy tattoos extending up each arm. They read, 'Because I could not stop for Death' and, 'He kindly stopped for me.'

Tom pulled out the chair next to the dealer, hung his tan jacket on the back of the seat, then signaled for Dean to pick a seat for himself. He decided to sit on Tom’s other side rather than risk being flanked if anyone else arrived before Dylaniel. Salviel opted to sit on one the supply crates apart from the players, yet still in range if anything turned violent.

"Holy shit! You're—I'm so glad you're alive," the red-headed woman told Dean. "I'm so sorry about shooting you. I wasn't expecting—"

"You're the one that shot me?!" he asked, stunned that he was suddenly at a poker game with his near-murderer.

She’d cleaned herself up and left her green jacket somewhere else, but on closer inspection that was absolutely her. He was upset, but he wasn’t entirely sure how to get into a fight with someone who had already apologized. On the other hand, he wasn’t really sure how to forgive someone for shooting him.

"She was also the one that saved your life, so it kinda nets out," Tom commented as he fistbumped the dealer in some sort of greeting.

"I'm not sure that's how it works," Dean replied, a little defensively. He wasn’t prepared for Tom taking friendly fire so lightly. Glancing back at Salviel, he only got a mildly sympathetic shrug.

"Yeah, that's how it works," the woman in the dress agreed with Tom. A mischievous grin formed around a stir stick that she was chewing on.

"So... rumor is, you're him. You are him, right? Fuck, I have so many questions about how this even works," the redhead said excitedly and waved her hand at Dean indicating his presence.

"Lena, don't make this weird," Tom casually pleaded.

"It's already weird," countered the other woman.

"I-It's always w-weird wh-when you're around, Cindy. Part of your charm," observed the dealer, who through process of elimination must’ve been Kit. He swept up the cards and shuffled them in a fluid motion, but his upper body rocked gently as if he had a little too much energy to be sitting in a cramped cellar.
"Seriously. It's been a long day, for Dean most of all," Tom said. "We're here to play cards and unwind, so lay off the interrogation. It’s all need-to-know basis—and no awkward personal stuff. Just leave him be, okay?" When no one objected Tom continued, "Alright, deal us in and as you were."

"D-do you have cash or need chips?" Kit asked Tom.

"Put $500 on my tab," Tom replied.

Kit pulled out a metal case full of poker chips from underneath the plywood table. He made a note on a pad of paper, then counted out several stacks in various denominations. After passing the pile to Tom, Kit looked to Dean.

Dean searched his pockets, but there wasn’t much to be found. "I only have a few bucks."

"Don't worry about it," Tom told him with a wave of his hand. "Kit, I'll front him $500."

Dean raised an eyebrow at the strangely generous loan. "Uh, thanks."

While Kit put together Dean's pile, a light-weight metal container the size of a small first aid kit was passed around to Tom. He opened it up to reveal a pipe, several baggies containing pills, and what looked like weed. Tom packed the pipe with some of the plant material, lit it, and took a hit.

"You want anything?" he asked Dean before looking to Kit. "You have any drinks or are we dry tonight?"

"Found some port." Kit held up a bottle that's label had fallen off. He uncorked the bottle and sniffed it in an almost feral way. "M-maybe a '31 w-with cherry notes."

"I'll pass. Thanks though."

Kit topped off Cindy’s glass, then held the bottle out toward Dean, inviting him to have some. Dean weighed his options. He considered himself an able drinker, but port hit a little harder than wine or beer and he hadn't eaten anything in some unknown number of hours. He hadn't gotten high since he was hunting solo in his early twenties, but at least his empty stomach wouldn't affect his tolerance. Granted, he wasn't entirely sure that was weed or even if the potency of weed had held true after over thirty years.

"Just a little smoke. If I start embarrassing myself, cut me off." Dean accepted the pipe from Tom, then took a hit. "So, we doing five-card stud or Texas hold 'em?"

About a half hour later, Dylaniel entered through the cellar door. He had changed into light grey pants that were very similar to his previous pair, minus the armor. He wore a plain pale blue t-shirt that had probably matched his eyes before it had faded and a grey leather jacket. His sword and dual hip holsters were missing. Though, as he sat down at the empty seat next to Dean, his jacket hung open slightly revealing that he hadn't left his pistols with the rest of his gear. He'd merely switched to shoulder holsters so that he could conceal them below his jacket.

Dylaniel handed Dean a paper bag that contained some jerky, a fruity nutritional bar, and a plastic bag covered in kanji. He didn't recognize the japanese snack, but when he opened it the contents appeared to be small fried patties that smelled like salty deliciousness. It wasn't clear to what extent the weed or his low standards for food over the last few days were affecting his taste. Either way food that came out of plastic bags had no business being so good.
"Ten dollar ante," Kit informed Dylaniel, who pulled a simple gold money clip full of cash from his pocket and joined the pot. Dean eyed the money clip. The gold was a tad out of place for their literally-apocalyptic setting, but otherwise it wasn't too offensive.

Dean tossed in his ante, then started to eat some of the japanese patty snacks. He noticed Kit sniffing the air while eyeing his bag of jerky. After opening the bag and grabbing a piece for himself, he held it out to his host, offering him some.

"N-no, thank you." The corner of Kit's mouth ticked up awkwardly, then he shook his head. "I-I can't eat that stuff."

"Vegetarian?" Dean asked.

Lena, the redhead, laughed at his question, then muttered, "Pretty far from it."

"N-nobody told you…. I-I'm a kitsune," Kit said with a meek smile.

To Dean’s knowledge, kitsune only ate parts of human brains. He’d only ever seen one briefly on a hunt when he was a teenager. It’d moved incredibly fast and left at least ten bodies before they’d found her dead. Some other hunter must’ve gotten her first. In the hunter community, kitsune were considered very dangerous and rare. There were major bragging rights in taking one down… and he was sitting around getting high with one. He realized that he must've been staring because Kit anxiously scratched behind his ear and avoided making eye contact.

"Kit, sweetie, you're all good," Cindy said as she swung an arm around his neck and pulled him close so she could plant a kiss on his cheek.

"Y-you're drunk, Cindy," he responded while blushing, then he looked up to meet Dean's gaze. After a moment's hesitation, he leaned forward across the table, extending his hand to Dean. "W-we haven't b-been properly introduced. I-I'm Jacob, b-but friends call me Jay or Kit, for kitsune."

Dean continued to stare without moving for several seconds. Tom, Lena, and Cindy all watched Dean to see if he was going to leave Kit hanging, but Dylaniel didn't seem particularly concerned with the interaction. After taking a deep breath, Dean reached out and shook Kit's hand.

"Sorry about…. I'm just—this is new for me," Dean said, sitting back down without taking his eyes off Kit.

In all honesty, he was a little uncomfortable. It wasn’t every day that he was unarmed in a confined space with something higher on the food chain than himself. He reminded himself that both Salviel and Dylaniel were armed, though Dylaniel’s choice of pistols would be frustratingly ineffective against a kitsune. Yet, Kit seemed to be decent so far…. Dean tried to give him some benefit of the doubt.

"I-It's no problem. Actually, I think that w-went b-better than the first time I m-met you."

Dean was leaning back in his chair with his boots up on what barely passed for his desk, reading a report on three skirmishes that had taken place earlier in the week. He looked up at the sound of someone knocking loudly on his office door. It was hardly seven in the morning, which was over an hour before he was expecting anyone. After lowering his feet to the ground, he sat up in his chair and turned to the door.
“Come in.”

His mood darkened slightly when he saw the middle-aged man enter the room. He liked Kelley well enough, but that was the problem. Every time there was trouble on the base, the other subordinates would always send in Kelley to give him the bad news. At that early hour it had to be something unpleasant—maybe another brawl between the demons and the hunters. The last one had been such a nightmare to deal with that he’d had to call in both Sam and Bobby to help straighten everyone out.

"Sir, I’m sorry, but we have a strange situation...." Kelley started apologetically.

Dean hoped his complete lack of surprise looked like discipline or thoughtfulness.

“There’s....” The subordinate shifted awkwardly. “Well, there’s a kitsune here—"

"Why would someone bag a kitsune?" Dean asked in surprise.

It’d been a year or two since the hunters under his command had even looked at a monster; they all had bigger concerns. If there was a personal matter that someone needed to go resolve, he would have granted them leave, but dragging a hunt onto the base was against the rules. They couldn’t be wasting resources and potentially harming their relations with the demons and angels by falling back into old habits.

"No one did. He just came into the camp and surrendered. It looks like he’s just a teenager." Kelley looked more anxious than he normally did when breaking bad news. "He asked if you were related to Sam Winchester."

"Where is he?"

'Teenager' was almost misleading. The boy couldn’t have been older than fifteen or sixteen. He was lanky with fair skin, messy brown hair, and teal eyes. His jeans and sweatshirt were slight oversized, giving the distinct impression that he had borrowed or possibly stolen them. The soles of his sneakers were cracked in three places and one of the shoelaces had been replaced with a piece of wire. He had opted to cower in the far corner of his small holding cell rather than sit on the cot that was against one of the side walls.

The sight made Dean internally wince with pity, but he reminded himself that kitsune did almost exclusively feed on humans. In spite of the voice in his head warning caution, he wanted to try to improve the situation somehow. He turned to the guard and nodded at the cell door. Once the door was unlocked, Dean walked in, then knelt down across the cell so that he was facing the boy. He kept one hand on his thigh, only a few inches from his blade.

"I'm Dean. Do you know who I am?"

The boy nodded repeatedly. His eyes moved around the cell, either taking in many small details or merely avoiding Dean, but they eventually settled on Dean.

"Can you tell me your name?" Dean asked.

"J-Jacob." He was soft spoken and his nose twitched in a way that Dean initially mistook for fighting back sniffles until he realized that the kitsune was studying some sort of scent. "Are.... Are you related to Sam W-Winchester? You're b-both... h-hunters. I thought that you m-might—you m-might be part of the—you m-might b-be related."
“Why do you want to know?”

“I-I’m supposed to f-find him. I-I need his help.” Jacob was trembling.

Dean sighed. The kid was either terrified or the world’s best actor. He slowly held his hands up, away from his blade and said, “I’m his brother. Listen, there are a lot of people that want to hurt Sam. In general I want to help you, but I’m not sure if I trust you. You have to admit it’s pretty weird having a kitsune just hand himself over to someone he knows is a hunter.”

“But that’s w-why I’m supposed to f-find him.” The boy leaned forward trying to emphasize some point, but then pulled back into the corner and spoke a little quieter. “B-because he’s not like hunters.”

“That’s an understatement,” Dean muttered, but the comment only made Jacob look confused. “What do you need help with anyway?”

The boy’s face scrunched up a little as he tried to decide whether he was going to tell someone other than Sam about his problem. Having a minute to look at the kid, Dean noticed that he was a little too pale and clammy. He looked slightly gaunt… underfed, which concerned Dean on more than one level.

“Three of m-my pack, they’re gone—they’ve gone m-missing and four w-were killed.”

“Kid, I hate to say it, but hunters don’t always keep tabs on each other and Sam hasn’t really been on good terms with the community for the last decade—”

“I-it w-wasn’t hunters.” Jacob shook his head, then looked Dean in the eyes for the first time. “Something took them, got in them-”

“Got in them?” Dean asked.

“I-I don’t know wh-what, b-but I’m supposed to f-find Sam W-Winchester if there’s something the pack can’t handle—something strange. W-we’ve never seen it b-before—I didn’t know who else to ask. I-I don’t know wh-what to do.” The boy was starting to ramble, so Dean held up his hand to silence him.

“Why are you supposed to find Sam specifically?”

“B-because... he w-won’t hurt me.”

“Why’s that?” Dean knew Sam was a softy at heart, but it’d been about twelve years since that was the public perception; even more so since San Francisco.

“He w-was f-friends w-with my mom.”
Dean assigned one angel to find Jacob some better-fitting clothes and try to make him as comfortable as possible. Another angel was assigned to act as a guard outside his holding cell, for his protection, until Dean could figure out what to do with him. After temporarily delegating the boy's care, he cleared his calendar for the day and used a talisman to teleport back home. He found Sam at his cabin, lounging on the couch and reading something on his laptop. When Dean entered, he glanced up from his computer and gave a little wave.

"You're back early," Sam commented.

Dean hung up his jacket and asked, "Anybody else around?"

"Ruby's working downstairs. Cas, Bobby, and Isa took the kids out to the lake. Flo's still in Virginia...." Sam raised an eyebrow when he noticed Dean wasn't looking particularly cheerful. "Why? Something up?"

"I just wanted to talk with you, one-on-one." Dean quickly assured him, "It's not super bad... mostly weird. We've got a kitsune prisoner in our Fort Bragg base. He just walked in and surrendered."

Sam looked up from his laptop at the mention of a kitsune, but relaxed a bit when Dean said 'he.'

"He was looking for you," Dean continued. "His name is Jacob Pond."

Sam thought for a moment, but shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"He said his mom, Amy, was a friend of yours."

Dean watched closely for various tells, but he didn't need to look hard at all. Sam lost a little color and closed his laptop. He rested his elbows on his knees, then buried his face in his hands.

"Amy has a kid," Sam said mostly to himself.

"Hands," Dean commented as he sat down on an armchair.

Sam ran his fingers up through his hair, then looking up to face Dean. "Sorry—it's nothing, just surprised."

"So you're friends with a kitsune?"

"We haven't spoken in... years." Sam furrowed his brow, trying to recall some memory. "The last time we talked I was at Stanford."

"Wait, you were friends with a kitsune before the water even got muddied with the Abyssal stuff?"

Sam smiled with false innocence. Dean had come to terms long ago with the fact that Sam kept
some unusual company, but that had mostly been derived from his role as King of Hell. The thought that maybe some of it had been foreshadowed years earlier was a little unsettling.

"She saved my life when I was fourteen, while you and Dad were on a hunt," Sam explained. "We kept in touch intermittently after that for a few years."

"I don’t want to sound like a complete bigot, but kitsune eat humans and you two were like pen pals?"

"She was one of my first real friends. I mean, she knew I was a hunter and...." Sam tilted his head from side-to-side, trying to find the right words. "Somehow she still liked me."

Dean could see the appeal. Growing up as a hunter was a fairly isolated life, with most of your temporary friendships being premised on lies. Having someone to be yourself around counted for a lot, but the fact that she’d been a kitsune was definitely a complication. No wonder he’d never heard of her until the boy had shown up.

Sam chewed his lip, then asked, "How old is he?"

"Somewhere in the ballpark of fifteen." Dean could see Sam think through something for a painfully long time.

"She wasn’t with him, was she." Sam’s tone was more of a concerned statement than a question. He looked like he already knew the answer.

Dean hated that he had to deliver that kind of news. "I’m sorry. She’s dead."

Sam swallowed hard, then nodded as he processed the information.

"She had told him to track you down if he ever needed the help of a hunter."

"I guess she’s been dead for awhile." Sam's voice had become slightly heavier with the all-too-familiar jaded grief. Had they turned out to be closer Dean might’ve given Sam some time to mourn, but he had to do something about the kid and there was also intel that Sam needed.

"Not that long actually; they just hadn't heard about all this. The demon and angel crowd doesn’t really overlap with the—" Dean almost said 'monster crowd,' but stopped himself from triggering one of Sam's pet peeves (honestly, he was getting pretty tired of the word too) "—non-human crowd very much. I guess a few months ago three of the pack members killed half the pack, Amy included, then took off. Jacob left the other two surviving pack members in Chicago and has been trying to find you since."

"Why would kitsune kill their own pack members? Pack loyalties aside, aren’t they endangered?"

"Super-endangered nowadays," Dean confirmed. "But I have a guess why the kitsune-on-kitsune violence happened. The kid said the three that started it, their eyes were black."

Sam closed his eyes for moment and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Lilith is possessing non-humans."

"Is that even possible?" Dean asked.

"I don’t know. If it is, then things are going to turn even messier." Sam opened his eyes. He looked like the mere thought had aged him a year. Frequently at home, when he was feeling relaxed, he had a youthful air about him. But when he switched gears to thinking about work, all
the years in Hell would start to creep into the corners of his eyes and mouth. “I’ll put people on it. If she’s figured out a way to jump non-humans… we need to know, fast.”

“Let me know as soon as you hear anything.”

Sam nodded, then he turned his attention back to the original topic. “What’s going to happen to the kid—Jacob?”

“I’m not sure. We don’t really have protocol for a non-human. He’s in a cell right now.”

Sam stared at Dean in a combination of surprise and disappointment. “He’s a kid.”

“Don’t look at me like that; I know he’s a kid,” Dean groaned. “I made sure he was comfortable before I came here, but pretty soon he’s gonna need to eat and that means humans. I can’t have him running out to grab a bite.”

“Kitsune don’t need the brain to be fresh. It shouldn’t be too hard to find bodies,” Sam suggested.

The corners of Dean’s lips curled downward. “Sam, I know you don’t work with the flesh half after a person drops, but topside we still have to deal with funeral rites and next of kin. I can’t just start feeding our fallen comrades to some kitsune. I don’t care if he’s a nice kid; desecrating bodies is a big deal.”

“What about the meatsuits that demons were riding? Most of them relocate after grabbing the body. That saves you the next-of-kin issue.”

“Fuck.” Dean slouched in his chair. “We’re really talking about what to feed him— What the hell am I supposed to do with him? I can’t just let him…."

Sam sat up straighter, preparing himself for a potential argument. “Wait, killing him is off the table, right?”

Dean began rubbing his temples. He didn’t want to be the bad guy in the conversation. Sam was the fucking King of Hell. How did Dean always end up being the bad guy?

“I don’t want to kill a kid. I don’t want to keep him in the cell forever. But I don’t want to let him loose out there to kill humans.”

“Give him protection and meatsuit brains if he’ll agree to stop hunting humans,” suggested Sam.

“Protection?”

“If Lilith is really possessing non-humans and starting with kitsune, then he might be in danger.”

Dean chewed his lower lip while thinking over the options. The kid was a risk, but he’d been in that kind of situation before. Years ago he’d put faith in Sam’s ability to carry a grim burden and so far he hadn’t regretted the decision. He didn’t trust the kid anywhere as much as he had Sam, but giving him a chance felt surprisingly important. Their fledgling army was an unlikely alliance and to turn away the boy because of what he was undermined that ideal.

“I don’t want him near our home,” Dean said with determination. “I don’t care if you have some sentimental thing or whatever; he’s not going near the kids or Ruby. He’ll live on the army’s bases and if he can behave himself, I’ll make sure he’s treated fairly.”

“What about the rest of his pack? The two in Chicago?”
“You want to bring them in too?” Dean sighed, then nodded. "If Jacob can talk them into coming peacefully... yeah, we can try to make it work. If Lilith goes looking for more claws, at least she won’t find those."

Sam’s brow furrowed at a thought. "Wait. How did he even find you with all the security precautions?"

"Yeah, that. Turns out almost all our warding is for angels, demons, and humans, so it didn’t really block him at all. And..." Dean smirked at the mental image. "He’s been stalking hunters for months. Turns out he can track a scent from a half-mile away and eavesdrop a hundred feet out. He just hunted hunters until he heard the name Winchester and followed them to me."

The fatigue in Sam’s demeanor shifted back to a more enthusiastic thoughtfulness at the prospect of having one more trick in their arsenal. "You realize how much of an asset he could be."

"He's clever and a hell of a tracker. I'll give him that. But we're mostly going after baddies that can teleport, which'll null out his tracking ability." Dean shook his head slightly.

"Then have him go after the ones that can't teleport."

Sam was suggesting that they send one or more kitsune out to hunt humans. The idea seemed backward and wrong. They’d just gotten done discussing ways of preventing the kitsune from killing humans.... Granted, if it was part of normal operations those humans would be the enemy, not civilians. And otherwise he’d be sending other troops out to do the same thing, and probably less effectively.

Dean sighed, then muttered, "I never thought I'd be training a kitsune."

"So the army takes..." Dean stumbled on what to say that wasn't 'monsters.' The few seconds of hesitation stretched awkwardly and he hoped that someone would save him before Lena or Cindy could think of a joke or tease at his expense. Thankfully, neither of them went for the easy target of merely calling him a racist. Maybe some of whatever respect they held for the other Dean had spared him that extra level of embarrassment.

"W-we prefer N.H.N. or non-human natives. Earth is our home too. W-we deserve to f-fight f-for it," Kit explained as he shuffled the cards, then dealt out new hands.

"Kit's been with the army for—" Tom began, but Kit finished the sentence for him.

"S-sixteen years."

"He was the first N.H.N. we had and he helped recruit most of the others during the first few years."

"How did you get hunters going along with working with m—N.H.N.?" Dean asked.

He was having a hard time picturing it. It wasn’t really clear how much insanity the hunters in the early years of the army had been used to. He thought that he’d had a leg up on crazy, having literally been to Hell and back, but maybe he’d lost some of his headstart when Hell had decided to visit Earth.

"S-some of them didn't, b-but a decent number of them accepted it eventually. N-new reality of the situation." Kit shrugged. "They w-were already w-working with demons and angels. At least kitsune, vamps, and ghouls w-were f-familiar."
"Kaylee wasn't joking about a ghoul being part of the group that brought me in, was she?" Dean asked Tom.

Tom laughed and patted Dean on the back. "No, she wasn't."

"Bones is a bit antisocial, but he comes in handy in hot zones," Lena commented. "He can smell a body a mile away and know whether the heart's still beating or if it's a puppet."

Kit cringed and commented, "I-I can't stand the smell of hot zones."

Dean hadn't noticed any weird smells while in New Orleans, but he didn't exactly have the senses of a predator. Tom passed the pipe to Kit, who took a hit and blew out the smoke slowly.

"You don't get the munchies, do you?" Dean nervously asked Kit.

The kitsune grinned broadly, then leaned back, caught in a giggling fit.

An hour in, Dean and Dyaniel were each up almost a thousand dollars. Cindy was holding her own, but not making any real ground. Kit, Lena, and Tom were both dangerously low on funds after Dyaniel had stolen a large pot by bluffing with an ace high. Dean had to admit that he was mostly winning through the luck of good hands, since he had no idea what the common tells were for angels, stoned witches, and a kitsune with some sort of compulsive disorder, though it did make the game a tad more interesting.

The conversation had fallen into what must've been a favorite topic when intoxicated: which species or faction had gotten the worst deal in the war. As much as they were all on the same side, there seemed to be a reasonable amount of friendly teasing. They were a diverse group with varying strengths and weaknesses, and their interdependence made them more tolerant of their differences. That tolerance gave a nice lightheartedness to explicitly discussing the groups, which Dean enjoyed listening to.

"I don't know." Lena waved her hands a little too emphatically as she spoke. "You hunters used to work in groups sometimes, right? So it's not like this is so different."

"Bullshit. I've met a lot of hunters in my life and you can't get more than three with their guns pointed in the same direction without their backs against a wall," Dean argued. He took another hit from the pipe and passed it to Tom.

"You have to admit, you guys were having your civil war in Hell before it went nuts up here. The change wasn't so big for you." Tom pointed at Lena, which caused Dean to furrow his brow.

"I'm sorry, working with you sentimental fuckers and the-Host-with-the-most was a big change." She popped a yellow pill in her mouth.

"You're a demon?" Dean asked Lena.

She turned her eyes black, then winked at him. He slowly shook his head at the discovery, then shrugged. Honestly, it really didn’t surprise him that much when it came right down to it.

"See $60 and raise $40." Cindy counted out a handful of twenties and threw them into the pot.

"For the record, civy humans had it the worst. When I was a kid none of y'all even existed as far as we were concerned. Then it's practically rainin' you. I was in AP biological chemistry when I was in high school— What the fuck do you do with biological chemistry when zombies turn out to be real?"
Lena looked over her cards and her very small pile of cash, then groaned. "Can I barter? I don't want to drop my last $40 on the hand. I'm swinging through Memphis before my next deployment and I want to have some real food. They've got barbeque there, slow-cooked dry-rub pork shoulder. I need to try that before I die."

"You already died," Cindy corrected between chews on her third stir stick of the night.

"W-what're you putting in the pot instead?" Kit asked warily. He was doing an admirable job of trying to keep order in a card game where every player had lost their sobriety long ago. Even Dylaniel had accepted some unknown number of glasses of port.

Lena suggested, "My shirt."

"Yes," Tom said while holding up his hand to silence either or both Dean and Dylaniel. "That's fine. Kit, please let it happen."

"Sure," Kit agreed. "F-fine."

Dean looked back at Salviel for signs of impending danger. "I think Salviel is allowed break my legs if I play strip poker."

"Well it's a good thing you still got cash." Lena took another yellow pill from the baggie and popped it in her mouth. She watched Tom counting his money while debating the strength of his hand. "Join me, Tom. That shirt is looking pretty ratty."

"I'm not losing this shirt." Tom’s tone was surprisingly serious. "It was a gift."

Lena raised her hands to indicate that she didn't mean to offend him. "You know we'll give it back. Hell, Dean's probably the only one it'd fit and he owes you $500."

Tom looked down at his clothes and thought for several seconds, then nodded. "I'm in."

"Cindy? Kit? Tell me you guys are in?" Lena bounced a bit in her seat from excitement.

Cindy turned to face Lena and used an arm to prop up her head. "Lena, how long have you had that body?"

"About twelve years."

"It's a great body and what a lovely set of tits you have.” She gently patted Lena’s closest breast. "But I've had mine for all thirty-six years of my life and I'm not sure I'm ready to just whip 'em out for your amusement."

"You know you want to," Lena cooed into Cindy's ear as Tom silently nodded in encouragement.

"I'm wearing a dress," Cindy pointed out. "I've only got three pieces of clothing to your four."

"So you take off 75% of each piece per lost hand?" Lena suggested, causing Cindy to giggle.

"Yeah, two loses and I'm going to take off half my bra."

"One cup—it'll work," Tom noted.

Cindy grinned while shaking her head. "I'm just going to stick with cash and enjoy the show. Thanks though."
“G-going to pass too,” Kit added.

“Fine.” Lena spared Kit the heckling, but turned her attention to the remaining player. “Dylaniel?”

He didn’t even look up from his cards. "No."

"Come on."

"Not happening."

"I promise someday I will see your sweet little six pack. It's probably adorable." Lena winked at Dylaniel, but relented. Dean got the distinct impression that Kit wasn’t the only predator at the table.

The first hand of the mixed pot went to Tom, who raised an eyebrow when Lena slipped off her black t-shirt to reveal a turquoise bra. Her shoulder had a brand on it that reminded Dean of the one Meg had used on Sam to prevent being exorcised. She also had a few tattoos, both magical and at least five of purely decorative skulls.

Despite having collected over $200 in the previous hand, Tom continued to bet his clothing and lost his shirt to Lena in the second round. Dean was surprised to see that Tom was actually pretty muscular for a witch. He’d assumed that being a caster would leave witches soft physically, but not this time. Tom’s chest was a massive web of magical wards including a healing ward similar to Sam’s and an anti-possession tattoo that had been slightly augmented. His necklaces jingled as he took his shirt off and the silver locket stood out against his dark skin.

The third hand went to Dylaniel. Lena pulled off her jeans, exposing the matching panties to her turquoise bra, then smiled at Tom. He took off his pants to reveal a pair of hot pink and white-rose-patterned silk boxers.

"Dyl, can I switch seats with you?” Dean asked. “If Tom loses the next hand I do not want to accidentally sneak a peek."

They swapped seats, then the cards were dealt. Dylaniel and Kit both bet up the pot high enough to force Cindy and Dean to fold. Tom and Lena were limited in their bet, so they both just sat staring each other down across the table. At the end of betting, the hands were flipped.

Tom grinned at his three of a kind, until Kit put down his straight. Lena held her head high as she threw her bra to Kit, She didn’t bother trying to cover her breasts at all. Not that they were the center of attention with Tom losing the same hand. Tom slipped off his boxers and tossed them into the pot. Kit wrapped his arms around everything in the pot except the boxers, then pulled it to him.

“T-Tommy, I don’t think—” Kit started, but was interrupted by Lena.

"Kit, trade you my panties for Tom’s boxers."

Kit looked up a little surprised by the offer. "B-by all m-means."

Lena slipped off her panties, then tossed them to Kit. She grabbed the boxers from the center of the table, then held them up.

"Were these a gift?” she asked.
"No," Tom replied.

Lena yanked on the boxers, ripping the sides so that they couldn't be used again. Dean was impressed by the display of strength necessary to tear silk. Tom raised an eyebrow with an intrigued grin on his face. Dylaniel rolled his eyes, then stood up.

"I'm out," Dylaniel said as he tucked his $980 into his pocket without stopping to fold it up or record his chips with Kit. He finished his glass of port in two very long pulls, then actually stumbled slightly while maneuvering around his chair. Dean wasn't sure what was more surprising: seeing an angel get intoxicated so easily or that no one seemed worried by the fact that he was armed. "Salviel, could you make sure Dean gets a place to sleep?"

"He could stay in Tom's quarters," Lena suggested. "It's not like he's gonna be there tonight."

Tom beamed with a sense of victory and accepted a fistbump from Kit.

"You know what, fuck it. I'm getting out of here too. Goodnight," Dean said, then followed Dylaniel out of the cellar.

Once they got back out onto the empty street, Dylaniel stopped and turned to Dean. "If you want to stay at Tom's bunk you can. I guarantee that he's spending the night with Lena."

"Are they a thing?" Dean asked as he glanced back at the cellar door.

"No, but they both knew it was going to happen. It's common knowledge that when Tom gets talked into strip poker, in the end he'll play to lose."

"You guys are confusing as hell, but you aren't so bad."

"If you need anything, let Salviel know and she can contact me. Otherwise I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Dyl." Dean patted Dylaniel's shoulder, earning him a strangely contemplative look in return. A weird feeling of déjà vu came over Dean, but he shook it off as maybe being an effect of the weed. After a moment, Dyl nodded and disappeared.
Realization & Recognition Of Bonds

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

Tom's bunk turned out to be a windowless room that was no bigger than a walk-in closet. It was unremarkable in every way, one among a hundred tiny rooms within a converted motel. The single bed took up the majority of the floor space. A few small wall-mounted shelves held some bundles of clean clothes and a bare light bulb hung from the ceiling, but otherwise the room was entirely empty. Dean sat down on the edge of the bed, then looked up at Salviel.

She'd followed him into the small room and leaned against the opposite wall. He wondered how literally she would take her instructions to not let him leave her sight. Would he be able to talk her into standing outside the room or would she watch him sleep? The thought made him a little uncomfortable. He didn't even see a chair for her to sit down on or a book to give her the appearance of distraction.

"Tom didn't strike me as the vow-of-poverty kind of guy," Dean commented, breaking the awkward silence.

"He isn't," she replied. "He doesn't live here. It's just the communal room he's using while on the base. These few blocks are all temporary housing and mess."

That was a little reassuring. The thought that someone who seemed as together as Tom primarily living in such a depressing environment wouldn't have boded well for the population as a whole.

"Where does he live normally?"

"I don't know; it's classified," Salviel said as she took out one of her angel blades and used its edge to trim her fingernails.

"I take it he's one of the bigwigs around here," Dean guessed, then reconsidered his statement after looking around the tiny room again. Surely Tom would at least have a chair if he was an officer in their organization? And yet Tom had been given the authority to dismiss Salviel from shadowing him.

"Tom likes to stay out of the chain of command. He calls himself a freelancer, since he's worked a wide variety of jobs at more bases than most people can even name." She shook her head. "No, it's classified because otherwise it'd give up where Kay lives."

Dean’s eyebrows rose in surprise. "Kay, as in Kaylee?"

"Yeah."

"They live together?" He had wondered what the deal was between the two of them, but when Tom started getting flirty with Lena the idea was abandoned.

"Some of the time, yes." Salviel slipped the angel blade back into its holster, then noticed the thoughtful expression on Dean’s face. "Is something wrong?"
"I just assumed that the two of them weren't a couple becau—"

"They aren't a couple. They're siblings."

10/01/2012

"Tom, if you want to go into town you better get your ass out of bed!" Ruby yelled through the bedroom door.

The wooden door had dozens of wards drawn onto it in marker, some of which had been painted over in a hue that didn't quite match the original shade of seafoam green. A paper sign that read, 'Keep out. I'm being awesome," was taped to the door.

"If he's like this now, I can't imagine how it's gonna be when he's a teenager."

Across the large open room that made up a combination kitchen, dining room, and living room, Dean and Cas sat at the dining table watching Kaylee. Dean was eating some oatmeal with a side of bacon, while Cas sat in the chair next to him entertaining the not-quite-three-year-old.

"Go easy on him. Sleeping in is a rite of passage for young people," Dean said as he topped off his own cup of coffee, then filled a mug for Cas, passing it to him after adding a little cream.

"I didn't sleep in when I was his age," Ruby complained, still standing by the bedroom door.

"But you had a fucked-up childhood."

"Look who's talking... but fair point." Ruby chewed her lip and waved a hand dismissing some expectation. "These kids are gonna be so fucked up."

"You both agreed to avoid profanity around the children," Cas said as he bounced Kaylee on his knee. He didn't bother trying to cover her ears. That would've been an eternal struggle.

"Oh, no. She might get sent home from preschool." Ruby rolled her eyes and mimed concern. "First priority is stopping her from flashing eyes because she thinks it's funny. Then we can worry about her wide breadth of vocabulary."

Ruby knocked on the bedroom door again, provoking a groggy shout indicating some level of consciousness. After sighing, she shrugged and returned to her seat at the table. She ate a few bites of her extra-crispy hash browns with a liberal squirt of ketchup, then cut up pieces of a banana which she passed over to Cas. Cas helped Kaylee eat the banana, then let her down when she was done.

Ruby eyed the clock, then walked back over to the bedroom door. "Tom, you've got ten more minutes before I send Dean in after you!"

"Seriously, still?" Dean leaned back in his chair. "How much longer am I gonna be on bedroom duty?"

"I'm thinking at least two more visits."

"It was one devil's trap," he muttered. "Anyway, he's just gonna figure out something to pull on me. If I get hexed trying to drag him out of bed—"

The bedroom door opened. Tom walked out in a sleepy haze. He wore blue flannel pajama pants, an oversized Violent Femmes t-shirt, and no socks. His hair was just over four inches long and
slightly flattened on the right side. He carried a bundle of clothing under one arm, waved using the other without looking, then turned straight into the bathroom.

"I know Sam's cool with long hair, but I just don't get it." Dean self-consciously ran his fingers over his hair, trying to smooth down some of its poofiness. "I can barely stand letting my hair get this long."

"You look good with your hair like that," Ruby commented, earning a small grin of appreciation from him.

"Maybe Tom's experimenting with rebelling?" Cas suggested.

"If he was actually rebelling I think he'd take up accounting as a hobby," Ruby countered. "He's just figuring himself out."

"Yeah, well don't expect anything to stick for a while. He's turning nine. You've got at least ten more years of hormones and all the crazy that comes with it," Dean warned as he recalled Sam and his own teenage years.

"If he's anything like you, he's got, what twenty-five more years? You still hormonal and crazy, old man?" Ruby teased.

"Yeah. I'm the old one, but somehow I'm always the one climbing the trees after him." Dean threw her a friendly glare.

"You're a hunter. You've got to stay in peak physical condition, or something like that," Ruby theorized while taking another bite of food. She looked at Cas, who nodded in agreement with her.

On cue, Kaylee tagged Dean and ran around the living room to hide behind an armchair. He sighed at the prospect of physical effort before he'd even finished breakfast, then gave chase. He intentionally let her get away from him a few times, but eventually grabbed her and began tickling her stomach.

"You're actually looking surprisingly spry," Ruby noted.

"He's in excellent physical condition" Cas agreed.

"You would say that," Ruby commented through a mouthful of hash browns.

Dean scooped up Kaylee with one arm and held her at waist height. Her legs dangled in the direction he was facing and her upper body faced behind him. She giggled and squealed about being the wrong way.

"I'll have you know that, apart from the munchkin here, I'm the youngest one in the room," Dean said smugly.

"I've spotted a grey hair or two on you," Ruby jabbed.

Dean flipped off Ruby out of Kaylee's view. "Yeah, well. You two are cheating. Some of us actually have to age."

There was a knock at the front door, then Sam entered. It was an unnecessary gesture since he had just teleported straight from Hell and could choose to appear almost anywhere that wasn't warded against him, yet he tried to give others their personal space and fair warning.
Kaylee started flailing her arms and legs, excitedly trying to escape from Dean's arm. Dean spun around a few times before putting her down, causing her to giggle and stumble around dizzily for a moment. She eventually staggered her way to Sam, who wrapped her in a massive hug. He tossed her in the air a few times, then took a seat at the table with her still hanging from his neck.

"Is Tom good to go?" Sam asked while stealing a bite of hash browns from Ruby's plate.

"He had a late start," Ruby said, then glanced at the bathroom door. "He'll probably be out of the bathroom soon."

"Does he still want to go into town?"

"Yep. He wants some new clothes and to hang out with 'the guys.' You might as well try to do something fun while you're at it." Ruby had been disappointed that Tom's expectations for a birthday involved buying new pants and hanging out with people he saw regularly.

"We'll figure something out," Dean assured her.

Sam smiled at Dean and Cas. "Thanks for making it on such short notice."

"It's not a problem. We just finished a hunt when you called and it was barely a day's drive," Cas explained.

"We've done like five hunts in a row. I'm glad to be home for a while," Dean added with a smile. "I've become soft. Motel beds just aren't the same."

"They're much harder and..." Cas frowned "of questionable sanitary conditions."

Once Tom was ready to go, Dean and Sam played rock-paper-scissors over who got to drive the Impala into town. Sam won, Tom took shotgun, while Dean and Cas piled in the backseat. Sam forfeited the driver's right to pick the music to Tom, who decided to start with The Clash. It was about a three-hour drive to Saskatoon, offering plenty of time for stories and joking around.

"You're exaggerating," Cas objected.

"I'm taking creative license," Dean admitted with a little shrug. "You can't expect me to tell them about the rugaru hunt without giving a little texture."

"Maybe leave out some of the texture," Sam requested, nodding toward Tom.

"I'm not a little kid, Sam," Tom said indignantly. "It's not gonna scare me."

"I'm not worried that it'll scare you. I'm worried that next birthday you'll be asking to tag along with Dean and Cas on a hunt." The boy looked thoughtful for a moment before Sam told him, "No way."

Tom slouched slightly in defeat, then began absentmindedly chewing on one of the pull strings of his plum-colored hoodie.

"Yeah, you have to be able to drive before you can go on hunts," Dean added, but Tom excitedly turned around to face him.

"So... you're saying that you'll teach me to drive next year?" Tom grinned.

"Sam, stop letting him hang out with your Crossroads buddies."
They stopped at a burger shop in downtown before going shopping. Dean and Tom both got bacon cheeseburgers and milkshakes. Sam ordered a veggie burger and an iced tea. Cas got the smallest, plainest burger on the menu and water. He didn't need to eat and some days it was an unpleasantly intense experience, but he knew it was important both as a way of pretending to be human and also from a social aspect. When the food came, Cas wordlessly transferred his pickle spear and french fries to Dean's plate, earning a smile from him in return.

"Get a room," Sam playfully teased.

"I thought we would be back at the camp before night?" Cas asked.

"It was a joke, Cas." Dean put a hand on the angel's shoulder. "I'll explain it to you later."

Cas nodded and gingerly began eating his burger.

"These f'ies ar' amazing!" Dean held up a few french fries to emphasize the point, but talking with his mouth partially full had also gotten the job done. "You should take Ruby here. Cas and I will watch the kids—"

"I'm not a kid," Tom reminded them as he sat up a little straighter in the booth.

"We'll watch the kid and the adult that doesn't need to shave yet."

"Thanks, but you might not have to," Sam replied. "Bobby should be back from Jody’s in a few days and he's long overdue for some domestic duty."

"He's supposed to take me fishing and shooting. You could come too," Tom offered them hopefully.

"Did he say what kind of gun he'd be starting you on?" Sam looked a little nervous, but knew better than to question the wisdom of Bobby.

"Shotgun." Tom grinned broadly at the idea of utterly destroying targets. Sam and Dean both took the weapon choice as more of a defensive tool that could be equipped with salt shells rather than something as explicitly lethal as a pistol.

After getting to know a few hunters, Tom had learned that they weren’t the boogeymen he’d imagined as a child. In the last year, he had started emulating Dean a bit more, seeking to be a bit tougher. Tom still idolized Sam, but Dean shared stories of dramatic battles and Sam rarely shared stories from his ‘work.’

Recently, Sam had been a bit concerned that Tom would want to be a hunter, but it was a little hard to imagine with the relatively intense magical training that he was receiving from Ruby. He was naturally gifted with the craft, and there was an unspoken expectation among other witches and Maji that Ruby's apprentice would someday lead a coven. Sam and Ruby both made Tom's safety and happiness a top priority, expectations be damned... though they had to admit that nowadays leading a coven was probably safer than hunting.

After lunch they went to a department store to satisfy Tom's request for some more clothes. He was the oldest boy in the coven, which meant that he more or less didn't get any hand-me-downs. It was true that he occasionally borrowed shirts from Ruby, but that wasn’t an ideal source for a wardrobe.

Sam and Ruby generally let him do anything with his appearance that he wanted. A few months
earlier he'd grown his hair out until his afro was completely unwieldy. Sam had been the one to explain the joy of hair ties, clips, and headbands. Since then, the hair length may have been reduced, but Tom usually wore some bright hair accessory, several of which he borrowed from the girls in the coven. No one made fun of his little embellishments, but on the unusual instance when the boy was in public it earned a few glances. On this outing he wore a teal paisley headband complete with a small white bow accent.

Tom was holding a handful of new purple-flower-covered hair ties while Sam and Dean helped him look for shirts big enough that he wouldn't immediately outgrow them. Dean kept suggesting muted colors, rock band t-shirts, and plain designs. Sam instead pulled out brighter colors and plaids. Meanwhile, Cas just watched the show.

Dean and Cas decided to go look for a pair of boots that would serve better in the wilderness than Cas's dress shoes while Sam paid for Tom’s clothes. After gathering up an arm's worth of clothing, Sam made his way to find a register while Tom tagged along. As the pile started to get rung up, Tom became distracted by a display of tennis shoes in a variety of neon colors that was across the department. He went to go take a closer peek in the hopes of further cashing in on his birthday fortune.

There was a loud sound like a crack from outside the store, followed by screaming and several small explosions. The cashier dove behind the counter, but Sam barely took cover at all. He spun around looking for Tom, who wasn't in view. He ducked down to see if Tom had taken cover below any of the clothing racks, but the boy wasn't there. He was frustrated that he couldn’t sense him, since Tom wasn't any bit demon. Sam started yelling for him.

There was another explosion, which was close enough to knock out a nearby display window. Sam held up his hand, telekinetically stopping the glass shards before they hit him. He hopped onto the checkout counter to get a better view, then saw him. Tom was huddled, taking cover about sixty feet away behind a metal bench. The screaming outside got louder for a second before the sound of gunshots started. Sam sprinted toward Tom, pushing all obstacles out of his way. He telekinetically threw a table in front of the window closest to Tom, then slid down to him.

"Dad!" Tom yelled and grabbed onto Sam, who scooped him up and sprinted with him toward the back of the store. Another small explosion rattled the front of the store, but Sam shielded them from the few pieces of debris.

About halfway through the store, Dean and Cas rounded a corner into view. Dean's shoulder was bleeding, but he refused to slow down long enough for Cas to heal the cut.

"Are you guys alright?" Dean asked as they ran through the employees-only area looking for an exit out the back.

"We're okay. Do you know what's up?"

"I think it's one of those end-of-days groups."

"Here for us?" Sam asked.

For months there had been slightly more chatter online from that crowd about taking a shot at 'the Devil,' but it hadn't been given too much attention. Sam barely read the threat assessment reports anymore. As the world got crazier, the number of people who wanted to kill him for any given reason grew.

"I don't think so. It looked like they went after the bank across the street. There's—" Dean started
to answer, but was interrupted by the sound of another explosion. It seemed to be coming from a side street instead of the front of the store, which threw their escape route into question.

"We're getting out of here," Cas said as he reached forward and touched a hand to each of the brothers.

Suddenly they were outside Sam and Ruby's cabin. Cas staggered a little bit from the effort, but Dean caught and held him up until he collected himself.

"You okay Cas?" Dean asked.

"I'm fine. It's just difficult to teleport in through the wards sometimes." Cas took a breath, then stood taller. "I'll go back and get the Impala. We wouldn't want her to get damaged."

"Thanks, Cas," Dean said as the angel reached to heal his injured arm. "Don't bother; I can patch it up. Save your energy."

Tom opened up the front door of their cabin and ran straight to Ruby. She was a little surprised, but accepted his nearly-debilitating hug without question. Kaylee had been sitting on the floor close by, but, seeing the opportunity for a group hug, ran to Tom and hugged his leg. Ruby turned to see Sam walk in the front door covered with dust, followed by a bleeding Dean. Her eyes grew wide. She patted Tom's head in reassurance and mouthed 'What the fuck happened?' to Sam. In return, Sam briefly threw his hands up before rubbing his temples.

"Hey Tommy, have I ever shown you how to treat a cut like this?" Dean asked, pointing to his shoulder. When Tom shook his head, he replied, "Would you like me to show you? Sam and I were stitching cuts when we were your age."

Tom seemed a little distracted by the chance to help Dean and learn something that made him more like his role models. Sam patted his brother's back in wordless gratitude. Dean reached down and picked up Kaylee with his good arm.

"Come on, munchkin. Let's make you into a mummy as long as we're breaking out the first aid kit."

Once Dean had led the kids out of the room, Sam collapsed on the couch and let out a long groan. Ruby sat down on one of the armrests, then watched him. She knew that something big had happened, but decided to give Sam a moment to order his thoughts. He looked apprehensive more than anything else and that worried her more than the little pieces of drywall in Sam’s hair or the three-inch-long gash in Dean’s arm.

"There was some end-of-days group attack next to us—it wasn't directed at us, just a fluke. A couple of explosions and gunfire...." He looked her in the eyes. "Ruby, it finally happened."

"What?" She slid down the armrest onto the cushion next to him and put a hand on his thigh.

"He called me 'Dad.'" Sam leaned his head back against the top of the couch so that he was staring at the ceiling. "I don't even think he noticed it. He was completely freaked out. It was a slip."

"We kinda figured that this might happen. I mean, he's basically been with us since day one."

"I know, and I'm fine with it— You know I'm...." Sam's mouth moved a bit, unsure of how to articulate his feelings. They both loved Tom and he thought of the boy as son, but taking that next step meant being careful not to overstep.
“I know what you mean.” She took his hand in hers. “It’s daunting, but it’s time.”

“We need to have a talk with him,” he agreed. “We’ve been dodging this thing too long.”

After slipping into their bedroom for a few minutes to get ready, Sam and Ruby asked Dean to continue watching Kaylee for a while while they talked with Tom. He’d retreated to his bedroom after watching the lesson in suturing a cut. To his surprise, he was allowed to finish the last inch, minus knotting off the end. In spite of the pride he’d felt, the sight of the blood had left him wanting to lie down for a bit. He had opted to lounge on his bed reading some comic books that Dean had brought him during a previous visit.

"Can we talk for a minute?" Ruby asked, peeking her head in the open door.

Tom nodded as he sat up, then put his comics off to the side. Sam sat down on the edge of the bed next to him, while Ruby pulled up a desk chair next to the bed.

"Tom, when we were at the store during the attack, do you remember what you said to me?" Sam asked with as soft a tone and posture as his large frame would allow. The last thing he wanted was for Tom to think that he’d done something wrong.

Tom looked thoughtful as he replayed the scene in his mind. After a moment his eyes widened a little and he looked down at his bedding. He didn’t make a sound. Sam put his hand on Tom’s shoulder and squeezed it gently in reassurance.

"Do you remember your dad?"

"Some stuff." Tom traced the seams of his pillow with his fingertips. It’d been almost three years since Gabin had been killed. For one-third of Tom’s life he’d lived with Sam and Ruby, but in terms of his memory that third was overwhelming. "He would make me pancakes with blackberries in them. When he’d make them, he sang to me…. I don’t remember what the songs were."

Tom refused to look at either of them and his shoulders slumped with the confession that he’d forgotten which songs Gabin used to sing. Ruby leaned forward to bring herself into the edge of Tom’s vision.

"When we lose people, even people that are important to us, it’s normal to sometimes not remember things. You haven’t done anything wrong, if you’re worried about that.” She leaned closer into his field of view, but he didn’t try as hard to evade her gaze. “Sam, me, Dean, Bobby, Belda—all of us have lost people and even though we want to hold onto every detail and memory, sometimes we can’t…. All we can hold onto for sure is that feeling they gave us.”

Ruby reached out and lightly tapped Tom’s chest over his heart with her fingertips. ‘Love’ was not a word that was ever really said around the camp or among the Winchester brothers. Only once had Sam and Dean braved the foreign territory of seriously using the word and then it was promptly hidden away again. Sam and Ruby had never used the word to describe their relationship, but that was largely because they almost never tried to described their relationship at all.

It was an uncomfortable topic, but giving meaningful relationships the recognition that they deserved was important, especially when trying to relate to Tom’s relationship with his father. Sam couldn’t honestly relate through his own father’s death. Too many things had been dissimilar. But he’d had another loss better suited for the reassurance he and Ruby were trying to give. He
took a breath to gain some courage.

“A few years ago, I had a friend… a girlfriend, Jessica, that I cared about more than anything, and she died. I was scared that, because I’d lost her, I’d lost all the happiness that being with her had brought me. And after awhile, I’d forgotten some of the little things….” Sam felt a faint tightness in his throat, but he swallowed and continued in spite of it. “I don’t remember her smile, but just the thought of her smiling brings back some of that happiness she gave me when she was alive.”

“You don’t feel sad when you think about her?” Tom asked quietly without looking up.

“Sometimes I do, but I try to focus on the time we had together and the joy it still gives me.” Sam glanced up at Ruby. “I didn’t think that I’d ever feel like that again, but then I found out that Ruby makes me feel…. She makes me happier than I’d thought possible. But the way I feel about Ruby doesn’t take away from the happiness that Jessica gave me. I’m grateful that I’ve had so many people in my life that’ve cared about me, each in their own time and way.”

Sam felt like he must’ve been blushing. It was embarrassing enough talking about his relationships with Jessica and Ruby, but it was even worse with Ruby sitting right there. To her credit she didn’t tease him or say anything to further muddy the message that they were both trying to get at. Sam wasn’t sure how clear his metaphor was or whether it was a sufficient segue into what they’d come in to talk about, but Tom at least seemed to have adopted a more receptive and contemplative posture. Sam subtly nodded encouragingly at Ruby.

“Sam and I care about you and Kaylee more than anything. We’ll never replace your parents, Gabin and Grace, but we also want you to know that you’re part of our family.” Ruby smiled and took Tom’s hand. "Want to kinda make it official and have us be your other Mom and Dad?"

Tom started to tear up. He squeezed her hand, then nodded, unable to speak. He rushed forward and hugged Ruby. She hugged him back, while pulling him close. Tom was a bit too big to sit on her lap, but they didn’t care.

Sam watched Tom cling to his surrogate mother in desperation and relief. He and Ruby had been Tom’s primary guardians for years, but the lack of structure in the camp had stopped them from taking the next step. They’d been scared to overstep their boundaries with him, but in the meantime Tom had been left in a no man’s land. The boy hadn’t cared about boundaries or propriety. He cared about having parents that loved him.

"It's not a bunch of new clothes, but happy birthday." Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver locket. He handed it to Tom, who carefully examined it. When opened from one side it revealed a photo of Gabin and a picture of the charcoal drawing of Grace that had been in the coven’s classroom. When opened from the other side it revealed a photo each of Sam and Ruby. Tom slipped it on his neck and hugged them both.

Dean considered Tom with newfound curiosity. He was 99% sure that Tom wasn't biologically Sam's kid for a whole lot of reasons and even if Ruby hadn't always used white meatsuits, he'd heard that Kaylee was her first kid, demon or otherwise. He would have had to have been part of Ruby's coven, rescued shortly after the time that Dean had time traveled.

"Tom's adopted?"

Salviel nodded. No wonder Tom seemed so eager to please him. Not only had Tom known him for thirty years, but they were family.
Dean suddenly wondered how much he'd been a part of Tom's life. He'd apparently started hunting with Cas, which would have kept him away from Kaylee and Tom for a significant amount of time. Though he liked to think he would've made time to see his niece—and, he supposed, nephew.

So Sam had basically had two kids. Kaylee had said he was a good dad and Tom hadn't indicated that that was any bit wrong. It was a strange thought that his little brother could fall into the responsibility of parenthood so easily. Sammy had almost always wanted a quieter life, so in a way it made sense that he'd settle into the family life. It probably helped ground him against whatever onslaught the time in Hell threw at him.

Dean sat staring at the undecorated wall for several minutes. He replayed his interactions with Tom in his mind. He tried to imagine events from Tom’s perspective: being completely unidentifiable to someone that he’d known almost all his life. How does that sort of introduction even begin?

He supposed Tom hadn’t been sure how to deal with the situation and opted to avoid it—in classic Winchester fashion. Coping with intoxicants and a one-night-stand also sounded like a strangely familiar method of dealing with confused feelings. They really were family.

“Are you okay?” Salviel asked in what seemed like sincere concern, which he appreciated.

“I just…. I don’t recognize my family.” He looked up at her. “Even with the ruined city, and the apocalypse, and the angels, and everything—I think that’s the thing that makes me feel lost.”
Dean was walking through a labyrinth of jagged stone hallways. He could hear the echoes of screams from some far-off place, but he wasn’t sure which direction the sound was coming from. Half of him wanted to try to save the person from whatever torture was being inflicted upon them. The other half knew better; it wanted to run from the threat.

It wasn’t cowardice. He was being pragmatic. In that place pain was the only form of interaction—you either gave it or received it. There wasn’t compassion or mercy beyond…. It wasn’t death. Every one of them was already dead. But you could wholly destroy souls—not just ruining them, but twisting them beyond what his master had commanded.

His master had said that only weak souls faded in the fires of progress and the strong would be forged into demons, yet Dean hadn’t found that to be true. He had been under that misconception for years, while learning to work his prisoners, reluctantly at first, but less so over time. Once he had improved enough to be granted his privacy while working, he began to indulge his curiosity.

There had been a soul, a woman. She broke without much difficulty and began to turn easily. He reached to cut her free from her bindings, to send the new demon down the next stretch of the path to damnation, but he couldn’t. She had had green eyes when she’d arrived, just a manifested memory of her former self. They had been so much like his own… and he’d turned hers black.

He gripped her throat, shaking her and slamming her head into the stone table she was bound to. Somewhere in the agony he’d inflicted the color had been lost, drowned in the dismal greys and muddy reds of Hell. Green, the color of life, had been lost. Dragging his sickle along her temple he felt the intoxication of clear purpose for the first time in decades. His training to be calm and calculating faltered as her tore into her, trying to find those lost green eyes. When he stopped her eyes weren’t green or black—they were dull and empty.

She had been his first, but once he’d learned about that sweet spot of vulnerability right after the change… he tried to reach it whenever he could. It was an act of mercy—and it felt good. When every soul was condemned from the moment they crossed the gates of Hell, cutting through them fast and viciously just made sense.

But this moment didn’t make sense. He’d gotten out of Hell. He’d found Sam and met all sorts of strange people. Sam had had a daughter, and maybe he’d adopted a son—or was that another Sam? He’d been saved from Hell…. He was just having a dream. He wasn’t condemned anymore—he was just having a dream. He didn’t need to torture and destroy—he was just having a dream. His master—

Dean frantically looked around the immediate hallways for Alastair. He’d had this dream before and each time the archdemon had taken him apart piece-by-piece. One of the cell doors was unlocked, so he ducked inside, pressing his body to the wall to hide. Darkness engulfed him, but it didn’t provide the comfort of being hidden.
This was wrong. He was being watched. It was a new and unsettling development to the otherwise standard nightmare. Hiding seemed wrong. He’d be caught if he didn’t keep moving, so Dean tried something completely unexpected. He moved back into the hallway and ran. He didn’t care where to; toward the screams or away from them, he couldn't tell. Just as long as he was moving and it was different than the same routine that eventually would lead to Alastair.

When his lungs felt like they would collapse, he stopped and took in his surrounding. He was in a medium-sized carving room. The floor was ridged in elaborate patterns to form runes from the blood that would drain down into the metal grate in the center of the room. Up to eight prisoners could be mounted to the walls or racks at the same time. But there were only three prisoners. Sam, Kaylee, and Tom were strung up on the racks, hanging limp in varying degrees of despair.

Kaylee and Tom had both been bludgeoned. Dean recognized the contorted and swollen limbs as the broken bones below the surface. Bruises spread across their skin, some yellowed from age. If this had been real life, he was sure they'd have both died from their injuries.

Sam had been gouged away at, almost to the point of nonrecognition. Dean felt sick to his stomach, but there was also an unpleasant familiarity to the sight. He’d never seen Sam so badly mutilated before, yet he was sure the familiarity was something to do with Sam and not some previous victim. Strangely, it was almost the initial difficulty of identifying Sam that had triggered the feeling.

After a tiny shudder, blood began dripping from Sam's wounds and he gasped. Feebly he lifted his head to see Dean. He was looking at him with solid black eyes. Dean took a step back in horror while shaking his head.

"Dean…. Help." Sam's voice was weak and cracked in his parched throat, but Dean almost couldn't make out the words through the hissing and sputtering sounds that came from the exposed bits of punctured lung.

He wanted to go cut Sammy down, but as soon as he took a step forward he began to feel the presence again. That thing was still chasing him.

Dean's body was shaking as he realized that he was holding the sickle he'd used so often in Hell. He looked around the dungeon for an exit, but he didn't see one. Every interaction in Hell was pain and even though he was armed, he didn't want to meet his pursuer. He was cornered in that room, but there wasn't enough time to risk running back into the hallway. Hiding was his only option, but there were few options and the others were too injured for him to move.

He decided to cower behind one of the racks and hope that his pursuer would pass by the room. But Sam, Kaylee, and Tom suddenly began crying out in agony. He wanted to help them, but there wasn't enough time. The presence had almost found them. They were going to be found out—their screams and groans were too loud. If he could get them to stop, then maybe the presence wouldn't find him.

"You could be safe," said an overwhelming voice that shook Dean and almost spoke from within him. He looked down at the sickle, which was dripping with blood. "You would be safer without them."

Dean sat up in Tom's temporary bed. Salviel had given him some privacy, or maybe she'd just turned herself invisible. He was alone. Nothing was chasing him. Lifting his hands up, he relaxed at the discovery that there wasn't any blood on them.

Salviel appeared next to the bed. She was alarmed, but hadn't drawn either of her angel blades.
"What happened?"

"I just had a nightmare. I get them every night. It's nothing."

April 13, 2011

Sam was seated on his throne researching the history of the Arbris caste. They were one of the smallest castes by overall population, but they probably wielded the most power per capita within Hell. Every freshly broken soul was evaluated by an Arbris demon and assigned to their most appropriate caste… or at least that’s how it was supposed to work.

The reality of the situation was less disciplined. Occasionally souls would be collected by archdemons even before they were broken. That had happened to Dean, who had been such a coveted commodity that Lilith had stolen his contract before it had even come due. And with the Pits currently half-held by Lilith’s forces, at least half the new demons were beyond the reach of the Arbris, who dared not venture into hostile territory even to perform their vital charge. The result was that a disproportionate number of new demons were filling the ranks of the castes which supported Lilith, indoctrinated by archdemons eager to grow their own castes.

Within the allied Pits, there were a slightly smaller number of dungeons working the tender souls into demons, but they were operated by skeleton crews. Very few of the captured Torquean demons, who specialized in breaking souls, had switched allegiance. And while the Arbris understood the importance of restoring depleted ranks, they were forbidden from assigning castes against their best judgment just to meet a quota.

The need to adhere to custom and tradition somewhat hindered their ability to create a massive army, but it did produce a very content and loyal population. Early in his rule, Sam had suggested to his advisors the idea of eliminating the Luxia caste. The Luxia, led by Lilith, was the holy caste whose role was to act in service to Lucifer. While it would’ve been a rather bold statement to culturally and politically excommunicate Lilith’s entire caste, it was eventually decided against. Aside from the fact that Sam had to keep up the facade of piety, the loss of an entire caste would likely be seen as a threat to all castes. And even though there was a large amount of resentment between the castes on both sides of the war, the respect for the institution itself was fundamental.

Since they couldn’t dissolve a caste to reassign its demons and the Arbris had their hands bound by the standards of their own caste, there was a mere trickle of new demons replacing the ranks on Sam and Crowley’s side. To the extent that any of those new demons belongs to castes whose archdemon was on Lilith’s side, those new demons were assigned to a pseudo-archdemon. No one referred to the allied leaders of the otherwise enemy castes as archdemon. Despite the animosity toward Lilith or Alastair, for example, referring to their own leaders of the Luxia or Torquean castes as archdemon would be an insult to the democratic nature of the individual castes. Sam couldn’t appoint an archdemon without suffering significant backlash and possibly having to quell a revolt.

When Lilith had initially drawn troops to Earth to begin her mission to break the seals, Crowley had managed to primarily use the labor of imprisoned demons. Ruby had been released under that policy decision, but she’d simply been returned to her own caste. Very few demons had actually crossed caste lines to substitute in for lost manpower. But with so many demons revolting, trying to temporarily reassign enough demons to fill the gaps would equally threaten the integrity of the caste system.

Traditions were almost everything in a place as old as Hell, so Sam decided to research the Arbris to see if there was any way to grow their populations within the castes with divided loyalties.
Maybe if they could get the allied populations high enough to gain the majority, it might make the hostile members of that caste reconsider their loyalties. It was a system that at times barely made sense to a human, but demons had a very different relationship to the chain of command and allegiances—for better or worse.

The tome Sam was reading was absolutely fascinating, though he still had trouble understanding some uncommon words in Abyssal. Every once in awhile he'd need to look away from the pages to clear his mind before returning to the text. While reading about a particularly interesting passage about an Arbris being placed on trial for taking bribes roughly four thousand years ago, Sam's eyes lost focus. He felt the vision beginning.

This was one of the stronger ones—the ones that seemed to come on when he slept. But in Hell, he didn't sleep. For some reason this one was breaking through in spite of it. The hall was quiet, so he didn't fight the vision. Even with the whole Arbris matter at hand, there wasn't anything so urgent that it should've stopped him from letting the vision play out.

There was a beautiful forest, full of plants that he didn't recognize. The trees were massive and ancient, extending up to create tiered canopies of green, yellow, and blue leaves. Willowy branches hung, shedding silvery-white wisps that floated through the air. The bark of the trees came in every color imaginable. Vines and ferns cluttered the forest floor, but reached upward along the tree trunks. Nearly every vine and tree grew beautiful flowers that smelled divine. It was complete insanity, but it was the most breathtaking place he had ever seen.

In the distance he could see a woman walking alone through the forest. She was maybe in her twenties with dark eyes and tan skin. Her black unkempt hair reached below her hips, providing her only source of modesty. She was naked and unarmed, surrounded but the bizarre wilderness... but she wasn't afraid or even vulnerable—she was angry. Betrayal and rage seemed to radiate from her and it made Sam feel a little nauseous.

She knelt down to look at a small bird of some type that Sam couldn't identify. The bird was lying on the ground, sickly and weak. She picked it up, stroked its feathers gently, then snapped its neck. Her hand clutched the dead bird as she stood up and stared at a wilting flower on a nearby tree. The forest was dying, slowly, but inevitably. It was being poisoned by something.

Suddenly, the woman screamed. She dropped the dead bird as she fell to her knees and clasped her hands to her ears. At first Sam didn't understand what had happened, then he could hear it too. It was high-pitched and incredibly loud at first, but it quickly lowered into a more tolerable frequency.

"We can make it right. The way it was—better even." The voice was oppressive and Sam was amazed that the woman hadn't passed out from the assault on her senses. It was a struggle for him and he wasn't even the voice's target. "That rage inside of you, hold onto it. It will serve you well, Lilith."

She finally fell to the ground unconscious. Sam felt a chill run through him. Somehow he knew that the voice had turned its attention to him. This wasn't like any vision he'd had before. He'd only ever observed events, nothing had ever reacted to him. But the voice was most definitely aware of him too.

Sam tried to snap himself out of the vision, but there was a strange resistance. Panic started to set in and even though most of his senses had been taken over by the vision, he could feel his body jerk with a start. He tried to stand up, thinking that physical activity might shake him out of the vision. For a split second the throne room blended seamlessly into the forest. Seizing the opportunity, he tried to take a step, but collapsed from the effort.
"Can you hear me, Sam?" the voice whispered in surprise.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on grey stone floor of the throne room. He was on his side and his head was killing him. Mir and Shola knelt around him, checking to see if he was alright. He started to lift himself up, but stopped part way in shock. A few feet beyond Shola, he saw a tiny plant sprouting from the stone floor. Its diminutive green form stood out against the deathly grey background. He reached for it, but passed out.

"What's the significance of the pocket watch?" Cas asked from his perch on the corner of the bed.

"You're not supposed to know yet. Just take it at face value for now and try to enjoy the movie."

Dean took a hit, then rolled over on the bed to pass the joint to Isa. She was sitting on a small mound of couch cushions that had been piled on the floor next to Dean's bed.

Dean had finally assembled his small entertainment system in his bedroom and was enthusiastically showing it off to Cas, Isa, and Flo. He'd been hoping to get Ruby and Aimé in on the first movie night, but his bedroom was on the small side. Instead it was just the four of them enjoying a few beers and whatever Isa had deemed to be a good intoxicant pairing with a spaghetti western. The television was only 28 inches, but considering it was the only television they had in the camp, no one was complaining.

Dean had initially resigned himself to sacrificing his entire closet to blu-ray storage, since they had no cable or satellite service to provide other sources of media, aside from a fairly slow magic-based internet connection. But Flo had managed to set Dean up with a terabyte hard drive full of pirated movies and television series. She had taken a lot of pleasure 'bringing Dean into the 21st century' by making a media server to host everything, though she hadn't yet networked the other cabins. As a result, Dean's bedroom was their temporary secret clubhouse/theater.

"Look at those beauties," Flo purred as she elbowed Dean's side to make sure his attention was drawn to the screen. She shared the bed with Dean, who was stretched out on the left side, and Cas, who sat at her feet. In the movie, one of the protagonists unveiled his collection of sophisticated firearms. Some of the guns were absurdly ornate, but the fantastic variety made her eyes glint.

"Van Cleef has the nice toys, but Eastwood can get by without it—that's a hell of a thing." Dean grinned over at Flo. "It's about being the kinda badass that can stare down a bad guy without anything but your will."

"I've seen a lot in my years, but I've never seen will win a firefight," Flo countered.

"Did you even watch the first movie?" Dean asked with surprise.

"That was innovation." She waved off his implied point. "Score one for team tech."

"Aren't you a witch? What the fuck do you mean that will doesn't win?"

"Magic doesn't count as willpower; that stuff takes a lot of calculations. You should really take some lessons from Rubahnali," she suggested.

Everyone knew that Dean was the adult in the camp with the least experience spellcasting. He'd always left the magic stuff to Sam, then Cas had adopted that role when they had partnered up. At times it bothered him that he was the odd one out on that front, but he did have a different role than most. He was the best fighter once you leveled the playing field by stripping away all the powers. When he and Cas were fighting humans or monsters Cas had the obvious advantage, but when
Cas's powers didn’t give him an edge against their enemy, Dean’s experience was usually the deciding factor in the fight.

The idea of dabbling in magic felt like a trap to Dean. Over the years, he’d seen a lot of people become too dependant on using magic. In all honesty, he thought Sam was letting his basic combat skills fall by the wayside. Magic could be just as much a handicap as it could be a resource and he tried to remember that... though there might be some value in at least learning enough theory to lend a hand in a pinch.

There was a knock on the cabin door, then Bobby came in. He looked concerned, but wasn't moving quickly enough to be panicked.

"Dean, get up—"

"Are we fighting or running?" Dean asked casually because he saw that Bobby wasn't armed.

"No."

"Can it wait until after the movie?"

"Sam's back." It was always a bad sign when Sam got back from Hell early. "He's not hurt bad or anything, but he looks something awful."

Dean tried to get up off the bed in spite of the fact that his limbs were still a little too heavy from the two joints he’d worked through over the last hour. He pushed up on his elbow and meant to swing himself upright, but only succeeded in rolling onto Isa. She broke out in helpless giggles, while he hastily made sure he wasn't crushing or groping her.

"Cas, little help please," Dean requested.

Cas patiently walked around the bed and touched the back of Dean's head. Dean quickly climbed off Isa with his newfound sobriety, then rushed out of his cabin.

Sam was lying on the couch in his living room. He hadn't bothered to take off his shoes and he had only unbuttoned his jacket. Dean was actually surprised to see one of those long coats that Sam wore in Hell. Sam had stopped bringing them topside after Dean had jokingly called the design a dress. Dean had regretted the joke after Tom had immediately gone into the bathroom to take a bow out of his hair. He’d apologized and gave reassurances, which were well taken, but he noticed that Sam still left the jackets in Hell from then on. Something must've really spooked Sam if he hadn't stopped to change clothes before porting back home.

The scene itself was unnerving. There was a damp washcloth covering Sam's forehead and eyes. Ruby sat in a chair next to him, holding onto his closest wrist. Dean hoped it was just to provide comfort and not to monitor his pulse. Tom hovered in the doorway to his bedroom, holding Kaylee.

"What happened?" Dean asked as he entered the cabin, followed by Bobby and Cas.

"He had a vision or something. It knocked him out," Ruby explained.

"A vision? He's been good with those for over a year."

"There was... something weird about it," Sam murmured.
“Hey, Cas.” Ruby caught the angel’s attention, then pulled the washcloth back from Sam’s face slightly.

Sam cringed at the contact and Dean could see why. A nasty looking bruise was forming just above Sam’s right temple.

Dean wasn’t expecting that. “Since when do visions punch you in the face?”

“Stone floors,” Ruby replied. “He passed out while standing.”

“I’ll tell Crowley to carpet the place,” Sam joked, but his audible fatigue prevented everyone from smiling.

Cas softly touched the injury, which disappeared. Sam removed the washcloth, but didn’t try to get up. He looked completely exhausted.

“So what literally mind-blowing news packs that big a punch?” Dean asked.

Sam chewed his lip while trying to remember. "I think there was a woman... maybe it was a bird,” Sam said uncertainly. “Something was wrong.”

"Sure as hell seems that way,” added Ruby as she examined the section of Sam's skull that had possibly had a fracture or two moments ago.

"And there was a sound.... It was so intense...." Sam frowned at the memory of the sensation. "I think someone was talking to me."

"Someone was talking in your vision?” Ruby suggested in an attempt to be helpful.

"No—maybe. I mean, I think they were trying to talk to me—like the real me.” Everyone stared at him in confusion. "I've had dreams where I can interact with people, and maybe there's a little bit of foreshadowing, like an omen, but this felt different. Something was looking at me and it was real."

"Something got into your vision?” Bobby asked.

"It didn't just get into it. I think it made it. I've never had a vision like this downstairs before and...." He hesitated. "That thing tried to keep me in the vision."

"What?!” Dean paced in alarm. “What the fuck is even capable of something like that?"

“There’s a chance that it may have been your angel trying to contact you,” Cas speculated. “On several occasions I spoke to this vessel, and it was considerably easier while he was asleep. Your vision state might be a comparable level of consciousness or even be more accessible....” Cas trailed off and scowled slightly.

"I'm sensing a 'but,'" Ruby said.

"But your angel shouldn't have hurt you. We never intentionally harm our vessels. Even with Heaven attempting to kill you, I’d expect your angel to recuse itself from any violence. It may have been an accident that you were harmed. Some sort of reaction to your Abyssal nature."

"Like an angel allergy?” Dean analogized.

"I don't know about the whole angel idea.” Sam looked up at Cas skeptically. "We're pretty warded up against angels downstairs. I don't understand how the signal could get through.”
“Could you hit up your heavenly turncoats to see if they know who might be doing this?” Ruby asked Cas.

“There isn’t a way to investigate an angel’s bloodline discreetly,” Cas replied apologetically. “It would be incredibly dangerous if they were caught, and we don’t even know that this really is the work of an angel.”

“So what do we do next?” Sam asked as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“If it happens again, I suggest you ask what it wants.”

April 15, 2011

Dean was standing in the middle of a tranquil meadow, untouched by man or beast… until now. The grassland was littered with hundreds of crumpled bodies. Each was beautiful and timeless and he knew that each one was someone he loved…. But at the same time he didn’t recognize any of their faces. None of them were supposed to die, ever… yet their wings had scorched the soil.

Cold sweat dripped down his back as he realized he was in a killing field of angels. He looked around in a panic for Cas. His hands trembled as he rolled over bodies, hoping that none of them contained those bright blue eyes. A strange heat prickling the back of his neck and at first he mistook it for adrenaline. But it was beyond warmth. It was hatred... but it wasn’t his. There was something else there that was watching him and the creature was seething.

Dean stood up and spun around, trying to see the thing that he’d sensed. Instead of the meadow, a graveyard extended before him. An endless number of headstones reached back to some far away time and place. Slightly apart from the rest were two headstones before open graves. He moved closer to try to read the two headstones, but one’s surface had been gouged, obscuring the name.

Suddenly, there was an overwhelming howling sound that reverberated in his core. Dean fell to his knees and covered his ears. He felt like he was screaming in pain, but the sound was too loud for him to be sure of his own voice. His ears may have started bleeding—he wasn’t about to remove his hands to check. The strange sound wavered, eventually almost sounding like words.

"Dean, where are you?” it asked. “It’s almost time.”

He woke up in his own bed to find Cas standing over him looking concerned. His body was covered in sweat and he was shaking. A second later, Bobby and Flo ran into his cabin. Bobby looked like he’d stopped halfway through brushing his teeth and held a shotgun. Flo’s long hair frizzed out chaotically, unbound by her normal wrap. She was wearing a small periwinkle nightgown, and had her Desert Eagle in hand. Everyone stared at Dean expectantly, but he didn’t understand what they were waiting for.

“What’s going on?” Bobby asked, looking around for a threat.

“I don’t know.” Dean tried to sit up, but his head hurt and he felt faint. He rubbed the heels of his palms over his eyes to create a different sensation than the sharp pain that pulsed in his skull.

“You were screaming in your sleep,” Cas explained.

Dean lowered his hands so that he could confirm the serious expression in Cas’s face. He’d had a lot of rough nights, but he was pretty sure that he’d never screamed.

“Screaming is a bit of an understatement.” Bobby’s posture relaxed slightly at the realization that
he probably wasn’t going to have to shoot anything, though he was far from okay with the situation. “I think you woke the whole camp up.”

"Speaking of, I'm going to let the others know it's ok," Flo said as she put the safety back on her pistol, then left the room.

"This was worse than your normal nightmares,” Cas observed. “Do you remember anything about what happened?"

"There was death…. Something was angry—and a loud noise, but I could've sworn it was talking to me.” Dean’s eyes widened as he tried to sit up despite the headache.

Bobby raised a eyebrow. "You mean like Sam?"

"Both of you having these dreams or visions within a day of each other does indicate that your angel might be trying to contact you. It may have decided to try you after failing to communicate with Sam,” Cas suggested. “Do you know what it was trying to say?"

"It... it asked where I was."

The creature was looking for him... or them. Dean heart was pounding and he swayed a little as he stared at nothing. Cas gripped his shoulder to help stabilize him.

"Did you tell it?" Bobby asked with audible concern.

"No—no!” Dean shook his head, then looked to Cas. "Cas woke me up."

“If that thing is an angel, could it find us through Dean and Sam?” Bobby asked Cas, who thought for an ominously long time.

“We’ll need more warding.”

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Dean didn’t go back to sleep. Instead he drank almost an entire carafe of coffee while watching Cas and Ruby discuss possible designs for a ward to block the vessel-angel link. Sam had looked surprisingly cheerful when he got home a few hours later. He entered the cabin with a small, black porcelain cup containing a baby plant, but it was quickly set aside at the news that an angel might be trying to locate them. Sam tried to offered whatever input he could in the design process, but Cas and Ruby were the clear experts.

“If we put this type of warding on the skin it’ll fade after a few years—and not just switching off one day. It’ll weaken over time and your feathery friend will start getting bigger and bigger peeks in,” Ruby pointed out as she tapped her pen on the table.

“I can inscribe bone,” Cas suggested, causing Ruby to nod thoughtfully.

“You mean like cutting up our bones?” Dean asked. “Awesome.”

“It’ll be quite painful,” Cas confessed, causing Dean and Sam to glance at each other unenthusiastically. “But the pain should pass after a few minutes.”

“I think we can fit the warding on three vertebrae,” Ruby speculated while flipping through her fifteen pages of sketches and notes.

“The length of a femur might offer an easier surface area,” Cas countered.
“Yeah, but the alignment on the spine—” Ruby began, but was interrupted by the sound of Kaylee crying in the nursery.

“I got it. You keep designing,” Sam said as he got up from his seat. He squeezed Ruby’s shoulder as he left the room.

“If a warded bone gets broken are we fair game? If so, you might want to avoid limbs,” Dean pointed out.

“That could be a problem,” Cas admitted.

“I’m just saying. I’ve had a lot of broken bones, but never the back. It might be safer that way.”

Sam came back into the living room carrying Kaylee. She was wearing purple, frog-covered pajamas and was crying quietly. One small hand clutched Sam’s shirt while the other held her head. Her eyes were clenched in pain and she pressed her forehead against Sam’s chest.

“Guys.” Sam gently patted her back, trying to soothe her. “I think we have a problem.”

“No fucking way,” Dean exhaled.

"Cas.” Ruby accidentally snapped her pen in half, then continued, “We finish these wards and then you’re gonna start beating the bushes because I’m gonna fucking kill that angel.”
“Is it safe to come in?” Tom asked as he knocked on the door to the tiny room while cracking it slightly.

“Sure,” Dean answered while he finished making the bed. He wasn’t sure whether Tom would be using the room going forward, but it was the least he could do to try to show his gratitude.

Tom was wearing the black t-shirt that he’d been so attached to and his tan jacket, but aside from that he was only wearing an old white cotton bedsheet that acted as an improvised sarong.

“Unlike you, I’m actually wearing pants,” Dean observed. He sat down on the bed in order to give Tom some space to move around in the room.

“Yeah.” Tom grabbed one of the bundles of clothes and started unwrapping it. “It was worth losing the pants though.”

“Sneaking back to the motel room at dawn trying to find some pants. You sound like your uncle.”

Tom froze in the middle of sorting through the clothing. He turned and looked down at Dean with a slightly embarrassed expression.

“How’d you figure it out?”

“I asked Salviel what the deal was between you and Kaylee.” Dean pulled his legs closer to his torso, providing some room on the bed for Tom to sit down. “So is that why you’re staying in this four-star resort?”

He waved a hand at the cramped living quarters and the fact that Tom had only bothered to bring two changes of clothes. There weren’t any magical components or personal belongings. He’d heard of light travelers, but this was on par with grabbing a coat as you ran out the door.

“Kaylee called me in to help I.D. you,” Tom explained. “Both since I’ve known Dean longer than anyone else that was free and because I could run the full spectrums of tests for an N.H.N. or other imposter…. And I suppose she wanted to keep it in the family, so to speak.”

“So what, you didn’t want to freak me out by telling me?” Dean guessed.

“A little, but honestly,” he cringed apologetically “you aren’t the only one that’s thrown by this whole thing. It’s a lot to process. Kaylee’s taking it pretty well—I think—but you at least had heard of her before you got here. I mean, if you met Bobby when he was in his thirties…. How do you even begin to explain that kind of relationship?”

Dean paused to think about whether he’d really divulge his identity and relationship to a younger Bobby. It’d be cool to get to know Bobby better, but bringing in the emotional baggage and questions was a bit daunting. Being the one out of the loop currently, Dean felt a little hypocritical
for considering withholding the information from the hypothetical Bobby, but keeping the relationship hidden had been his initial instinct.

“I like to think I would’ve told you,” Tom added with a small shrug. “But I just wanted to figure out the right time and way of explaining.”

“I can understand that.” Dean allowed Tom the out.

Keeping secrets had been a recurring theme in Dean's relationships, and while he had been pissed off at Sam for it, he understood the impulse. Mostly he was upset about repeat offenders. Tom barely knew him, the younger Dean, so there was an understandably smaller expectation of trust than there had been with Sam. Sam's secrets about Ruby and his Abyssal nature had chipped away at an established relationship, but Tom was just conflicted while trying to build a new relationship.

Dean realized that Tom had analogized the other Dean as being on par with Bobby. He thought back to his memories of Bobby, and the ones that stood out in his mind the most were all the little secret non-hunter outings as a child. Despite only seeing him a few times a year, Bobby had been an important part of Sam’s and his upbringing. Had that been the parallel that Tom had intended?

“Was I—the other Dean around much when you were growing up?” He felt strange getting so personal, and yet it wasn’t exactly personal for himself. It was the relationship with the other Dean they were talking about, but it was still connected to him. The other Dean was feeling more and more like a shadow that was following him around.

“Definitely. For years, Dean had a cabin a few doors down from us at the camp. He used to hunt with Cas for a few weeks at a time, but he’d swing through for a few days or a week. Never missed a birthday or big holiday or anything. He always had the best stories.” Tom smiled at a memory, then sat down on the foot of the bed. “He’s actually why I got into hunting a little.”

“You’re a hunter?"

“Yes and no. I know my way around weapons and the lore, but these days nobody’s really hunting anymore. You get your adrenaline and sense of service on the battlefield, but when I was a teenager I went on a few random hunts with Dean.” Tom laughed. “Actually, my first hunt we didn’t tell anyone. I’d been bugging him for years, so he eventually snuck me out to burn some bones. Dad was pretty mad when he found out…. You probably shouldn’t try taking Kaylee or me hunting unless you want a black eye and the silent treatment for about a month.”

“Sam was that against you hunting?”

He could see Sam not wanting Kaylee potentially being around other hunters, but Tom was human…. Granted he was a witch, but the other hunters didn’t need to know that.

“I think it was more just the fact that I’d taken another step down a path he didn’t want for me.” Tom sighed, then said, “He’s such a pacifist. He didn't want us kids to get into the life no matter what form—but we don’t always get what we want.”

Sam sounded like almost the opposite of their father, which made sense in a weird way. They were both stubborn as hell, but John had chased violence while Sam had largely avoided it. It seemed that Dean had been Sam’s mild foil in the same way that Bobby had been John’s. Dean had offered a taste of the hunter life, while for him Bobby had offered a fleeting escape from it.

Dean wondered where Bobby had come down on the subject of Tom hunting—if he’d even had the opportunity to face the question. Kaylee had said that Bobby had died, but he hadn’t found out
when. For all he knew Bobby could’ve died back in 2009 and they didn’t know much of anything about him. What if he’d died of a heart attack or something that couldn’t be avoided? But Kaylee had said he went out fighting, so maybe there was hope that he could prevent it when he got back. One more thing to add to the growing list.

“How did Bobby die?” Dean was torn between uncomfortably looking away from Tom and watching him like a hawk. His eyes flicked at the witch. Tom let out a slow, pained breath….

Bobby must’ve meant something to them after all.

After a slight hesitation, Tom asked, “Gory details or just who did it?”

“It was a fight, right?”

“Yeah.” Tom dragged out the word weakly. He wasn’t exactly resisting the discussion, but it was obviously a wound that hadn't fully healed.

Maybe Dean could spare Tom the pain and catch the play-by-play from someone else? Not Kaylee, she’d probably be in a similar boat to Tom. They’d mentioned him eventually meeting the other him or Sam—Cas would almost certainly be easier to get a clinical answer from. The angel would’ve been an ally for many years, but he wasn't family to Bobby, like the rest of them. He'd save the details for later… but in terms of the basics, he was dying to know which side had earned even more of his hatred.


“Humans.”

6/10/2012

“You aren't going to have a burger?”

Dean pointed to the chalkboard sign near the diner's entrance as he explained his choice. "The sign said they have good chili dogs, so I figure I'll try what they're pushing."

Cas looked around and furrowed his brow. "Did you hear something?"

"No." Dean scowled briefly as he compulsively ran his fingers through his hair to puff it up a bit on the sides. "What?"

"I'm not sure... never mind." Cas returned his attention to the conversation. "I just thought that you don't like hot dogs."

"It's not that I don't like hot dogs. I just prefer burgers."

Cas was getting a better grasp of aesthetic pleasures and preferences, but he hadn't yet figured out the importance of variety. It had been like pulling teeth trying to get him to even change his tie occasionally—and it's not like it was a drastic change; all three of Cas's ties were blue. But the lightest shade had been deemed the favorite and why should he settle for less?

"Could you have a chili burger?"

"Cas, first of all you don't have to try to solve all my problems. Secondly, a chili dog is far from a problem—until maybe an hour or two later. Third, chili dogs are a traditional food, but I've never heard of a chili burger before. Listen, maybe you should try a bite, otherwise you aren't fully
appreciating the cultural phenomenon."

"It seemed... intense."

Right on cue, the waitress dropped off their meals.

"Have you ever even tried anything spicy?" Dean asked Cas as he picked a few pieces of chopped onion off the top of his chili dog in order to reach a preferred ratio.

Cas cautiously eyed the sloppy pile of meat and starch from the other side of the booth. "No. The concept isn’t appealing. We experience enough pain without seeking it out in our free time. It’s only going to be made worse—"

The sound of a glass breaking on the floor drew their attention. At first they both gave it little more thought than any of the other times that a server had accidentally dropped something, then they noticed why she had dropped it. The waitress stood completely still, staring up at a small wall-mounted television. Three other patrons had stopped eating and were watching the screen. The waitress scrambled to pull her cell phone from her pocket, then ran into the back.

The television showed breaking news: live shots from a helicopter, circling a fire in some city. At first it was hard to tell the scale of the fire, but as the camera zoomed out it was clear that at least three city blocks were consumed.

Dean climbed out of the booth and walked closer to the television. The news anchor was mostly stating disbelief at the footage, but the ticker at the bottom of the screen was more helpful. An explosion had occurred moments ago in downtown Indianapolis. Aside from several buildings that appeared to have been leveled in the blast, most of the area had simply ignited in a massive fireball. First responders were on route, but the sheer scale of the crisis was probably beyond their ability to contain anytime soon.

"Dean."

He turned back to look at Cas and saw what the angel had wanted to bring to his attention. Out the window next their booth, on the horizon, a small plume of smoke was rising. Dean glanced between the news report and the window. The diner was about 15 miles west of the fire.

"Cas, is there anything you can do?"

As much as Dean wanted to do something to help, he was just one guy against an inferno. Even with all his training and skills, he’d still be just a man running into smoke and flame without equipment. Cas didn’t need to breathe and could teleport victims to safety, but he would invariably put Dean’s wellbeing first and would just be stuck aiding Dean if he insisted on going too. Dean would have to sit out this round of action.

"I'll try."

Before Cas could teleport away, Dean grabbed his arm.

"Don't end up on TV."

"I'm looking for some witnesses to a huge explosion in Indianapolis." Dean glanced around the diner’s parking lot to make sure that nobody was eavesdropping on his phone call to Sam. Luckily, everyone seemed to be riveted to the television inside. The view of the burning city from the parking lot was unobstructed, but nowhere near as detailed as the live news coverage.
“Something special about it?” Sam asked.

“This thing is big, like—” Dean looked at the television through one of the diner’s windows. “It just jumped a river. I’m thinking maybe one of the seals? You might have one of Lilith's meatsuits or something headed your way.”

“How long ago did it happen?”

“About ten minutes.”

Dean could hear Sam sigh on the other end on the line. Him not living up to Hell’s standards of timeliness had been a common point of frustration for his little brother. The combination of the time conversion and Hell involving so many moving parts made punctuality a big deal to the bureaucrats downstairs, among whom Sam was definitely counted.

“I’m going to need some time to work on this,” Sam told him unenthusiastically. “With that big a window, anyone who died in the explosion itself would already be going through the system, past where the queue fades away. There are probably at least 200,000 souls down in that part of the pool, so it’ll take awhile on our end—and that's assuming they haven't trickled into Lilith’s territory. But I'll try to see if I can find you any accounts of what happened.”

“Let me know if we can help.” Dean didn’t understand the system, but even simply providing information was better than watching helplessly.

“I'll call you back.”

He sat down on the hood of the Impala to watch the smoke plume from his vantage point in the diner parking lot. The world had been getting scary lately and there was so little he could do about it. It seemed like every day there was some new horrible thing on the news. There was no pattern or reason beyond the guess that maybe Lilith was involved. But they couldn’t all be seals—they would have hit sixty-five by now if that was the case, wouldn't they? It sure as hell felt like it.

Sam had his demons hunting hers and he tried to keep it precise and quiet, yet it didn’t always go down that way. The hanged man staging and sigil carvings had started turning up in the news as early as spring 2010. The media had called it a new craze in gangland style killings, which not-so-ironically is exactly what it became... for awhile. Civilian gangs caught wind of the style, but didn’t understand the significance. So eventually when a group of Bloods left fifteen Crips strung up and carved in Woodlawn it caught a lot of attention. Most notable among its audience was Lilith, who responded to the perceived insult by killing a hundred Bloods. Within a week, rock salt was sold out in every major store in Los Angeles, Chicago, Oakland, and New York City. It was a new wave of—well, hunter wasn’t exactly the right terms. Supernaturally aware, maybe?

Dean told himself it was better this way, even if it wasn't perfect. Let the big cities start to open their minds a little more. With everything slowly going sideways they'd need whatever help they could get. If only the vanguards weren't a handful of aging hunters and career criminals. One of Dean's hunter buddies from the Los Angeles area had said that the local cops mistook a devil's trap for Santería. It would have been funny if it wasn't so depressing.

He leaned back against the windshield, then pulled out a joint. After taking one puff while watching the city burn in the distance, he eyed the cigarette. Raising it up to the horizon, the plume of smoke in the distance looked like it was coming off the joint. The realization that he was becoming jaded washed over him, then he took another hit. When his cell started ring, he put out the blunt on his belt buckle, then flicked it down the hill toward Indianapolis.
Sam didn't bother with any lead-in. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't Lilith."

"How do you figure that?"

"We found the human that did it." Sam didn't sound particularly surprised, though he probably had acquired his own jadedness from Hell—almost certainly about the moral character of humans.

"It was a human?" Dean asked, blindsided by the news.

"Looks that way. He's not what I'd call sane."

"No kidding. You haven't seen the damage. It's something else. I'm almost glad it's just some crazy person."

"Yeah, well, it might not be that simple. When you mentioned that you thought Lilith might be in on it I started a team going through our records. In the last month we've had about 126,000 souls of confirmed killers. When you take off all the war vets and manslaughter, we're looking at closer to 8,000. We've been going through that pool and we found...." Dean could hear Sam flipping through some papers and murmuring as he did some quick calculations. "There are 1,687 with a questionable mental state."

"You just threw out like 6,500 murderers because they didn't qualify as having a 'questionable mental state'? Maybe you guys need to redo your definition of insanity."

"Most of our hunters fall into that 6,500 category."

"All the more reason to expand your definition of insanity," Dean commented, making Sam chuckle. The sound of his brother laughing made him smile a little in spite of everything. "So give it to me straight: what's the bad news?"

"Thirty-two of those, including the guy that did this, used the same red-flagged online forum. That's a pretty big coincidence for one month."

"Red-flagged?"

"We monitor thousands of websites for various reasons: security, recruiting, etcetera," Sam explained. "This forum was for eschatological—end of the world—fanatics and survivalists. Lots of talk about the coming apocalypse."

Dean furrowed his brow and glanced around the still-empty parking lot. "You think they know about the way things are going?"

"I can't tell if they actually know or that they just think they know," Sam replied. "It's hard to get a straight answer out of those kind of people, especially when they find out there really is a Hell and they made the cut."

"Any themes?" Dean rubbed his neck.

He wasn't even sure if this was his game. They were human after all—and not even witches or anything as far as he could tell. These guys were more a job for the police—granted, the police couldn't do a headcount on the souls of recently deceased murders in order to spot trends. Hell had the perk of inventorying all transgressions that burdened each soul whether the human's acts had been discovered or not. Human intel was limited to things like physical evidence, which was only ever helpful to the extent that it was found and compiled.
"They like to attack the weak and the institutions. Watch the world burn—so to speak."

"That explains why they bombed a good chunk of downtown Indianapolis."

"Two things: it wasn't 'they,'" Sam corrected. "This guy was working solo as far as we can tell. There doesn't seem to be any chain of command, just lots of goading. Also, it wasn't a bomb. It was a natural gas pipeline explosion. The guy worked for the utility company."

"Are you fucking serious? So, some guy just lets loose a couple valves and a hundred people go up in flames?"

"More than that. We've already got 310 fatalities and that's just Hell's tally."

"And the fucking thing's still going." Dean leaned his head back against the windshield and looked at the clear blue sky turning hazy with smoke. "How're the civies gonna handle this?"

"I'll see if we can tip off some of our assets in strategic places," Sam volunteered. "I'm not sure how much they can get done without giving up their source. They'd probably get laughed out of whatever power they have if they said the Devil told them."

"Yeah. I'll try to spread the word to the hunting community, but we'll be facing a similar problem if anyone asks for sources."

"I doubt hunters are going to just laugh off having Hell as a resource."

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11/16/2012

"Dean? Is that you?"

Dean and Cas both turned around to see that the man they'd just passed on the sidewalk had stopped. The guy was in his forties with a greying beard that clashed with his still mostly dark brown hair. He wore a denim jacket over a plaid green shirt, and cowboy boots. When he saw Dean's face he held out his arms in a surprised greeting that bordered on an invitation for a hug.

"Kent?" Dean laughed and excitedly accepted the hug. "Holy crap, man. How long has it been?"

"Seven—maybe eight years."

"I'm glad to see you still up and kicking." Dean shoved Kent's shoulder playfully, then turned his body more to bring Cas into the conversation. "This is Cas, my partner."

Cas smiled with a warmth that the angel sometimes forgot to adopt when meeting new people. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise. You two wanna come over to my place for a quick beer? I'm just down the street."

"Of course," Dean replied. "You still owe me like a hundred beers."

"But who's counting?" Kent added as he started walking them to his house.

Kent's two-bedroom bungalow was exactly what Dean had expected. The living room walls were covered in posters for John Wayne movies and the furniture was all faded leather and knotted wood. The kitchen looked almost untouched except for the '70s-era fridge that was partially held together with duct tape. Kent grabbed three beers from the fridge, handed them to Dean, then turned on a second-hand CD player before taking a seat on the couch.
“I don’t keep your big hair rock,” Kent teased. “You’ll have to settle for the Man in Black.”

“Johnny Cash is fine by me. My dad used to listen to him.” Dean opened his beer and took a sip, but Kent hesitated before taking his first sip.

He sighed while shaking his head. "I'm sorry about your pop. He was a great." Kent raised his beer in a half toast, then drank.

"Thanks, man.” Dean wasn’t sure whether Kent had ever actually met John, but early in their friendship Kent had loved hearing stories about the then-living legend. “He did a lot of good while he could, but you know how it goes in this line of work.”

"Yeah...” Kent hesitated for a moment, then quietly said, “I heard about your brother.”

"What'd you hear?" Dean asked as his sipped his beer.

There were several rumors about Sam floating around, each iteration traveling within its own clique of hunters. Half wrote Sam off as dead and half portrayed him as some sort of turncoat. Kent’s sympathetic tone seemed to lean slightly toward the former.

"Some big bad... took him.” The corner of Kent's mouth turned downward as he decided to drop the sore subject.

'Took' probably alluded to one of the possession rumors, which meant that someone upstream had reason to believe Sam hadn't died uneventfully or retired. Knowing the areas Kent liked to hunt in, it was probably the rumor that had cropped up in the Virginia region. Some garbled retelling of the busted Devil's Gate mixed with that old North Carolinian antichrist rumor.

The 'big bad' rumors always proved to be a dilemma for Dean. He wanted to defend his brother, to try to explain that the situation wasn't as harsh as it seemed, but the truth of the matter sounded so insane that it was dangerous. He never wanted to feed the perception that Sam was something sinister, so he tried to say as little as possible on the subject. For the most part, no one dared ask him about Sam for fear of bringing up painful memories.

As much as Dean wanted to mitigate the number of people trying to kill Sam, at least it wasn't like he was easy to find or kill. Sam was warded in every way imaginable. At that point, he almost never left the camp while topside without at least one knight as a bodyguard. And even if someone wanted to bring the fight to him, the second a living human crossed a gate into Hell they’d be on his radar—not to mention his telekinesis and the First Light power. Against some run-of-the-mill hunters, Sam would be fine.

It was everyone in Sam's orbit that Dean was more worried about. But none of the rumors mentioned him having kids or that Sam might still interact with Dean and Bobby. The intel that the hunters had gleaned through torturing demons before exorcism had so far only betrayed Sam's presence and prominence in Hell. None of the hunters had yet thought to investigate his personal life—why would the Devil have one?

Cas mercifully broke the silence while changing the subject. “Kent, how long have you known Dean?"

"I guess it must be about 13 years."

"Since '99—was it Johnson City? That was a hell of a weekend." Dean smiled as he started the tale. "I thought it was an acheri demon for sure, so I was setting up this trap—"
"Wait. You were making a trap in that house? I could never figure out why you had that paint all over your pants." Kent began laughing so hard that his eyes watered slightly.

"Well, yeah," Dean confirmed. "I was putting down the traps on the first floor and this guy somehow managed to get upstairs without me noticing."

"It wasn't that hard—fuck, I didn't even know you were there."

"Well, I'm like halfway through the trap—acheri need extra runes," Dean added for Cas' benefit. "When I hear this noise above me. I'm thinking it's the acheri coming straight down on me, so I decide to spray a little salt in the general direction."

"I'm upstairs looking around and I step on a weak floorboard," Kent continued. "It buckles a bit, because it's got this giant wardrobe on in, so I try to dive out of the way. But some genius unloads a pair of shells into the floor right under me."

"I'm telling you, it would've come down either way." Dean sipped his beer. "They were just salt shells."

"Anyway, half the room and I fall through the floor. After the dust clears, I look up to see this guy." He pointed at Dean. "His legs are covered in blue paint, his top half covered in a Persian rug—he can't see shit, but he's already reloading."

"The ass got ripped out of your pants." Dean grinned, serving the embarrassment back to Kent.

"Yeah, I'm lucky that's the only thing that got ripped out of my pants," Kent muttered. "So we're sittin' there gawking at each other and the monster shows up."

"It wasn't even an acheri. It was a specter. Neither of us were packing silver, so we both just ran for it." Dean was gesturing emphatically to help convey the action. "Now, you know me, I'd never leave Baby except in an emergency, but I'm covered in wet paint. So I jump in the back of Kent's pick-up truck as he's hauling ass out of there."

"And that's how this asshole owed me a paint job before I even knew his name."

"I made good," Dean said in his defense as he finished his beer.

"You shorted the detailer $500!"

"Him being lousy at pool isn't my fault." Dean shrugged a little to cover his pride, then looked around the room. "You have a bathroom around here I could use?"

"Yeah, down the hall on the right."

Dean walked down the hallway, admiring the collection of photographs on the walls. Many of the photos were of Kent with other hunters. A few even had him holding relics from hunts. Thank god Kent wasn't the type to try to snap a pic next to a beheaded vamp corpse or the like. The guy was tacky, but not that tacky.

The first door on the right wasn't the bathroom; it was a standard hunter's workshop. A small workbench held an ammunition press and other tools of the trade. One of the walls was covered with newspaper clippings, another telltale sign of a hunter. There was a large weapons safe stood in the corner. Next to the safe was a pile of random clothing and equipment.

Dean took in the room at a glance and almost kept walking, until he saw the vest. Doing a double
take, he looked back into the workshop. On top of the pile of clothes and equipment was a bulletproof vest. Shootouts were rare for a hunter, but not completely unheard of. Yet that hadn’t been the thing that drew Dean’s attention. The vest had been painted white with a stylized red cross on its chest. He’d seen that somewhere before and the vague recollection gave him chills.

Taking a slower look around the workshop, he noticed details he’d missed during his quick glance. The bullet and shell-packing station didn’t have salt or silver at it. The newspaper clippings weren’t about missing persons or strange happenings. They were about shootings, bombings, a few assassinations... and on one side of the board was a calendar of upcoming events.

Dean’s heart started pounding. He wasn’t sure what that all meant, but it wasn’t good. He clicked off the safety on his pistol, then lowered the gun slightly behind him.

"Don't move," Dean said as he reentered the room and drew the pistol on Kent.

"Dean, what's going on?" Cas asked in alarm, but Kent didn’t look particularly surprised.

The hunter slowly put down his beer bottle and raised his hands.

"He's got a fucking arsenal in the other room," Dean replied.

Cas was confused by why that was different than any other hunter, but the tension on Dean’s face made it clear that something was very wrong.

"Dean, buddy. I can explain," Kent told him. “I was going to tell you—it's actually a good thing."

"I find that pretty fucking hard to believe."

"Yeah, you probably will. Most people do." Kent smiled briefly at some memory. "Angels are real."

Cas and Dean exchanged a quick glance, but Dean's pistol remained fixed on Kent. To his credit, Kent didn't try to take advantage of Dean's temporary distraction.

"I know it sounds crazy, but an angel spoke to me," Kent continued. “They need our help. There's a war coming and if we win, then Earth—it'll be paradise. Think about it: no more monsters or ghosts. We don't need to be turning over rocks trying to find the filth for the rest of our lives."

Dean had heard of crazy people hearing voices, but Kent had always been an incredibly stable guy. All the stress of the job had rolled off of Kent in a way that Dean had emulated when he was younger. It was hard to imagine that one day Kent would just snap... and to snap so accurately was a coincidence that just didn’t happen. There were a lot more doomsday theories floating around in the mainstream than even just a few months earlier, but hunters generally did their homework. Kent wouldn’t be easily convinced without evidence.

Cas gave Dean a meaningful look, indicating that he was probably reaching a similar conclusion. If Kent really had been visited by an angel, then he and Cas would need to tread softly. The two of them were members of Heaven’s most wanted and they could be sitting in the living room of an agent of Heaven. Disclosing that Cas was an angel might help their credibility with Kent, but if they couldn’t talk him down, how would the hunter fail to report a run-in with a fallen angel?

As much as being there may have put them in danger, Kent had somehow gotten himself into some kind of arrangement that Dean needed to understand. There might be a new threat out there and it seemed to have pulled in his friend. He could probably leave with Cas, and port away to safety.
without Kent accidentally or intentionally giving up their location, but he couldn’t turn his back on the situation.

He thought back to the seemingly endless news reports of the violence and destruction that had cropped up in the last year. They’d written it off as exclusively Lilith... until they’d discovered the end-of-days mob. But the wall of newspaper clippings weren’t just the collection of an investigator or even an admirer. There had been calendars. Something was going to happen, maybe something already had. He felt a little faint.

"What did they ask you to do?" Dean asked.

"There’s all the normal hunting—monsters, demons, witches," Kent evaded. “But there are some other kinds of threats—"

"Threats? You mean humans?"

"Yes.” To Dean’s limited relief, Kent’s voice seemed to at least betray some discomfort with the turn in the conversation. “Some humans are trying to stop us."

"So you blow up a fucking train station?!” Dean snapped at him.

That was one of the prominent clippings, ominously pinned right next to a printout of the track assignments for the week leading up to the attack.

“I didn’t.” Kent flustered a little, but recovered. “We’re doing what needs to be done. The job is hard sometimes—you know that better than anyone! It sucks and we suffer—we lose people and we have to make the hard choices, but we do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been told, but this isn’t right.” Dean licked his lips and his arms lowered a few millimeters from sheer disappointment. It was painful to see a friend so turned around by the entire situation.

“This is just the next logical step. We’re still fighting evil, but now we’ve got support and real guidance. We don’t have to be running around in the dark anymore. We can win this thing.”

“It’s not about fighting evil,” Dean countered. “It’s about protecting people.”

“This is protecting them. There’s a big picture here!” Kent threw his hands up in exasperation. “You’ve been dealing with the little picture for so long—we all have been. But you can’t focus on that. Of course it’s gonna be messy so close to the ground. It always is—”

"But you’re talking about killing people! This isn’t ‘messy.’ It’s dead innocent people!” Dean yelled in desperation to get through to him.

Kent shook his head, then said, "How do you know they're innocent?"

Dean's heart sank. How was he supposed to argue with that?

"You're not working alone." Cas’s voice was quieted by the slow, alarming realization.

Dean’s eyes widened and he raised his gun a little more as he took on a more professional posture. "Kent, who else is doing this?" he pleaded, but Kent didn’t answer. “Please, man. I'm begging you to talk to me."

"I'm talking, but you've got to listen to me. I know this is a lot to process at first, but you don't
understand what an opportunity this is—just hear them out, please." Kent closed his eyes and began lowering his head.

Cas realized a second too late what he was doing and reached out to stop him from beginning his prayer.

Dean fired twice.

He sat down on the leather recliner and rested his elbows on his knees. After placing his pistol on the coffee table, Dean buried his face in his hands. Cas stood up from the couch and slowly walked over to Dean, giving Kent's body a wide berth. He placed a hand on Dean's shoulder.

"He didn't successfully begin the prayer, but we should still go."

Dean looked through his fingers at Kent, then up at Cas.

"Cas, what's going on?"
A Deal With The Devil

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping me with this.

"Humans killed Bobby?"

Dean was stunned. It was incredibly unusual for hunters to be killed by humans—though this place was anything but usual. There was a war going on and maybe that meant more violence in the world generally, but he still couldn’t quite process the great hunter being killed by anything less than a vicious monster.

"Templars, to be specific," Tom said in an attempt to bring clarity, but he only succeeded in confusing Dean more.

"The old guys from the third Indiana Jones movie?"

Tom pursed his lips at Dean’s question, caught between amusement and loathing. "I wish. Templars are…." He scowled reflexively at the thought of them.

"They're human servants of Heaven," Dylaniel said as he opened the door to the room. He was back in his light grey armored clothing and armed with his pistols and sword. He gestured for Tom and Dean to follow him out of the room, which Dean did. Tom closed the door briefly in order to slip on some new clothes, then joined them. As they walked Dylaniel continued his explanation. "Templars frequently have extensive combat training. Heaven realized early that if war was going to occur, they'd need to take whatever resources they could from us. They had a massive recruiting effort within the hunter community starting in 2012."

"Hunters?" Dean furrowed his brow. "What could hunters do that angels couldn't?"

They exited the communal housing building and turned onto a narrow street. It was early morning, but the streets were packed with more people than he’d been expecting. The scale of the motel-turned-temporary-housing had given him a better appreciation for how large the base might’ve been, yet his revised guess didn’t seem to do the population justice. This place wasn’t just a converted town; it was a town teeming with activity.

Several of the small memorials that he’d noticing along the sidewalks were being tended to by people in varying fashions. At one, a woman lit candles while apparently praying. Another one had a man spilling his own blood into a bronze dish that was shaped like a bird. The use of blood suddenly made Dean question whether they were memorials for the dead or if there was magic at work. He made a mental note to ask about that later, then turned his attention back to Dylaniel.

"When Sam made his deal with Crowley, he saved two hunters from the grasps of Heaven. That, combined with Bobby's early efforts to reestablish his hunter network, were perceived as a small but noteworthy amassing of allies in the form of hunters. Heaven attempted to divide the hunting community by reaching out to some of the members that already hated Sam."

"Have you heard of Clare Matheson?" Tom asked Dean, who shook his head. "She was a psychic
"Her people were the hunters gunning for Sam?" Dean guessed.

"Gunning unsuccessfully," Dylaniel corrected. "With Sam having killed a dozen of her group and already believing that he was the antichrist, it was easy to convince them to become warriors of Heaven. Matheson started recruiting along the Eastern United States, but within a year Templar groups were in every state along with most European, Central Asian, and South American countries. Heaven’s ability to recruit was significantly impacted by the dominance of an Abrahamic religion in the area."

“So what, India wasn’t won over by Heaven because the angels weren’t pitching Elephant gods?” Dylaniel's lips thinned at Dean's question. "Roughly 15% of the population of India was Muslim or Christian."

“15% isn’t bad,” Dean commented.

“That’s roughly equal to half the population of the United States,” Dylaniel corrected.

Dean's eyebrows rose as he was reminded just how large the population of India was.

“It took everyone a while to understand what was happening,” Tom added. “There’s been such a long history of sectarian violence in some parts of the world that it was hard to tell what was old or new.”

“The violence was easier to identify as the work of Templars in the U.S. They worked to destabilize society, weaken potential threats like the presence of other faiths and magic users. The assorted terrorist attacks and hate crimes pushed most populations to their extremes. Your liberal areas turned more liberal and the conservative areas turned more conservative. With the continent tearing itself apart it became easier and easier for all the different factions to recruit.”

Dean had wondered how an army meant to fight angels would’ve even formed, but if it was initially meant for fighting Templars that made more sense. The idea that other hunters might be killing and causing wanton destruction offended him on a personal level. There were exceptions, yeah, but historically hunters were a respectable community and these angel-whipped hunters-turned-killers were an insult to that.

“So how did you guys manage to recruit hunters without everyone getting spooked off by the Sam and Hell association?” Dean asked.

He had been wondering how he might be able to deal with that whole mess when he got back. Hopefully, he’d be able to figure out a way to prevent Sam from agreeing to work for Hell, but that didn’t do anything about his little brother’s innate affinity with Hell. Keeping that dynamic hidden away was a major priority.

“They didn’t try to avoid the topic of Sam and Hell,” Dylaniel replied. “He was the one who orchestrated the whole thing.”

1/21/2014

Dean and Cas stood in the small alleyway outside the back door of the W hotel. It was shortly after one in the morning and fog had blanketed San Francisco, obscuring visibility beyond a dozen feet. Dean exhaled into his hands for warmth while they waited.
“How is it that we can live in Canada for four years and sunny California is a million times colder?” Dean complained to Cas.

The sound of footsteps caught his attention and he turned to look towards the darker end of the alley. “The coldest winter I ever experienced was a summer in San Francisco.’ Mark Twain.”

Dean smirked a little at Sam’s offered quote, but it didn’t make him any warmer.

Sam emerged from the fog with a small smile on his face. He was followed by a young Asian woman, a large man with a Mediterranean complexion, and Middle Eastern woman in a pumpkin-colored hijab. The four of them wore pant suits of varying greys and black. Sam, in his usual style, didn’t bother with a tie or with buttoning his blazer. Shola carried a brushed stainless steel briefcase that Dean noted was chained to her wrist. The other two were each armed with at least two pistols and an angel blade, by Dean’s quick assessment.

“You're getting a flare for the dramatic,” Dean critiqued.

“You'd be surprised how often a little style can make the difference in a deal,” Sam replied. “And look who's talking—having this meeting in a boutique hotel.”

“Would anyone ever look for us here?”

Dean had selected the hotel, yet the bill had somehow managed to end up on Hell’s tab—not that it was a big deal. Hell had a 10% interest in San Francisco’s entire financial district.

“I’m not complaining. It’s nice that we get to have the meet-up somewhere that has more than a one-star review.” Sam rubbed his neck anxiously. “Is everyone else here? I know we’re running behind. We had trouble getting the parchment without killing—you know what, nevermind.”

“They're all inside. It's only a few minutes after. They can forgive it. Maybe don’t mention whatever you had to kill for the parchment,” Dean suggested, making Sam huffed a weak laugh. There was a moment of hesitation, then Dean put his hand on Sam's shoulder. "You sure about going public like this?"

"We’ll have to step out of the shadows eventually. I might as well do it on my own terms and get some benefit from it."

"It's going to be weird seeing you work, isn't it?"

“Yeah. I’ll try not to be too much of an ass, but honestly I think they'd be more scared if I was too nice.” Sam sighed, then added, “Don’t try too hard to defend me and don’t get pissed if I’m a dick to you.”

This was going to be the first time that Sam and Dean were going to be seen together publicly since Sam had become King of Hell. There was something to be said for keeping their public relationship strictly professional. Neither of them wanted Sam’s bad reputation to rub off on Dean, Bobby, or Cas… yet Dean wasn’t as comfortable with giving Sam the cold shoulder.

“Just don't break any of my bones and I'll manage,” Dean assured him.

Sam took a moment to gather his composure. After a few deliberate breaths, he straightened to his full height and adopted a smoother, more confident demeanor. “Well, let's go make history.” He held out his hand inviting Dean and Cas to enter the building first.
Dean led the party through the kitchen's back door, down a service hallway, and up two flights of stairs. They took a few turns before arriving at a conference room. Already seated at the large mahogany table were Bobby, twelve other hunters, and four fallen angels. Cas entered the room first, but Dean stayed back just before the door for a second to whisper a hello to Shola. The two guards brought up the rear.

Sam stopped just inside the doorway and looked over the room. His eyes lingered on the ceiling and the massive area rug covering the floor. He sacrificed precaution for the diplomatic benefit of appearing to be trusting. If there were any hidden devil's traps in the room he could bust them in a split second should things turn sour.

Sam took the free seat at the head of the table. He was the instigator of the meeting, after all. To his relief, Tora and Joseba didn't make a spectacle of any concerns they might have had about Sam taking the seat that was most likely to be trapped. Shola took the seat to his right. Dean sat further down the table, between Tamara and Cas.

"Who're they?" Carl, a hunter out of the Salt Lake City area, asked, nodding at the two guards who were standing at attention behind Sam.

"Extra protection," Sam replied coolly. "They don't speak English, so they're just flies on the wall if everything goes well."

He didn't bother distinguishing them as honored guests as far as demons were concerned. The hunters knew they'd be meeting with the King of Hell, but to have two Knights of Hell in the room might prove too much for their already-strained sensibilities. Thankfully, the fallen angels appeared to be keeping the new discovery close to the chest.

"You're just bringing more demons in here?" complained Marcus, a hunter from Wichita who represented a network of over two dozen hunters with loose ties to Bobby's network.

Sam's lips thinned subtly at his tone. "I brought an assistant and two guards, who have been instructed to protect everyone in this room. If you want to make a big deal out of their species, then be prepared for that to impact your bargaining position. We're here to cooperate in an attempt to resolve a threat to Earth, not Hell." He let his point hang in the air for a beat before continuing. "So, I suggest you don't start turning away help at your gates."

"Help from Hell. Have things seriously gotten that bad?" Carl muttered.

"You showed up, didn't you?" countered Bobby.

"So what—we're desperate and Hell is ready to just roll in and barter for our souls? They're going to screw us. We can't trust demons—" Marcus argued.

"If I may," Shola interrupted forcefully, but with a smile. "We would like to present our proposal. Your concerns will be addressed to the best of our ability and if you are unsatisfied, then we will leave without confrontation."

"And what if there is a confrontation?" Marcus asked in something not quite rising to the level of a snarl.

"Then you'll have been the one to start it, but you won't be the one to end it," Dean said, trying to restore order to the proceedings. "This is a peaceful meeting. If anyone wants to fight, take it outside. In here we've got work to do."

The silence from the group indicated everyone's tacit agreement. Dean shot his brother an almost
imperceptible pleading look in the hopes that Sam wouldn't make things too difficult. Sam was trying to walk a fine line between being ominously generous and alienating. Dean just hoped he wouldn't have to try to break up any brawls. With the knights, Sam, and the angels there, they could probably level the building in one good spat.

"I can't believe we're actually thinking about making a deal with the Devil." Marcus sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

Sam had given up trying to fight the nickname years ago and just embraced the power it incidentally gave him. "Yeah well, the Devil also went to your sister's wedding, so take tonight with a grain of salt."

Dean and Rufus both smirked a bit at Sam's comment.

"You've called us here to make an offer—that's what your people are best at, isn't it?" said Anael, one of Cas's favorite sisters. Her tone was cautious, yet it carried less disgust than Sam had expected from an angel as high ranking as the former commander of Earth's entire garrison. She had only agreed to come because Cas had asked her to, but upon seeing four other siblings for the first time in decades she had started to become more comfortable. "So, tell us what we have to lose without you and gain with you."

"We've all seen the carnage on the news or firsthand. There are at least three distinct groups that are causing it." Sam began his pitch by bringing everyone onto the same page and outlining their common enemies. "The easiest group is your common end-of-days fanatics. The problem is that there are a lot of them, and there are a lot of them because they're not exactly wrong. By some definitions we're looking down the barrel at the Apocalypse, but we haven't passed the point of no return yet. The other two groups are trying to get us there.

"Heaven has been recruiting hunters and other combat-trained humans to apply pressure. They've been responsible for many of the recent emergencies—Templars mostly handling the traditional terrorist attacks and angels have started bringing down a lot of 'acts of God.'"

"The last group is a minority faction of demons, lead by several archdemons, the most prominent of which is named Lilith. They have been working to unleash Lucifer upon the Earth." All of the hunters aside from Bobby and Dean looked alarmed by the news, but none of the fallen angels were remotely surprised. Sam continued before they got bogged down in the details with Lucifer. He knew where Shola's loyalties lay but the two knights both supposedly had a personal history with the archangel. "Hell has been actively fighting Lilith's forces for five years. We've reduced their numbers considerably, but they've gone to ground on Earth and it's been difficult to locate them—"

"You're talking about this like we're in a war, but we're just a few hunters talking about…. I mean, how big of a problem are we facing, really?" asked Tara, an old friend of John's.

"You may be thinking small scale, but the problem is systemic. Mortality rates have increased significantly across the board, and it's not us." Sam didn't look at Dean while categorically including himself with hellspawn. "They're treating this like a war because they want a war. They want Heaven and Hell to have a grand battle that will eliminate one side and it'll destroy Earth in the process. Until they get their war or there's a change of power, Heaven is going to harass Earth to try eliciting a response. They need to be resisted, and Earth needs to be the one in charge of that resistance."

"It's true. I've seen it," added Rachel, a fallen angel of the virtues choir. "They will salt the soil to
That sucks, but what—we're supposed to stick our necks out fighting angels, until we're both so wrecked that Hell could just roll in and fuck us?" Marcus huffed.

"Hell is prepared to provide over 100,000 demons to serve under human command," Sam said in a calm tone that didn't begin to capture the magnitude of the offer.

The room was silent as his words sunk in. Almost no one on Earth had any concept of how many demons existed. Even Dean, one of only a few humans to survive seeing Hell had been confined to dungeons the entire time. There was no sense of scale compared to Hell, but Azazel's army had only been in the hundreds and it had terrified every hunter in the continental United States.

"15,000 in each of North America, South America, Europe, and Africa, 40,000 in Asia, and 3,000 in Australia," Sam elaborated. "And we're prepared to increase those numbers if we deem it wise."

"15,000 demons in North America." Rufus muttered.

“That’s 15,000 demons on your side. By our estimation, Lilith has pulled at least 50,000 demons onto Earth and she still has reserves. We’re actively working to wipe out what would be her reinforcements and we’re fighting her where we can up here, but you can’t afford to pretend that these numbers aren’t real." Sam leaned forward to help emphasize his next point. "I can’t spare these resources without something from you in return and without my manpower, you’ll find yourselves completely overrun.”

"There are only maybe 300 hunters in the U.S." Tara said in concern. She looked to the other hunters for their input, but the shock was still wearing off for many of them.

"326 as of last week, and we don't know how many are Templars," Shola corrected.

"You think that we’d have Templars going guerrillas on us?" Tamara asked.

"Why not?" Sam replied.

"If Templars are really so devout, would they agree to work with demons in order to trick us? I mean killing is one thing to people like that, but working with demons—I’m just saying how far do we expect them to go?" Marcus said skeptically, but his voice carried slightly less venom.

"Would a hunter really agree to work with demons in order to save us?" Anaél criticized, causing her sisters, Rachel and Marut, to nod in agreement with the higher ranking angel.

"You're asking us to trust demons," said Reggie, a hunter that Sam and Dean knew from a few years back, based out of Milwaukee. His voice was conflicted, but Sam at least appreciated that he seemed to be seriously reflecting on the issue rather than blowing it off.

"Yes, and I'm asking demons to die protecting you." Sam allowed his confident exterior to soften for a moment as he tried to make the hunters at the table understand what Hell was really committing to. "We know how the numbers work out. It's going to be the demons going into the meat grinder on this."

"Riding humans," Carl objected.

"We're sensitive to that issue," Sam conceded. "The first choice will be to grab brain-dead or seconds-from-death bodies. All souls will be released to take their natural course."
“And the second choice?” Marcus asked.

“If we don’t have the days or week necessary to find free bodies… then I think a few ride-alongs are going to be the least of our worries.”

“So, are we basically just gonna be kicking the end of the world down the road?” Reggie asked. “I mean, I’m all for fighting when we can win, but if the choice is death by Heaven now or Hell later…. I just don’t know.”

“Hell doesn’t want Earth, destroyed or otherwise,” Sam assured them. “Hell wants more or less the status quo. In fact, we’re prepared to pull back on routine official activities on Earth until a sustainable situation can be created.”

“You make it sound like Earth’s a hunting reserve,” Carl jabbed.

“Says a hunter,” Anael commented, earning a subtle smile from Shola.

“Many demons feel it is,” Sam confessed, “but that doesn’t change the offer before you.”

“When you say 'routine official activities' what do you mean?” Bobby asked.

“Crossroads will not make contracts with civilians. Empowering of witches will be restricted to non-offensive spellcraft. We’ll cut the power to most cursed objects. And more, all subject to limitations that are consistent with the overall objective,” Sam explained. “We have sixty-seven different policy changes we’re prepared to implement in stages, which could reduce hunter duties by up to 40%. To the extent that you weren’t engaged in the fight against our common enemies, you’d mostly be tackling non-human natives.”

“Non-human natives?” Tamara asked.

“Vampires, werewolves, skinwalkers, etc. Who are we to call them monsters?” Sam smiled subtly as the ambiguous ‘we’ hung in the air.

“You’re seriously offering to neuter Hell?” Rufus asked as he scratched his chin.

“Not neuter, just temporarily redirect our efforts. We can’t give each other aid while stabbing each other in the back.”

“You think we’re going to help Hell?” Marcus’s voice had surprisingly lost most of its hostility, but it was still uncomfortable.

“If it means stopping the Apocalypse, then I’d hope so.” Sam stared at Marcus flatly without blinking for several seconds. His centuries of practice in Hell taking command of situations was showing. In these discussions, Sam could almost certainly outmaneuver every person at the table and he wasn’t trying to hide it. He wanted to show that he wasn’t using tricks or subtle manipulations. No working each person over one at a time. They were laying their cards down on the table and gaining the benefit of trust even if it was begrudgingly gained.

“What exactly do you want from us?”

“Stand with Hell against the Templars, Heaven, and Lilith’s demons under unified leadership,” Sam answered simply and sincerely.

“Allying with Hell against Heaven?” Tara sighed as she tested the idea aloud.
"Heaven is in distress. You should not think of it as pure. It may not be a historic enemy of Earth as Hell has been, but its concern with the wellbeing of humans is questionable at best," Hael commented. "There are angels prepared to stand against Heaven in defense of Earth. We also expect that more will fall, and when they do they'll be looking for leadership."

"Let's say we do it. Who's crazy enough to put their neck out on this?" Rufus asked.

"Heaven is already after me," Dean volunteered.

Sam, Bobby, Cas, and Hael already knew that he was going to pursue command if the alliance was approved. He and Cas were starting to collect a small following of fallen angels. It made sense that once hunters were brought into the mix he would continue in a leadership position. Despite how obvious the choice was to those who knew him, the idea raised a few eyebrows around the table.

"Aren't you a little too close to the angels to be—" Tamara started to object.

"Angels are not the enemy," Anael injected. "Michael, Raphael, Zachariah—Heaven is the enemy."

"Dean Winchester has been the most despised human by Heaven for almost four years. The Host wishes to kill him," Marut said as something akin to reassurance. Dean tried not to roll his eyes at the angel's unorthodox attempt to vouch for him.

"Okay. You don't have a conflict of interest with Heaven, but you're still Sam's brother and rumor is you were in Hell for a few months—" Marcus began.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You think I'm a fan of Hell? You think I like this?" Dean asked, gesturing at Sam and his accompanying demons. He didn't want to insult Sam or even Shola, but he wanted to put it on the record that he wasn't Hell's bitch and create a little distance from Sam. "Anyone want to guess who in this room has killed the most demons?"

Tara took the bait. "You."

"No. Sam, by about a factor of ten. And Cas has killed the most angels hands-down," Dean replied. "Who they are doesn't matter compared to what they want to accomplish. I hate Hell. Personally I would like to melt the whole place down into glass. And I have good fucking reasons to—I was tortured there for 90 years. They tore me apart in ways you can't even begin to imagine. That's where my dad was tortured for 120 years. That's where Sam's been getting his own special sort of torture for..." Dean looked over at Sam. "What is it? You're coming up on 500 years? I hate what that place has done to him.... But no matter how I feel about Hell or Sam, my priority is Earth. If they try to make a move on Earth, I will go back down there myself and kill every last one of them."

Dean trusted Sam despite the showy threat and he knew it. Sam didn’t visibly react to Dean’s impassioned speech, though Shola and every hunter in the room did a double-take. Cas unconsciously leaned closer to Dean, away from Sam.

The King of Hell nodded thoughtfully before responding. "Then it's a good thing we're getting this contract in writing."

Shola opened the metal briefcase that was chained to her wrist, withdrew a stack of parchment, and handed it to Sam. The pages weren’t uniform, but generally measured out to be the standard legal-size.
"Before anyone asks, these aren’t human," Sam said only half-jokingly as he tidied the pile.

He placed one hand on the pile and restated the terms that they had hashed out over the last few hours. As he spoke, text appeared on each piece of parchment. When he was done he took one and passed the pile around the table.

"You can’t alter the terms," Sam began explaining the rules of the spell. "If you agree to this covenant, then mark your copy with a drop of blood. In one hour, any unmarked copies will be destroyed and all marked copies will only be viewable in the willing hands of the person who marked it. This covenant will only be active if it is agreed to by two-thirds of this group."

Sam took a small black penknife out of a jacket pocket. Without a moment’s hesitation he cut the pad of his thumb and pressed it to the bottom of his copy.

"Samuel Lucian Winchester," Sam said before picking his thumb up from the parchment. The bloody thumbprint was absorbed by the page, then reformed as his name. Each copy of the parchment also received his bloody signature.

There was a pause while everyone thought over the implications of agreeing to the covenant. Dean had no real reservations about entering the contract, but he didn't want to be the first one to agree after Sam. There needed to be a broader base of support if possible.

"I'm done hiding," Anael said as she drew her angel blade and plucked her finger. Pressing her finger to the page she smiled with pride. "Anael."

"Robert Steven Singer."

"Rufus Nadim Turner."

"Castiel."

"Dean Winchester."

"Hael."

"Tamara Chikenzie."

"Josephine Danso Barnes."

"Reginald Hull."

"Timothy Marlowe Janklow."

"Tara Larsen."

"Rachel."

"Marut."

"Marcus Bly Barbosa."

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“Sir,” Shola whispered to Sam.

Everyone else had risen from their seats to leave, except for her. She glanced down at her chair, then looked up at Sam intently. Several of the hunters were casually making their way to the exit,
but Carl seemed particularly eager to leave. Sam leaned over and whispered for Tora to tail Carl. When Tora disappeared, a few of the nearby hunters and angels looked at Sam curiously.

“What's going on?” Bobby asked, drawing the attention of everyone left in the conference room.

“Devil’s trap,” Sam replied flatly.

He offered a hand to Shola. Once she took his hand, Sam flexed his free hand and the chair splintered. He helped pull her up into a standing position, then looked around the room. Several of the hunters seemed downright horrified by the casual display of power.

“You know the expression ‘I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed’? This sort of trick is disappointing, but I can forgive people for being cautious around me. If it goes beyond this”—Sam picked up a piece of the chair’s seat with part of a devil’s trap clearly written in chalk on it—“then I'll be mad.”

Before anyone could react, Tora blinked back in and said something urgently in Abyssal. Joseba drew an angel blade and looked around. Shola glanced at Sam in concern, then blinked away.

"Get the humans out! Carl crossed us!” Sam yelled to the angels.

Heal didn't hesitate. She grabbed the three hunters closest to her while teleporting out. Rachel and Marut looked to Cas and Aneal for guidance.

“Go!” Cas yelled to his remaining siblings before he grabbed Dean and Bobby, then teleported away.

Anael, Marut, and Rachel each immediately grabbed groups of hunters and fled to parts unknown. Tora and Joseba jumped directly back to Hell, but Sam popped home first to let Dean, Cas, and Bobby know he was fine.

The next day's news coverage in San Francisco was all about a strange attack at a luxury hotel. The third floor conference area had exploded, though no one was killed or injured in the blast. However, the body of a man identified as Carl Holten was found pinned to the exterior wall of the same hotel. Reports were sketchy, but the rumor was that a red cross was cut into his chest and a pair of wings were painted onto the wall behind him in blood. Tora improvised the design of the warning. After all, she was short on time and didn't know if angels even had sigils.

By that night, every hunter from the meeting who hadn't signed initially was on board with the alliance. Carl's apparent betrayal of the rest of the group to the Host had made the lot fugitives to Heaven. Sam's people had been come off as somewhat trustworthy—or at least not wholly self-interested. The whole thing couldn't have turned out better if Sam had planned it all himself.
As they approached the dining hall, the density of people on the streets began increasing. At first Dean reflexively thought that the people they passed were mostly human until he reminded himself about how many angels and other creatures he'd met. Hell had given some significant number of demons to the fight, but to his knowledge he'd only met Lena, which only emphasized how hard it was to tell what species any given person was.

Body decorations seemed to be popular among the crowd. Many of them had visible tattoos, including an above average number of neck and head tattoos. Some of the tattoos were names and dates, probably signifying a tribute to a deceased loved one. Some had ornate linework across their foreheads, which reminded Dean of the syf that Ruby had shown him, Sam, and Bobby. A few arms bore tattoos of feathered wings peeking out from their sleeves and he smiled at the idea of tatted angels.

Even though most of the clothes looked like they'd been taken from a military surplus store, unique pieces of clothing were mixed in. Leather was a popular choice in varying shades, but most stuck with the classic black or brown. Dylaniel seemed to be the odd man out in his preference for lighter shades like grey and pale blue—even his hand-and-a-half sword's sheath was nearly white.

When they reached the dining hall, Dylaniel broke away for a moment to speak with several people while Tom helped Dean get some food. The options were limited... sort of. There was only one meal plan available for humans, but there were seven other options for different species’ unique dietary needs. Dean eyed the tightly sealed bin in the back of the kitchen labeled 'cardiovascular - cured one week.'

"When ghouls eat stuff, do they eat in the dining hall, like around everyone?" Dean whispered to Tom while trying to pull his gaze away from the stash of possibly-human sweetbreads.

"They generally eat during off hours or stick to their own tables." Tom handed Dean a tray of scrambled eggs, country potatoes, and a bowl of thick, opaque whitish liquid with shredded meat floating in it.

"What's the wallpaper paste?" Dean asked while jiggling the tray to observe the consistency of the liquid.

"Congee—think like rice porridge. It's good. More importantly, it's easy to make for a few thousand people."

Dean shrugged in vague disappointment, but followed Tom into the dining hall to find a place to sit. Salviel was seated at a relatively empty table sipping a cup of coffee. Dean had wondered where she'd gone off to after apparently having been relieved. Tom took a seat next to her and Dean followed his lead.

"Angels drink coffee?" Dean nodded to her half-drunk mug of black coffee.
She tilted her head in a gesture similar to a weak shrug. "Some angels enjoy food, but most who eat are just letting their vessel take over for a while to enjoy themselves. Paloma, my vessel—coffee is a passion of hers."

"She's alive?" He’d wondered how an angel’s bodies ticked when he was stitching up Cas back at the apartment, but the way the angel had talked about his meatsu—vessel, Dean had just assumed the guy was dead or something.

"Yeah, and awake." Salviel put down the chipped ceramic mug and looked at Dean.

He wasn’t sure why, but it made him uncomfortable to know that two people were watching him through her dark brown eyes.

"Many of our angelic recruits have very close relationships with their vessels. The human actually is aware of what's going on and participates in daily life," Tom explained. "Consent is very important to the angels on our side and they've taken to seeking ongoing consent rather than just for the initial possession. It’s only fair. After all the vessels are risking their lives too."

"Paloma has an aversion to violence, but otherwise we share senses. I’m the primary actor and she reserves herself for personal matters."

"What kind of personal matters?" Dean asked.

Salviel looked at him like he was an idiot. "It's personal."

Dean dropped the subject and looked around the dining hall as he started eating. He felt like he was back in any number of high school cafeterias on his first day of school, checking out the cliques. There was a table that he quickly identified as demons after one of them told the punchline of what was probably a vulgar or derogatory joke in Abyssal and the others burst into laughter. The table next to them was undoubtedly human because the Abyssal made them all shudder and some potato pieces were thrown in retaliation. One table had a man and a woman who were both wearing what looked like welding goggles and drinking from opaque black cups through ominously red straws.

Another full table caught his attention. The eight men and women all wore light grey or light blue uniforms. Only one of them had a tray of food that just held the congee and a glass of water. The others weren’t eating, but seemed to be sitting with her in quiet solidarity. On each of their chests was a small ancient-Egyptian-looking eye embroiled in gold thread.

"What's with them?" Dean asked, pointing with his eyes in an attempt to not be rude.

"They're angels," Salviel answered. "The lighter colors mean that they're air patrol. Sometimes you can get your invisibility knocked out depending on the auras in an area. The lighter colors help camouflage them in a pinch."

"No fucking way. Angels really fly?" Dean chuckled. He’d heard that flapping sound when they popped in and out, but he’d never actually seen any wings. Cas and Ruby had talked about stuff sometimes not being visible to the human eye, but he hadn’t imagined anything on the scale of wings.

"Normally we fly faster than humans are able to perceive, but that’s not necessary. When you’re patrolling there’s only so fast you can fly before it’s not worth the effort. You might as well save a little energy, especially if you have backup."

"What's the golden eye?" Dean asked. "Dyl doesn't have one."
"That's the sigil of the Order of Horus. I don't worship," Dylaniel said as he approached the table with a tray of food, then sat down next to Dean. Dean hadn't seen him coming up behind him and felt like he'd been caught gossiping, but Dylaniel didn't seem particularly offended—no surprise there.

"Horus… like the Egyptian bird-headed god?" Dean glanced back at the table of angels. "You're telling me that those angels converted?"

"Horus is the Egyptian god of the sky," Dylaniel corrected. "It's a symbiotic relationship. He gives them additional protection in exchange for their patronage."

"I'm sorry." Dean smiled in surprise at absurdity of their conversation. "It sounds like you're saying Horus is real."

"He is real," Dylaniel replied flatly before eating some of his scrambled eggs.

"He doesn't make it out to North America very often," Tom explained. "Aside from angels, he doesn't have a large following beyond Northern Africa."

Dean and Sam had killed a pair of pagan gods on Christmas Eve two years earlier, but he wasn't sure what being a pagan god actually meant. He'd figured that maybe they were monsters, witches, or something akin to demons that had collected a group of worshipers over the years. The idea that there were angels with their God and Heaven made him even less confident in the existence of other deities, but this was a strange turn. He'd been told there was a God and now he was being told there was another—almost certainly many others.

"How does an angel even convert?" Dean looked to Dylaniel and Salviel. "It's not like you guys doubt the existence of God."

"My father may have made me, but until he returns I don't see why I should put more faith in him than a god that is willing to fight beside me," Salviel answered in a tone that was only slightly resentful.

Her words were strangely comforting. He hadn't ever believed in a higher power and that feeling had been tested when he'd found out that angels were real. Yet, in spite of Castiel’s testimony that there was a God, he just wasn’t entirely convinced. It had come as an unnerving realization that he might be incapable of believing in something more. If he couldn’t take the word of an angel, then what evidence would he need to be convinced?

But as it turned out the word of angels was not absolute truth and the title of 'God' wasn’t necessarily singed out for one entity. Maybe his doubt was justified? Whether he was right or not was yet to be seen, but he wasn’t alone in this confusing mess. If the angels themselves were giving other deities the benefit of their faith, then maybe he was in better company than he’d initially thought.

"I guess I can't argue with that."

Kaylee entered the dining hall without bothering to stop by the kitchen. She wore black leather pants, boots and a knee-length black leather coat that had slits up the sides, which reminded Dean of medieval clothes, though the jacket was unbuttoned along a front seam, allowing her Nine Inch Nails t-shirt to peek through. The shirt somewhat defeated the menacing and/or professional effect her appearance might have otherwise had. When she got closer, Dean noticed red embroidery in the shape of small flowers along the jacket’s hems. Her arrival drew the attention of everyone in the hall, though only the table full of demons continued to watch her for more than a few seconds.
“You done putting out the fires?” Tom asked as she leaned against their table.

“Yeah, I smothered them with a few thousand bodies,” Kaylee responded before picking up Tom’s fork and grabbing a bite of his potatoes.

“Get your own.”

“I’m not that hungry,” she said while scooping up another bite as he tried to swat her away.

Dean wondered why he had ever doubted that they were brother and sister.

When she finally handed the fork back to Tom, she continued explaining, "We're gonna need to get some people brought in to compensate for a gap I couldn't fill in Mexico. Dyl, did you get ahold of Kali?"

"She can meet with us in two or three days. It will take some time to get her things in order there, as well as ensuring safe passage for Devi." Dyaniel’s voice lowered when mentioning Devi, which caught Dean’s attention. “But I should be able to reach her without too much difficulty between now and then.”

"I need to know if Central Asia can spare some grunts,” she told him. “I’m not sure we can wait three days."

"I'll mention it to her."

"See if you can get them for something less than an arm and a leg.” Kaylee sighed. “I know that she likes you, but she’s stingy as fuck with her people.”

"Do you want to send a Crossroads demon?” he suggested.

"The last time I sent her a Crosser, zie came back without a head.”

Dyaniel shrugged at Kaylee’s rebuff. “Fine, I’ll talk to her.”

After finishing their breakfasts Kaylee, Dyaniel, and Tom led Dean across town to some sort of headquarters. On the walk there they passed by dozens of people who watched them with candid curiosity. Now that his full escort was assembled, Dean started noticing the differences in how each of them was treated by the passersby and acted in turn.

As soon as they were in public, Kaylee carried herself with more dignity, though she didn’t bother buttoning up her jacket. She had lost most of her playfulness and sass in exchange for a more reserved expression. Dean reminded himself that she was not only the commanding officer of probably everyone around them, but she was also a queen—whenever the fuck that actually meant. Some of the onlookers stood at mild attention when she passed, while others held a single hand to their chest and bowed slightly.

Dyaniel also seemed to command a significant amount of respect from many of the onlookers, but not all of them. A few people seemed to suddenly find something that needed their immediate attention, whether it was discussing a matter amongst themselves or fiddling with a random object. Dean looked to Dyaniel for any sort of reaction to the mild slights, but he didn't acknowledge them at all.

Tom stood a little taller, but didn't nearly keep up the formality that Kaylee and Dyaniel displayed. Most of the onlookers seemed indifferent to him, though a few treated him with a warmth that
indicated popularity. This was consistent with Tom’s easygoing demeanor at the poker game and the resulting shameless stroll back to his room without any pants.

To Dean’s relief, Tom walked beside him and pointed out little details, like the fact that the tiny memorials littering the sidewalks were actually several different things. Some were indeed memorials to the dead, but others were shrines to different gods or altars for witches to get a better link up to Hell. Dean couldn’t really tell them apart by sight, but Tom seemed to know where every altar in town was off the top of his head. It made sense that he would, though with connections like Tom had, he probably didn’t need to bother kneeling on the pavement to get better reception.

About ten minutes into their walk, a woman turned the corner ahead of them, followed by a small entourage of men and women in combat gear. She had long black hair that was pulled back into a braid. Her olive skin was tanned and dusted with a little dirt, but she still radiated a beauty that reminded Dean of pure strength. She wore dark brown and green leather armor, including a breastplate that was engraved with the images of a tree, a stag, and a bear. She had a long knife holstered on her hip and a recurve bow and quiver on her back. A warm smile spread across her face when she saw Kaylee.

“Macaria!” the woman shouted, stopping Kaylee in her tracks.

Kaylee opened her arms, offering a hug to the woman. “Good hunting as usual?” she asked as they embraced.

“A modest yield, but it was well-earned.” The woman looked into her quiver, which only contained six arrows. As she drew a broken arrow, Dean noticed its unusual composition. The shaft was thicker than normal with a pearlescent core and the arrowhead was a metal that was brighter than silver embedded with black veins. “Two were broken in the fight. As I said, well-earned.”

“I’m taking care of some family business,” Kaylee told her, causing the woman to raise an eyebrow, then look Dean over thoughtfully, but she didn’t ask any follow-up questions. “But afterward, I’ll be glad to help you make some replacements.”

“Be sure to hurry. With the ceasefire ending soon, I’ll need to be ready.” The woman patted Kaylee’s cheek. “Tell your father hello for me. I will ask my own for his continued blessing.”

The woman nodded respectfully toward Dean, but turned back to her group without even looking at Tom or Dylaniel. Her group followed her down another side street and his own continued on their way. Once they got out of earshot Dean felt comfortable quizzing his guides.

“Who was that?”

“That was Artemis,” Dylaniel said casually.

Even Dean knew about Artemis, Greek goddess of the hunt. She had been a favored deity of hunters in the western world for millennia. Nobody seriously worshipped her in his time, but through tradition it wasn’t uncommon to see a hunter’s favorite weapon marked with a bear or a stag. When he was a kid, Bobby had told him stories about Artemis teaching the first hunters how to kill monsters like the minotaur or gorgon. Supposedly, she led hunting parties of her hunter worshipers…. Dean leaned back to watch the half-dozen people following her out of view.

“Artemis—that was her? And she’s actually hunting for you!” It was taking a lot of self-control for him to not just chase after her. He’d always liked the stories about her, but after seeing her in real life his childhood crush was renewed. “I know I’m not allowed to try anything while I'm here,
but if I wanted to get in contact with her when I get back home—"

“She’s also a goddess of chastity,” Tom said with a knowing smile.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, I definitely hear that.” Tom rolled his eyes a little while sighing. "She won't even consider
letting you into her hunting party if you've had sex in the last year."

"You ever hunt with her?"

"Yeah, right. She can barely stand to have Tom within fifty feet of her," Kaylee interjected with a
laugh. "Her loss."

Dean felt painfully aware of the fact that objectively it'd been over two years since he'd had sex.
He wondered if she could sense it off the body or if she'd been deceived by his subjective ninety-
two years without getting laid. No wonder she gave him the little respectful nod. He sighed as he
push the thought from his mind.

“What’s Macaria mean?”

“It’s her nickname for me,” Kaylee replied. “Macaria is a daughter of Hades. I’m not entirely clear
if she actually thinks I’m her cousin or what, but she seems to like me, so I let her do it.”

Essentially lying to a god through omission sounded like an incredibly dumb idea, but for whatever
reason it didn’t concern the others. In the legends, Artemis had always seemed relatively
intelligent. Surely she’d be able to figure out that she and Kaylee weren’t actually related. What
must she think of him? It wasn't like she'd called him Poseidon or anything.

"She knows Sam’s human—or whatever, right? He’s only… what, like fifty-something years old.”
Dean tried really hard to avoid implying that the goddess was an idiot. “I mean, Hades is like a
big deal in Greek mythology—"

“Don’t call it mythology,” Tom warned. “That really pisses off the gods and their followers.”

“Okay, sorry—but, I mean, she doesn’t have to look that hard to see that this doesn’t line up.
Kaylee, you’re not even Greek… maybe.” Dean was temporarily distracted by the realization her
knew nothing about Ruby’s meatsuit.

"A lot of the old pantheons don't keep in touch anymore,” Kaylee explained. “Many of the old
gods are missing or unrecognizable—Baldr and Odin didn’t even notice that Gabriel had been
impersonating Loki for like a thousand years. It's pretty rare for them to get their family reunions,
so a lot have actually started forming relationships with members of different pantheons. If there
are similarities between their families they’ll sometimes substitute in for each other—knowingly or
maybe with a little bit of willful ignorance. Generally, it’s not a problem. Everyone needs support
and family nowadays, even if they aren’t blood."

The idea that a god could miss their family or need emotional support was a new, uncomfortably
human dynamic. Dean scowled to himself. There had been a time when he had known so much:
demons were evil drones, angels were the sweet reassurances of his dead mother, and gods were
the things of epic myths. But the last week had systematically dismantled every ounce of certainty
he'd possessed.

"What's funny is when you get multiple gods of the same domain interacting." Tom grinned.
"You'd think everyone created the sun."
“Yeah, that's why you gotta try to keep them apart during down time,” Kaylee commented. "It's easy enough to get along when you're fighting against a common enemy, but if you put too many gods in one place and give them time to talk it causes problems.”

"What kind of problems?"

"One time Shango and Chaac accidentally electrocuted like a hundred cows," Tom offered as an example.

Kaylee shook her head at the memory. "I still have no idea where we got all that replacement cattle from."

"That was a headache," Tom agreed, then added as the eternal optimist, “but on the plus side, we had steak two meals in a row."

Headquarters turned out to be a building that looked like it had previously been a combination courthouse and post office. The exterior of the building was roughly reinforced, but the interior still had some remnants of elegant decorations. The main hallway floor was unmaintained white and green marble. Ornately patterned tin tiles covered the ceiling. Many of the walls had lost their wallpaper, but a few dull scraps hinted at a French classical pattern.

They passed through a series of steel-barred gates that had been used as the primary source of security probably more than a hundred years earlier. Eventually, they entered a windowless vault-like room that was maybe thirty by twenty feet. On the near side there was a large table surrounded by eight chairs. In the far corner was a four-person circular table. About halfway along the back wall was a more substantial wooden chair, set apart from the rest, almost like a throne.

Kaylee waved Dean over to the large table. In addition to several large paper folders, it had two bulky laptops and an ornate silver goblet filled with what was probably blood. Below the objects, Dean noticed that the table’s surface was a 5x8’ map of North America, which was covered with a clear plastic protective layer. Dean looked over the map, which didn’t look like any map he’d ever seen before.

The borders between Canada, the United States, and Mexico were missing, along with many lesser borders. A large stretch just east of the Rocky Mountains was covered in a handwritten note ‘Badlands.’ There were large X’s over Southern California, New Orleans, Boston, and the entire Great Lakes region. Large red circles covered multiple sections of the Southeast and Northwest.

“We've got 112 bases across North America, 40 of which are convert military bases. The rest are heavily fortified or hidden locations,” Kaylee explained while pointing toward features of the map. "For the most part, neutral humans stick to their cities—well, I guess they’re more than cities at this point. The entire population of California is living within fifty miles of the San Francisco Bay—San Francisco, Oakland—all those cities from your day are now a single metropolis. New York City has doubled in size and quadrupled in population since your time. Mexico City broke 15 million at the last census in 2030. Toronto, Chicago, Austin—there are 28 human city-states and some small communities that we don't really keep track of.”

“What makes the Badlands bad?” Dean softly chewed his lip while struggling to fathom the scale of the Badlands.

“That whole area got blighted about a decade ago,” Dylaniel responded. “The water’s more or less poison, so there’s no plant life and almost no animals. Without the plants to hold down the topsoil it’s constantly having dust storms.”
“There are a few enemy bases in the Badlands, but they can only be manned by angel and demons since they don’t need food or water,” Kaylee added. “It’s still dangerous for them though. When you have so much death in an area for so long you get a lot of very powerful ghosts, banshees, and specters haunting the land. You have entire town’s worth of bones buried in the dirt, festering with hate in giant, unmarked graves.”

“Angels and demons really have a problems with ghosts?” Dean asked. It was hard to imagine that the comparative nuisance of ghosts would really affect something on the level of demons or angels.

“Aside from the telekinesis, ghosts are also possessors who don’t need permission to take a host.” Dylaniel frowned. Dean noted the surprisingly human response. “Every vessel becomes a battlefield given enough time.”

“The environment literally eats away at everything and everyone there. The land is harsh and the spirits fight over anything of value, eventually tearing it apart,” Tom said as he took a seat at the map table.

“If stuff gets destroyed there, then how and why are there bases?”

“The bases are constantly being rebuilt and having their garrisons replaced,” Dylaniel answered. “As for why, there’s almost no strategic value to the land aside from the fact that it’s so secluded.”

“We generally don’t maintain a presence there. It’s too high a cost for the reward of isolation. But we send parties in to hit Heaven’s and Lucifer’s bases at random intervals. If we hit them hard and fast we can usually destroy an entire base without too much effort. We just can’t hold it. It’s a chore, but preventative medicine always is.” Kaylee shrugged at the unfortunate reality.

"With the ceasefire ending in a little over a day, we need to go through and reassess many of the operations,” Dylaniel explained as he picked up one of the paper files and began reviewing it. "Many of our people took this holy season as some down time. With the exception of the more contested hot zones, our people are between deployments."

"So, today you get to sit in on a whole bunch of meetings.” Kaylee patted Dean on the back.

"Meetings?"

"You wanted to get an idea of what's going on, and short of dragging you through thousands of miles of battlegrounds, this is the best place to start.” Kaylee pointed to one of the folding chairs. "Sit down. You're gonna learn how to run an army."

Dean's head was swimming with information by the end of the second hour, but the pace didn’t slow for his benefit. Aside from a short break for lunch around 1pm, the day was a blur of people dropping into the room for appointments or with surprising developments. Nothing dire seemed to be happening at the moment, yet there was an unpleasant eye-of-the-storm feeling to many of the conversations.

The ceasefire was actually a holy season that had begun the day that Dean had arrived in 2039, and now that they’d had a whole day to calmly assess the situation, several casualty reports were coming in from more secluded locations. For example, there had been a significant battle in northern Alberta a week earlier, but the heavy snowfall and massive battlefield had made it difficult to count the dead. With the ceasefire in place, both Heaven and the AFE had worked to clear the bodies and find survivors.

Everything was discussed with a matter-of-factness that felt misleading, especially since lives were
on the line. Kaylee and Dyaniel seemed used to making policy decisions that put people into danger; they were commanders in this operation, after all. Tom was more of an advisor and he left the final say to someone else. It wasn’t that he seemed averse to difficult choices, but more that he didn’t want to be bound to any particular operations. He skimmed the action item list, trying to locate things he could do himself rather than assign others.

One particularly delicate meeting was with an envoy from the human city-state of Twin Cities (formerly the nearby cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul). They had come to plead for aid. A winter storm had knocked out their utilities for the last six days, which caused rampant illness. They were visiting the AFE base in secret for fear of breaking their neutrality. Kaylee had the envoy wait outside while they explained to Dean the potential risks and benefits of aiding the metropolis.

There was a very real concern that another envoy had been sent to ask Heaven for assistance. In their desperation, the humans should be expected to play both sides. The question was whether sending their own angels to help heal the sick would put them in significant danger, and whether the diplomatic boon would have any real effect on the city-state’s loyalty. If they refused aid outright, but Heaven didn’t, would that set the AFE so far back that neutrality would be lost?

In the end it was decided that a call for volunteers would be sent out through the angels in their ranks. No one would be ordered to take part in the dangerous aid mission, yet there would certainly be angels willing to go. Beyond their own pursuit of freedom and happiness, one of the most common reasons for angels to fall was the desire to help humans. The bonds that many had established with their vessel reinforced that sense of duty. There were probably even a fair number of vessels with friends or family within Twin Cities. The volunteers would understand the risks, but find them acceptable.

Aside from listening to accounts of snowy killing fields and a population of nearly 10 million going without heat or clean water for nearly a week, the worst part of the extended briefing was meeting Elias Finch. He was some sort of longtime gunslinger, who had an air about him that just screamed ‘asshole.’ Unlike everyone else, when he entered the room, he didn’t bother to stand at attention or show Kaylee any respect. Instead, he took a seat at the larger table, dropping a traveling bag on the floor beside him, and eyed Dean.

“Finch, this is—” Kaylee started to introduce Dean, but was cut off.

“Yeah, I heard.” Finch turned his attention from Dean to Kaylee. “You’ve got a damn fine mess brewing. I was at Fort Bragg when I heard about him this morning.”

“Did you hear he was here?”

“No, but I figured he’d be with you or Dylan.” Finch looked at Tom and bared his teeth in a subtle snarl. “You can go back to Port-au-Prince if you want.”

“You can go fuck yourself if you want.” Tom smiled sourly as he leaned back in his own chair, solidifying his position.

“Save the bickering.” Kaylee cut off the fight before it gained too much momentum, but crossed her arms as she watched Finch. “Why’d you grace us with your presence?”

“I wanted to look him over; see what the fuss is about.”

“Fuss?” Dean asked. He didn’t like the way that sounded.
“Everyone wants to know why we have another one of you in the mix,” Finch responded, then addressed the room. “I’m not the only officer coming this way. While looking around for you, half the bases I hit were planning on sending someone to find out what’s going on. You’re just lucky everywhere but NorCal has been up to its ass lately, otherwise I wouldn’t be the only one here.”

“Fucking hell—Cecily!” Kaylee called out, summoning a demon assistant to her side. “We’re gonna have multiple representatives from the regional bases—maybe more arriving in the near future. Coordinate with them, so that we don’t have to deal with drop-ins every few minutes.”

As Kaylee and Dylaniel spoke with Cecily about the logistics of meeting with everyone, Finch watched Dean in an almost predatory way.

“How are you with a rifle?” Finch probed.

Dean straightened defensively. “Scope or iron sights?”

“If you have to ask,” Finch said while shaking his head, but was interrupted by Tom.

“Scope and silhouette.”

“I can hit pretty consistently at 650 meters with a scoped .308 and I’m a AAA at silhouette shooting with iron sights.” Dean knew he wasn’t winning any marksmanship awards, but he was generally considered better than most hunters, which was saying something.

“Get better,” Finch advised, then turned his attention back to Kaylee, who had just finished talking with the assistant.

“Thanks.” Dean glared unabashedly at Finch. “Thanks for that.”

“Finch, go get some quarters, then go down to the ranges on the south side of camp,” Kaylee told him. “You might as while do some work.”

“I was thinking I could stay here a bit,” he countered.

“This whole thing” —Kaylee gestured at Dean; her tone had become stern and Dean realized she was essentially giving orders— “is still need-to-know. Right now, you don’t need to. You’re not getting shit until everyone else gets their fair shot at getting a rep in. Anyway, I’m sure everybody’ll be here by midday tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Finch muttered as he picked up his satchel and walked to the door. He stared at Dean and Tom for several long seconds before turning down the hall.

“I bet you’re regretting letting me out of that cage,” Dean commented once Finch was gone.

“News was already spreading before we let you out,” Dylaniel observed.

“Dammit, Kay. Why’re you always taking in strays?” Tom joked half-heartedly, but no one felt like laughing.

“I’d like to go on record as appreciating not being left with two bullet holes in New Orleans.” Dean absentmindedly rubbed the section of his abdomen that had been hit. “So, how bad are things?”

“If word’s gotten that far, then there’s basically no question that Heaven knows you’re somewhere on Earth. Team Lucifer will probably be finding out in the next day if they don’t know already.”
Kaylee rubbed her temples as she sunk into her throne-like chair. “The clock’s officially running…. Looks like this holiday is gonna end with a bang.”
Toward the end of the afternoon an assistant came in with a thin paper file. Dyaniel was the closest person to her, so he accepted the delivery. After taking a moment to skim through its contents, he sighed. Kaylee looked up from the laptop she was working on and frowned slightly.

“Another one?” she asked unenthusiastically, earning a nod of confirmation from Dyaniel, though he didn’t look up from the papers.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Another what?”

His upper body was draped over the map table in fatigue. He’d given up on trying to count how many little random decisions and appointments he’d witnessed so far in the day. There had been a time when he thought that wars were action-packed and dramatic, but so far it was a whole lot of paper pushing.

"Another applicant.” Kaylee closed the laptop, then stood up in preparation for something. “Hell is a divine monarchy and I haven't held up my end on one of the job requirements."

"Being the First Light runs in the bloodline, and she doesn't have any heirs," Dlyaniel clarified.

Tom’s expression was fairly neutral, though the corner of his mouth turned down slightly at the way his little sister was being talked about.

"You have to have a kid as part of your job?" Dean sat up in surprise and discomfort. He barely knew her and she was thirty years old, but in a weird, alternate-reality way she was his niece. The entire idea that she might be a sexual entity was awkward, even ignoring the issue of bodily autonomy.

"It's not like I have a deadline, but essentially,” she replied. “If I die and I don’t have anyone to pass the throne down to things in Hell would be really fucked—and that’ll mess things up up here. Crowley would probably try to operate as regent or something for long enough to figure something out, but who knows if that'll last.”

"So you're getting pressure to marry?"

"Nobody really cares whether I get married.” She shrugged. “It's just that I need to have kid or two. I don't even need to stick with the same co-parent."

"You haven't been able to find one that you can stand. You probably shouldn't start counting chickens," Tom suggested.

"Speaking of chickens, who's the next contestant?" Kaylee asked.

Dyaniel flipped back to the first page of what Dean realized must've been a personnel file.
"Ariel."

"The mermaid?" Dean joked.

"Not quite." Tom smiled helplessly. "I'm not sure a half-fish could cut it in Hell."

"A quarter-fish," Kaylee corrected. "Yeah, I don't think Crowley'd be too happy filling Hell with saltwater. I—"

"Wait," Dean said while holding up a hand to silence her. "Let me savor the mental image."

"I'm guessing angel," Tom added, trying to find out more about his sister's suitor. "It's always interesting to see who the contenders are. All the factions want a claim to Hell."

"Throwing a little angel in the mix has been a popular idea with every faction except demons. Not that it'd be a problem. If I put my foot down on something Hell listens."

"Currently him," Dylaniel replied. "He's a seraphim known as the 'Lion of Heaven.' He fell about eight years ago to join us and achieved command of a platoon within a few months. Ten commendations for service—many angels admire him."

"But you don't like him?" Kaylee guessed.

"I have a concern." Dylaniel looked down at a particular section of Ariel's file. "He has never served in an integrated unit. Because of his experience and a lack of field officers at the time of his fall, he was allowed to select his subordinates very early. He only selected angels, and since then only angels have requested transfer to his command."

"Well, this should be interesting. Tom and Dyl, I want you both in on this." Kaylee grinned at Dean. "Enjoy the show. You get to watch some more of the delightful politics of running this ensemble cast."

Ariel was a few inches shy of six feet, with a little muscle to him. His skin and hair hinted at some African lineage, but his intense grey eyes made Dean do a double take. He wore unremarkable military fatigues with a few small insignia denoting some meaning. Every movement he made was deliberate and precise.

Kaylee sat at her improvised throne while Tom and Dean sat at the small circular table in the corner. Dylaniel opted to stand at mild attention several feet to Kaylee's left. Ariel stopped about ten feet in front of her, placed his right hand to his chest and bowed.

"At ease," she said, causing him to nearly relax. "I'm told that you are courting me?"

"Yes. It would be an honor." His voice was quieter than Dean had expected, but he had to admit that the seraphim spoke with conviction.

"The evaluation process could be extensive. I will ask you some questions. There will be tests." Her eyebrows rose subtly at a thought. "What is the state of your vessel?"

"He was killed in battle one month after our joining, though I have maintained its health in all other respects."
"Your body's health will be independently verified if I deem you worth further consideration," Kaylee explained as she scanned him with her eyes, then continued, "Also, in the event that we have a child, if it ends up carrying any of your grace, you will be prevented from taking it or any of its issue as vessels."

"I—understand." Ariel's voice wavered in surprise at the thought, but agreed without hesitation. Tom nodded in approval at the seraphim's dumbfoundedness.

"So Ariel." Her voice lost some of its cold authority, but it would be a stretch to describe her demeanor as warm. "Tell me what made you decide to join us?"

"I spent years watching my siblings kill each other." He reconsidered his approach, then restarted. "I did not understand the war for many years. I did not question Heaven's purpose because it was the will of our father. After a one-year deployment, I returned to Heaven and found that my most beloved siblings were dead. At first I blamed the armies of Earth, but when I realized how few of us were left in Heaven…. Our father could have restored Heaven, but he is not behind them."

"Do you think your father favors us?" Kaylee asked as she studied Ariel like someone might a classical piece by some famous painter.

"No." Ariel's jaw clenched. "I think he is... lost."

"If neither side is blessed, then why did you fall for us? You were already home."

Ariel shifted a bit, revealing some level of discomfort. Dean had seen angels use these otherwise-human tells, but he'd found them difficult to read. It wasn't obvious if the seraphim was offended, embarrassed, or sad—but any and all of those possibilities piqued his curiosity.

"Heaven would sacrifice all of our lives wagering on an idea," Ariel answered. "I cannot believe in paradise when I cannot believe in the judgment of those who would take me there."

Kaylee nodded to help signal her appreciation for his answers so far. "I can see you care a great deal about your siblings. I'd like to know your thoughts on humans."

"To be honest I did not give them much thought until I fell. I served on Earth during the Second Punic War for one month, though I did not interact with more than twenty humans. I was charged with preserving holy relics and spent most of my time in a temple. In the last several years I have had more extensive interactions with them. Overall, I’ve found them to be resilient and very adaptive; both admirable qualities."

"How do you feel about their culture?"

"Some of their tendencies are...." Ariel chose his phrasing carefully. "Overwhelming to the senses. Mostly the smells of their food, which they take an inordinate amount of pride in, and their recreational sounds."

Kaylee smiled slightly. "You're not a fan of music?"

"I do not believe I understand the point," he admitted. "But several of my respected siblings seem to appreciate it, so I may have simply not considered it enough."

"Tell me your thoughts on nephilim," she instructed without warning.

His brow and mouth wavered for a moment, caught off guard by the change of topic, but he quickly replied, "They are necessary—" Ariel stopped talking so quickly that Dean thought he
must’ve literally bit his tongue, but then the seraphim looked at Dylaniel in alarm and Dean realized it had actually been figurative tongue biting. "My words were poorly chosen. I was wrong to say that."

"No, you were right. We are necessary and you did choose your words poorly," Dylaniel responded with a colder than normal tone of voice.

Dean’s eyes widened slightly at the drama unfolding in front of him. Based on the way Tom’s eyebrows had risen, he could tell the seraphim had committed some kind of faux pas. To her credit, Kaylee’s expression didn’t change at all. Whatever fuck-up her suitor had committed, she hadn’t been completely blindsided by it.

"I did not mean to offend you," Ariel said as something akin to an apology.

"I believe you," Dylaniel replied flatly. "Continue."

Dean tried to casual cover his mouth to conceal the tiny smile that helplessly grew on his face after watching Dylaniel’s non-forgiveness.

"Your—" Ariel began speaking to Dylaniel, who he had turned to face, but realized that it was really Kaylee that he was attempting to woo. He turned to face her again and stood a little straighter in an attempt to regain his full composure. "The nephilim will likely play a vital part in the future of both this conflict and afterward."

Dean had no idea what they were actually talking about, but to his ears that answer sounded like canned bullshit. Mercifully, Kaylee held up a hand to reassure Ariel that he didn’t have to continue struggling to come up with more positive statements that he probably didn’t fully believe. It wasn’t exactly that he seemed to be lying. It was more like he was so bad at lying that he couldn’t figure out how to finesse an unpleasant topic.

"Tell me about your thoughts on demons." Kaylee probed deeper with barely any mercy. When Ariel hesitated, she told him, "Don't worry about being tactful. I want to know how you really feel. A miscommunication would be more harmful to you than a sincere disagreement."

The casual threat embedded in her reassurance made Dean think of a Crossroad demon. Clearly, she did have a background in politics.

"I understand why they are an important resource... but I do not think that they are trustworthy," he confessed.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because they are corrupted." His tone made it clear that he thought his point was obvious. "It’s in their very nature."

"Have you ever had a conversation with a demon?"

"No."

"What are you doing right now?" she asked pointedly, creating a painful silence that stretched between them.

"Ma'am, you...." Ariel shifted again. "You're the First Light of Heaven."

Kaylee stood up and removed her long leather jacket. Tom hurried to collect it from her. As he
carried it with him back to the sidelines, he flashed a knowing grin at Dean. Kaylee took a few steps forward, stretching her shoulders slightly. As she flexed, Dean could see that most of the back of her t-shirt had been cut out, only leaving the collar and the bottom hem to hold its form.

After a moment of concentration, a pair of long, slender wings extending from her back faded into view. The wingspan was easily twenty-five feet, filling the entire width of the room. The wings appeared to be made of light that shimmered just enough to allude to individual feathers. Dean could barely look at her because the wings were so bright, and noticed that Tom was also averting his gaze. Dylaniel seemed relatively disinterested, but Ariel stood in a state of awe.

"I may be the First Light, but this is not all that I am." The light faded, allowing Dean to look back at her. Her wings had lost their luminosity, taking on an almost black color that matched her demonic eyes. She had black, sturdy but sharp claws. Five-inch long black horns grew out from her forehead and curled backward parallel to her scalp. Her earlobes extended an inch further back than normal and almost resembled stubby bat wings. A pattern of fine lines that glowed like embers spread across her forehead and up her horns.

Dean tried not to let his mouth fall open in shock. Ruby and Castiel had mentioned that she might be able to make her eyes turn black and maybe something else, but that was a lot more than eyes. That was one of the least human forms he'd seen outside of Hell.

"Ariel, does this bother you?" When she spoke three pairs of fangs were visible in her upper set of teeth alone.

"I... I do not know." His voice wavered slightly.

"I appreciate your honesty." Her wings rocked gently, unable to flap or fully retract in the eight-foot-tall room. "Any child we have would be part demon. You would have no power over Hell; only Abyssal can sit on the throne. Knowing this, would you like to retract your offer? You won’t suffer any negative consequences if you do so."

“No. I do not wish to retract my offer.

Kaylee nodded, then stared at him thoughtfully for a few seconds. In an instant she had reverted back to her normal appearance.

"I need some more information before I decide. If you want to continue being considered, you will need to do at least two things for me: first, you will go to Hell, entering through the Black Gate. You will be unarmed and without any form of armor. From there I want you to travel to the Citadel. You won’t be able to fly, so at an average pace it should take you four days to reach the Citadel. If you exercise diplomacy and good judgment, you could reach the Citadel in just over one day. If you exercise poor judgment, you’ll never reach the Citadel. Once there, you will find Crowley and he will take you to the throne room before returning you to Earth.

“If you return, you will have the option of completing my second requirement. You would report to Dylaniel and serve directly under him." She looked to Dylaniel. "If Ariel reports to you for service, I want you to assemble a fully integrated squad and run operations in the Badlands for at least three months. At the end of your operations, I want your full assessment of him."

The mention of spending three months in the Badlands made Ariel lips part subtly for a moment before recovering. Dylaniel nodded with some combination of experienced indifference to the assignment and lack of surprise at Kaylee's judgment. Tom glanced over at Dean with a little smirk.
"I understand. Thank you. I will appoint a replacement and begin immediately," Ariel agreed.

"You're dismissed."

With another bow, the seraphim excused himself.

Kaylee walked over to Tom, who tossed her back the leather jacket. Dean stared at her, thoroughly disoriented by everything that had just happened. He was still trying to figure out how the whole wings thing worked. She slipped on the jacket, then looked between Tom and Dylaniel.

"Tommy, Dyl, what do you two think?" she asked while Dylaniel approached the table.

"He's a little uptight, but he's an angel—no offense," Tom apologized to Dylaniel.

"None taken," Dylaniel replied. "He might just be unfamiliar with non-angel social customs. He's only been on Earth for a few years. We'll see—if he survives Hell."

"You're running him by the throne?" Tom gave Kaylee a nod of approval. "That'll be interesting."

"Yeah, let's see if he feels the need to try it out." She shrugged while adjusting her jacket.

"Won't he die if he sits on it?" Dean asked a little surprised by their causal tone.

"He'll never rule. I told him that and if he's still thinking about making a power play for Hell, I can't have him around."

Dean wasn't thrilled by the idea of Ariel's life being endangered. The guy didn't seem like an ass, per se. Though he supposed that Kaylee did need to be conscious of usurpers.

"I'm less concerned about him making it out of Hell. I think it's whether Dyl gives him a thumbs up that's his real trial." Tom patted Dylaniel’s shoulder.

"That nephilim flub was rough," Kaylee said while cringing at the memory.

"What's a nephilim?" Dean asked.

"Nephilim are the offspring of a human and an angel," Dylaniel explained. "We are abominations under the law of Heaven. It is a mortal sin for an angel to mate with a human. The parents and children are to be killed on sight by servants of Heaven."

"You're half-human?"

Tom and Kaylee exchanged a quick sidelong glance with each other, then watched Dylaniel.

"Yes."

It had taken a second for him to really appreciate that Dylaniel was only half angel. Based on his reserved demeanor and name, he'd just assumed the kid was an angel—though Kaylee had also provided the human name Dylan when initially introducing him. In hindsight, Kaylee and Tom had only ever referred to him by the dual abbreviation of Dyl while in private. Also, no one had ever actually told him that Dylaniel was an angel and he didn't talk about Heaven or God in the same way as the angels.

It shouldn't have surprised him that angels could have kids with humans; they'd just been discussing an angel having a kid with a human-demon hybrid. If that was on the table with the
whole demon thing, then it'd make some sort of sense that it'd work without the demonic bad-mojo in the mix.

"I don't get it. If you're looking for a trustworthy angel guy, why don't you and Dyl have kids?" Dean asked.

Kaylee raised her hands and stepped backward as if to say that she wasn't touching the topic.

"Because we're cousins," Dy slenderial answered for her.

Kaylee and Tom watched with morbid amusement as Dean worked through the meaning of the answer. They had parents who were siblings and demons didn't have siblings as far as Dean knew….

"Y-you're my son?" Dean's voice was so quiet that he wondered whether he had even made sound.

"Timeline differences aside, yes." Dylaniel's neutral expression barely changed while giving the earth shattering news.

Dean rested his face in his hands. This was too much information for him. He felt like all the air had been sucked from the room and replaced with questions. Looking up at Dylaniel again, he could see a slight resemblance. The boy looked like him except for a little difference in the hair and, obviously, the eyes.

"And you're half angel?"

"Yes."

Dean nodded slowly as he processed the information. There was an angel out there that he'd ended up having sex with—maybe she was alive still? Maybe he'd meet her? What if he already had? He was getting too caught up in guessing.

"Who's your mom?" Dean asked, pulse rising.

"Angels don't have genders. I don't have a mom; I have a xe," Dylaniel replied, but it only confused Dean more.

"A what?"

"'Xe' is a gender-neutral pronoun," Tom explained. "The nephilim adopted it to mean their angelic parent regardless of their vessel's sex."

"Ok….

"Castiel."

8/17/2010

Cas plunged his blade into the last angel's chest, then pulled it back out as the body flickered and fell to the ground. He looked around the room to see Dean wiping the blood off his adopted angel blade onto his jacket sleeve. Cas wordlessly walked over to inspect Dean for injuries and healed the few cuts he found.

"Your tie's shredded," Dean managed between winded breaths.
Cas looked down to see that his dark blue tie had been cut diagonally over almost the full length of its front. He held up the pieces and scowled subtly.

"Are you going to fix it?" Dean asked while bolstering his weapon.

"I'm not injured." Cas slowly loosened the tie and took it off. He dropped it in a move that made them both strangely uncomfortable. "It's unnecessary…. Repairing it would be a waste of my energy."

Despite the moderate ease with which Cas had discarded the tie, over the next two days Dean began to suspect that Cas was actually saddened by the loss. The angel would never consciously acknowledge it, but he seemed to have gained some of the sentimentality that supposedly came hard for species. But Dean saw him, several times a day reflexively reach to adjust his tie, remember that it was no longer there, then pause thoughtfully. At first it was interesting to watch, but quickly the spectacle of an angel possibly feeling remorse over clothing accessories was replaced by the desire to cheer up a friend.

"Happy birthday," Dean said as he walked into the motel room and tossed a small box to Cas.

"I don't have a birthday." Cas looked at Dean, a little confused, but began unwrapping the box.

"You do now." Dean sat down on one of the queen beds and watched Cas open his gift. “August 20th, mark your calendar."

Cas removed the box lid to find three new ties in varying shades of blue. "Thank you, Dean." He held them up to examine their different textures. "You didn't need to buy three. It is customary to only wear one at a time."

"Yeah, but you can switch between them depending on your mood," Dean explained. Cas was still learning about aesthetic preferences and simple pleasures, so he decided to walk him through the decision making process. "Which one do you like the most?"

"They're all very nice. Which one do you prefer?"

"That's not really what I was getting at, Cas. I'm try to help you make that decision."

Cas nodded in understanding of Dean's intent, then gave the issue a little more thought. "Tell me which one you'd pick and why you'd select it."

Dean sighed a little to himself, but walked over to the table. He thumbed through the options then picked up the lightest blue tie, and held it out to Cas.

"This one." Dean spoke with a determination that made Cas nod in recognition.

"And why?"

"Because it matches your eyes." Dean felt a bit self-conscious and added, "It's a general rule of clothing: when in doubt wear something that matches your eyes."

Cas looked at the tie that dangled from Dean's hand, then frowned slightly. "I don't know how to knot a tie."

Dean chuckled because, of course, the original tie came pre-tied with the body and the angel seemed to never remove his clothes.
"I'll help you with these, but you're gonna have to learn this skill at some point…. I mean, you might not 'have to' but it's helpful for faking a Fed."

Dean pulled up a chair in front of Cas. He lifted the angel's collar, wrapped the tie around his neck, and began tying the knot. A relaxed smile formed on Dean's face. It had been a few weeks since they had had a nice lull in their hunting and it felt good to do something so simple. The first attempt resulted in a tie that was too short, so Dean remeasured it against Cas's torso.

"You should wear green more often. Or do you not doubt what to wear?" Cas asked in what Dean assumed was a valiant attempt at small talk.

Dean grinned while looping one end around the other. "I know I look like I got dressed in the dark most days, but when I want to look good I can."

He gripped the forming knot, and pulled it into a tight Half Windsor. Dean took a little pride in his work by adjusting it to place a dimple just below the knot.

"I don't understand," Cas replied. "You always look good."

Dean flustered a bit while patting the tie flat against Cas's chest, then scooted his chair back a few feet. He could feel his ears turn pink and his smile flickered nervously. Dean reminded himself that Cas was still learning how to compliment people, so the subtleties of that statement were almost certainly lost on the angel.

"Thanks, Cas. I'm gonna get ready for bed. Think you can handle the other two?"

"I should be fine."

Dean patted Cas on the shoulder and went into the motel bathroom. Closing the door behind him, he braced himself against the sink basin, and sighed. Cas was a good guy, but he had a way of sending some very strange signals.

8/14/2010

A week earlier they had stopped at a diner for lunch. Dean had ordered his usual bacon cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate malt while Cas socially ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and water. Dean had the first sip of his malt, then sank back in the booth. After proclaiming that he'd just had the greatest chocolate malt in existence, Cas reached across the table, picked up the glass, and tried a sip using Dean's straw.

Dean was a little too shocked to say anything at first, but he wasn't about to abandon the remainder of the malt just because Cas had committed a faux pas. When they got back into the Impala, he decided to say something.

"Cas, I'm telling you this because you're trying to fit in better, so don't take this the wrong way: you shouldn't have just tried my shake." He tried to keep his tone of voice as non-critical as possible, though he wasn’t entirely sure if Cas could even perceive that sort of distinction.

"Was it something specific to the food type or a rule in general?" Cas asked, eager to learn from his apparent mistake. “I've seen several instances of humans eating each other's food."

"It's like a combination of the food and the symbolism of eating another person's food...." The body language had been obvious to Dean, but when pressed to articulate it he was having trouble quantifying it. "I mean, you only eat off each other's plates if you're family or best friends."
"You're my best friend," Cas replied in a tone that Dean could tell was almost concern.

He mentally kicked himself for carelessly choosing words that Cas could interpret as meaning that they weren’t good friends. The angel’s literalness sometimes led to a gullible insecurity that Dean needed to protect him from.

"That’s true, but even best friends ask for permission before just grabbing each other’s food," Dean explained.

"But people don't always ask permission." Cas had seen it at least ten times in six states over the last eight months of hunting with Dean.

"Usually grabbing food without asking first is something people in relationships do." Dean realized that Cas wouldn’t understand what he meant by 'relationships.' "Like romantic relationships."

Cas thought quietly in shotgun for what seemed like a whole minute. Dean debated asking if Cas was alright, but he eventually nodded in understanding.

"I misrepresented the boundaries of our relationship, and you were embarrassed," Cas said.

Dean wanted to correct Cas by saying that he'd misrepresented their 'friendship' or 'partnership,' but that would just prolong the already awkward conversation. For a second Dean thought that Cas seemed dejected, but the feeling was fleeting.

11/02/2010

Cas heard Dean's mumbled prayer from several blocks away and teleported to him immediately. Dean was slumped over in an alley, but to Cas's relief he was not injured. He was drunk, more than Cas had ever seen from him before. The small pool of vomit below Dean confirmed that an evening of fun had gone too far.

Carefully, Cas helped Dean upright. Draping one of Dean's arms around his neck, Cas tried to help him walk, but Dean's feet missed their marks badly. After realizing just how intoxicated Dean had managed to become, Cas instead opted to simply carry him. Cas scooped Dean up and was met with only token resistance.

Once Cas had carried Dean back to the motel room, he laid his charge down on the bed. Cas removed Dean's boots and jacket, then made for the belt. He knew that belts were located ominously close to genitalia, so he proceeded with caution. Dean briefly attempted to either aid or stop Cas, but the intent was unclear.

As he turned to go, Dean hooked Cas's right thigh with his arms. Cas looked back down at his pitiful friend. Dean's eyes were barely open and he didn't seem fully capable of lifting his head enough to look Cas in the face.

"Don't go," Dean almost whispered. His free hand reached up to grab at Cas's trench coat, but ended up just awkwardly dragging down Cas's side. When Cas reclined on the bed, with his head propped up against the headboard, Dean buried his face into the tan trench coat. He patted Cas's chest a few times, then told him, "Don't leave me.... I don't wanna be alone."

Cas placed a hand on Dean's back in a weak attempt at providing comfort. After some contemplation, Cas realized that it was November 2nd, the anniversary of Dean's mom's death. They had known each other for less than a year, but in the months they’d spent on the road Cas felt
he had gained a significant understand of his companion. As much as Dean seemed committed to the life of a hunter, it was not his choice. It was ingrained in him from a young age as a result of his mother's death. Cas supposed there was a lot for Dean to mourn every anniversary.

The next morning, Dean woke up with almost no hangover, but that wasn't what he noticed first. He had somehow managed to end up half-snuggling with—or at least against—Cas. Dean's head was pillowed on Cas's abdomen and lower chest. His right arm wrapped around the angel's torso and his right leg crossed over and intertwined with Cas's. Cas's arm softly held Dean's back, acting as support.

Dean looked up at Cas, who was just sitting there quietly waiting for Dean to wake up. Their eyes met, about a foot apart, and Dean suddenly was the one who hadn't understood personal space. He blushed below his freckled cheeks when Cas smiled at him, then hastily untangled their limbs. Dean scooted backwards off the bed, making some vague statement he couldn't be bothered to think through, about needing the bathroom before slipping away.

Once in the bathroom, Dean started to process the situation. He'd gone out drinking the night before because he was sad and lonely. His plan to find a woman to hook-up with had failed; not for lack of interested woman. Two had given him the nod. But when it came time to jump, he just wasn't feeling it. In his confusion and frustration, he'd drank more than he should've.

Cas had found him and brought him back to the motel. He had asked Cas to stay because he needed someone, but not in a fleeting physical way like he would've had with one of the women. The thing he'd needed was a source of emotional support.

That realization hit Dean a little harder than he would've thought possible, but there were two other discoveries that were equally troubling: he hadn't woken up in a cold sweat or crying. It was probably only the third time in almost two years that he hadn't dreamt of Hell. Maybe it was his intensely drunken state or maybe he just felt safer not sleeping alone.

The other realization was that he was partially hard. He normally didn't mind morning wood, except when it was potentially sending mixed signals to his friends. Dean touched his jeans to try to figure out if the bulge had been visible to Cas. He had intended to only readjust his pants and wait for it to go away, but when he touched his dick to move it he reconsidered. It'd been weeks—probably a month—since he'd masterbated, and Cas knew that the bathroom was off-limits while the door was shut.

Dean started a warm shower and climbed in. He started thinking about the blonde he'd met at the bar—Mindy, he was pretty certain. She'd been wearing a tight pink dress that barely held in her breasts. Visualizing her was okay. She was attractive, but it wasn't really doing it for him. He was older, more mature, and apparently the idea of casual sex had lost some of its appeal. He wanted more than just some brief physical connection. He wanted a real relationship. Last night, his instincts had turned him away from the one night stand and Cas had taken care of him. Cas had brought him back to the motel, cleaned him up, and stayed with him through the night. Cas had patiently lay there while he had grabbed at him and embraced him. Cas had—

Dean's eyes rolled back and his thoughts went foggy with bliss for a few seconds. He felt a moment of complete relaxation, then the panic began to creep into his mind. He'd just jerked off to Cas without even really working at it. Since Hell, masterbating had become an exercise in healthy living that he really had to put effort into, not the fun release it used to be. Many of life's little pleasures had lost their thrill since Hell, and he'd assumed that that was how it'd always be going forward, but it turned out he was wrong....
But Cas was a guy—sort of. He’d known attractive guys before, even enjoyed looking at them occasionally, though definitely not as much as he enjoyed looking at women. Yet he’d never jerked off to one before. He felt a knot form in his stomach. It wasn’t just the fact that he’d touched himself while thinking about a guy. It was that it came so easily. If he was honest with himself, at that point Cas was probably the best thing in his life.

Dean rested his forehead against the shower wall. He tried to think about something else: their current job; whether they could fit in another hunt before heading back to camp for Kaylee’s first birthday; anything. But he couldn’t focus on the distractions. There was one crack too many and the levee was starting to crumble. His shoulders slumped as he started shaking in spite of the warm shower. Tears began running down his face.

He was confused and ashamed. Somehow he’d gone from being one of the toughest hunters around to crying in the shower over a guy. He had thought about a man and that was wrong—for him. As far as he was concerned, if other people were gay that was their business, but he couldn’t be having those feelings. He wasn’t supposed to be like that. He was supposed to love hunting, muscle cars, hard alcohol, rock and roll, a good fight, bad beer, and easy women. He was a man’s man—Dean hit his head lightly against the tile wall.

Taking a mental step back, it wasn’t that he was super attracted to Cas physically. It was more the relationship that they shared that Dean appreciated. He’d had friends before. Not many, but when your life was as intense as a hunter’s, strong bonds could form quickly. But none of his friends had ever been like Cas. All of his friends were good for a few fun days or a week tops before he needed some space. Yet Dean had been more or less on the road with Cas for ten months, and he hadn’t gotten tired of him.

The angel was a little strange at times, but he had a sincerity that Dean cherished and it seemed like he always had some new facet to reveal. Initially, Cas’s skill at making small talk had been horrible, but eventually Dean had realized that he was perfectly willing and able to engage in lengthy substantive conversations just fine. Maybe the idea of talking about anything and everything with someone should’ve scared him, but it was strangely freeing and thrilling. For the last few weeks he’d even thought about telling Cas what he remembered from Hell. He’d been scared to be that vulnerable with Sam, Bobby—even Ruby, who might be able to relate, but Cas was different. Cas was different than everyone. Dean clenched his eyes and cursed.

After getting out of the shower, Dean popped his head out from behind the bathroom door and asked Cas to run a few errands. He made some excuse about wanting to take a slower morning after the long night. Cas didn’t question it, and left to fill up the Impala, grab Dean some breakfast, get directions to their next stop, and more.

As soon as Cas was gone, Dean walked out of the bathroom dressed from the waist down. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he grabbed his cell and called Sam.

After a few rings Sam picked up. His voice was groggy, but attentive. “Dean, everything okay?”

“Yeah, Cas and I are fine,” he assured his brother. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Um... Sure.” Dean could hear a rustling noise and Ruby’s voice in the background.

“If this is a bad time....” Dean began to take the opportunity to retreat from the conversation. He rolled his eyes in frustration at his own cowardice.

“No, it’s fine. I was going to get up in a few minutes anyway.” Dean felt like an ass for calling at
what was 6:20am where Sam was, but his time away from Cas was limited. "What's up?"

"Well, you know how Cas asks a ton of questions? He asked me what it's like to be in love." Sam's end was silent, so Dean hastily continued, "I don't really know what to say. I had that thing with Cassie a few years back, but that was only a few weeks—how am I supposed to know if that was love?"

"Wow. Uh...." Sam sighed, then said, "This is kinda heavy talk for before I've had any coffee."

"Sorry man. This was dumb." He could feel himself blushing. "I shouldn't—"

"No, no. I don't mind. Just give me a second." Dean could hear Sam shut a door, then walk around. Sammy was probably trying to find some privacy too. "I'm probably going to give you a bad answer. I haven't really thought about this stuff much."

"What's there to think about? It's feelings—just describe." Dean quickly added, "You're in love with Ruby, right? Or am I completely embarrassing us both?"

"I think it's safe to say we're both embarrassed," Sam replied, a little amusement audible in his voice. "But, yeah, I think I'm in love with Ruby."

"You think?" Dean asked in alarm. Sam's uncertainty was unnerving, both because he wasn't sure how good Sam's intel would be and also because it might mean that you could be in love and not even know it.

"What do you want from me? It's not like this stuff comes with a manual," Sam muttered. "Ruby and I... haven't actually said the words—but, I mean, things are pretty great, and I'm happy, so whatever."

Dean chewed his lip for a moment. "But when did you know that there was something more to your relationship?"

"Well, I realized I had a thing for her after a few months, but I didn't want to do anything about it."

"Scared it might mess up your friendship?" Dean asked, then mentally kicked himself for being too obvious.

"Yeah." Sam yawned. "And I was scared she might break all my limbs on the way out. Anyway, a month or two later things just got physical one night. Then she suggested we do friends-with-benefits."

Dean held his cell phone away from his head for a second and groaned while rolling his eyes. Of course his little brother would stumble into that kind of luck. "Seriously? You had commitmentless sex with a babe thrown at you?"

Sam chuckled, then replied, "Yeah, well it turned out to be more commitment than expected."

"Kaylee?"

"Actually, no. I started to fall for her before we found out she was pregnant," Sam explained as Dean peeked out the blinds to confirm that the Impala was still gone. "It's like that metaphor about turning the heat up on the pot of water with the frog. It just sort of sneaks up on you. The littlest things that she did made me feel better. It felt natural and infinite—like I could spend all my time with her no matter what we were doing because she's.... It's like I felt like I had a home, and it was
wherever she was…. I didn't really get that until recently."

Dean nodded even though no one could see him. Sam hadn't ever really experienced the security and comfort of having a real home. From six months old until he went to college, he'd only ever known motel rooms and occasional sleepovers at hunters' houses. Dean imagined that dorm life had provided some stability, but how much could you really feel connected to a place that was meant to be transitional?

"I'm glad you found that," Dean told him.

"Thanks," Sam said. Dean could hear some action in the background, then Sam sighed. "I love them, but I wish I could have one fucking day where I sleep in until ten."

"Sorry about calling so early."

"Like I said, it's fine. I hope that helps with Cas."

"Yeah, I think I get it." Dean rubbed the stubble on his cheek. "As thanks, I'll watch Tom and Kaylee when I get back. You can finally sleep in."

Sam immediately replied, "I don't care if that town is overrun with vampires or zombies or werewolves—you're going to drop everything and drive non-stop until you get here."

Dean laughed. "We'll see you in a few weeks."

"Coward."

Chapter End Notes

Destiel... after only like 210,000 words. Sorry to any Destiel shippers for making you guys wait so long. I’ve been looking forward to this reveal for so long. It’s made writing Dyaniel extra enjoyable.
Dean reran Dyaniel’s words in his head a few times before saying, "I-I’m sorry.  I thought you said ‘Castiel.’"

"I did," Dyaniel confirmed.

Dean’s mouth anxiously tried to form words that his brain hadn’t quite figured out yet.  He was too confused by many aspects of the conversation, not the least of which was how Dyaniel could be so damn calm about this whole thing.  The kid didn’t seem to understand the absurdity of the situation.

"The robotic angel in the suit is your mom?" Dean asked again in the hopes of getting a different answer.

Dyaniel corrected, "Xe.  Yes."

"That’s crazy.”  Dean exhaled the words while shaking his head, but then his tone turned defensive.  “That doesn't make any sense. He seems okay or whatever, but there’s so much wrong there I don't even know where to begin."

Dyaniel's expression changed almost imperceptibly, but Kaylee and Tom knew him well enough to recognize that he was scowling at Dean.

"Dean, you're gonna want to back off."  Tom stepped forward to get a little between Dean and Dyaniel.  He wasn't expecting a fight to actually break out, but there was an element of uncertainty to this entire situation.

"He's the one saying that I'm…."  Dean didn't actually know what he'd been told.  If angels really didn't have a gender, maybe Castiel was in a woman.  But completely aside from them possibly calling him gay, they were implying that he had a relationship with some emotionless angel... or at least that they’d had sex.  Maybe it was an accident?  He got drunk and Castiel was in some hot woman?  He'd had plenty of drunken one-night-stands before.  There had to be a reasonable explanation.  "I'm not trying to be a dick, but I think there's gotta be a mistake or something I'm missing.  First of all, in my time Cas is wearing a guy, and, secondly, he's not exactly Mr. Personality.  So you can see why this is all coming a bit out of nowhere."

"Cas is maybe a little awkward at times, but he's just as complex and emotional as anyone," Kaylee commented.

Dean heard the 'he' and found it alarming.  "You said 'he,' but Cas has been a woman," Dean countered.  "I'm no expert on angels, but last time I checked humans still needed to fuck the opposite sex to have a kid."

"My xe took a female vessel, but it was temporary," Dyaniel explained as his cousins watched him
for any tells.

Dean was scrambling to rationalize Cas only having a female body briefly. Could a vessel be destroyed? Was there an emergency? "It was temporary—like a fluke? We drank too much or it was a foxhole kind of situation?"

Dylaniel openly glared in a move that Dean found unsettling. The nephilim turned and nodded to Kaylee and Tom. "I'm going on rounds. You can call for me if you need something."

"Dyl, you—" Tom started, but he was already gone.

"Dammit." Kaylee collapsed into her chair in annoyance. She threw her hands up at Dean. "Really? You've got to be so touchy about this?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" He stood up and paced. "You guys are feeding me all this stuff that's completely insane and I'm just trying to make sense out of it."

"You basically just asked him if he was an accident."

"I'm not trying to insult him," Dean said in his defense.

"That is a pretty fucked up thing to hear from a parent," Tom quietly commented.

"I'm not his parent!" Dean spun around as he shouted. He'd had enough of dealing with the other Dean's goddamn life. "I didn't fuck his mom or xe or whatever. I don't know what kind of sick, freak occurrence made that happen—"

Kaylee snapped, "You know what? Stop before I stop you!" Dean opened his mouth to talk, but she cut him off. Her expression had turned venomous. "Dean, we'll tell you what we're gonna tell you and you can believe it or not, but don't go telling us it's bullshit when you don't know. This isn't your time. This is our time and you need to remember that. You think this stuff with our uncles is insane? Well you can ask them tomorrow. In the meantime, have a little fucking composure. Dyl has seen his parents take enough grief. He doesn't need that shit from you."

Dean was shaking from shock, frustration, and being yelled at by someone he was beginning to think of as a friend. He was thoroughly confused by everything that was going on, but he did catch part of what she'd said. "I'm gonna see them tomorrow?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "This'll be fucking great."

1/30/2011

Dean fell to his hands and knees. The leader of the angels walked up behind him and grabbed a fistful of his hair. He pulled Dean upright into a kneeling position, then pressed the tip of his angel blade to Dean's sternum. Blood dripped from a gash on Dean's left cheek, his right arm was probably broken, and his angel blade had been lost in the brawl.

Cas had been similarly disarmed in the grossly unfair fight. It had been six against two, which would have normally triggered them to flee, but the group of angels had found some way to block Cas's ability to teleport. Unable to run, the result of the fight was largely inevitable with the only question being whether Dean would be taken alive or killed.

"Castiel." The leader, Ziniel, began stating the interim judgment. "For your crimes against Heaven, you will be imprisoned until true and fearsome judgment may be brought upon you—"
Cas interrupted. "Please, spare him." His words were directed at their captors, but he was staring at Dean.

"We have explicit orders," Ziniel replied. "He will be taken to Michael."

"You can't take him to Michael." Cas didn't know what Michael wanted with Dean, but he knew it was nothing good. The archangel had no concern for the welfare of humans. Whatever Dean was wanted for, his well-being was not going to be a factor at all. Maybe he'd be tortured for information regarding Sam, executed for all of the angels he'd killed, or used as a hostage in a game with stakes that were too high? "Please, I'm begging you to let him go."

Cas's humility made several of the angels visibly uncomfortable. An angel begging was almost unheard of, but to plead for a human was unimaginable. The angel holding her blade to Cas's throat looked at Dean, then at Cas in confusion.

"You will be imprisoned for treason and you only ask about him?" Her voice was more curious than critical. "Why do you even care?"

"If you take him to Michael, I'm sure he will be destroyed…. If he is destroyed, then I will be as well—beyond anything that Heaven could inflict on me directly." Cas pulled his gaze away from Dean, then stared at Ziniel with conviction. "I'm in love with him."

The angels looked at each other with uncertainty. The suggestion that an angel could be in love was taboo. To some angels the idea was absurd, but to others it was offensive. Ziniel scowled and tugged on Dean's hair, making his eyes water.

Dean's jaw dropped and his lips moved, unable to form words. He'd been struggling with the impossibility of his feelings for months. It had been insane to think that Cas could ever have those thoughts too, so he had tried to bury his own. But Cas had confessed them... too late.

"Love is a human emotion. Our kind is above base emotions. You're just confused by your illness. You're wrong," Ziniel said as he bared his teeth in a showing of anger. The irony of his statements was lost in the wake of Cas's confession.

"Read my mind and tell me how wrong I am," Cas replied defiantly.

It was considered inappropriate for one angel to read another's mind unless given permission. This courtesy was even extended to hostile angels, though Cas had always taken the precaution of actively trying to shield his thoughts. But now he let down his guard slightly, just enough to allow his feelings for Dean to be displayed.

Curiosity got the better of the six angels. There was a painfully long pause while Cas's most personal confession was laid out on display for their captors... and Dean. Dean barely moved, but for a small trembling and watering eyes that bordered on tears. Hael looked at Dean for a few seconds, then moved her angel blade half an inch off of Cas's neck.

"It's no secret that you are sick. But I had no idea that you'd allowed yourself to be poisoned by these creatures," Ziniel hissed. "You disgust—"

Ziniel pointed his blade at Cas to emphasize his point, but as soon as the angel blade was a foot away from Dean's heart Hael disappeared. Ziniel looked around in confusion for a moment before Hael's blade plunged through his back and out his chest.

There was a split-second pause while the four remaining angels realized what was happening. Hael had chosen sides and now each of them was being forced to do the same. The angel closest
to her lunged at her, but another intercepted him. The remaining two entered the melee, each one trying to aid a different side. It only took a few quick swings before Hael and the two friendly angels were standing over their three dead siblings.

"You two should go before reinforcements arrive," Hael said as she turned away from the bodies to instead look at Cas. "We will tell them you escaped."

"Why are you doing this?" Cas asked.

Her face was painted with disbelief at her own actions, but her lips flickered in joyful revelation. When she spoke, she nearly smiled. "They say that it's an abomination to love a human. We're supposed to be more than them. To love them would make us weak. But you are not weak." She turned from Cas to Dean. "You gain strength from your love for each other. That should be protected, not punished. If you both are to be killed for that... there is something wrong with Heaven, not you."

"Thank you all." Cas nodded to the other angels.

"We may not be many, but you have some allies in Heaven," Hael told them. "Now go."

They teleported back to the living room of Dean's cabin, him still kneeling in mild shock before Cas. He was completely speechless. Some angel had just read his innermost feelings and outed him. He was embarrassed beyond immediate comprehension, but it was also a relief. Being exposed was probably a small price to pay for sparing their lives, and also there was the unforeseen perk of the entire awkward event: Cas had said he was in love with him.

They had both had their feelings for each other brought out into the open. No more long nights lying in bed trying to decide whether to say anything. No more wondering whether Cas's borderline-intimate interactions were just an incomplete knowledge of customs or something more. It was exciting and terrifying all at the same time.

Dean stared up at Cas for a moment, scared to do anything that might be the wrong thing, but Cas smiled in a way that was strangely reassuring. Dean stood up slowly and shifted nervously.

"You're hurt," Cas observed. "Can I heal you?"

Cas had never asked for permission to heal him before, but Dean understood that he was trying to be respectful of his confused feelings. Dean could feel the trickle of blood cooling on his left cheek. He nodded. Cas held Dean's right arm with his left hand, reached out and cupped Dean's cheek gently, healing the flesh below. It produced a delicate tingling sensation that made Dean close his eyes for a few seconds.

"Cas, I'm not sure what to do." He spoke with an out-of-character helplessness.

Cas tilted his head, indicating his thoughtful reflection on the situation. The familiar gesture made Dean feel safer, if not less vulnerable.

"Can I try something?" Cas asked.

Dean's pulse started to rise. He wasn't entirely sure what Cas was planning. No one ever knew what Cas was about to do and he knew the angel better than anyone in existence. Cas was fearless, passionate, and intelligent, but all of that was hidden below a calm exterior as level and unmoving as a frozen lake.
"Okay," Dean exhaled.

Cas's fingers slid back to interlace with Dean's dirty blonde hair. He stepped forward, pressing his lips against Dean's just as Dean finished taking in a startled breath. The first thing that Dean noticed was the softness of Cas's lips. He had assumed that for some reason guys must be rougher than women, but Cas's lips were some of the softest he'd ever felt.

There were things about Cas that were predictably not feminine, but that didn't bother him as much as he'd expected. Like when Dean moved one hand over Cas's shoulder to pull him closer—he'd never made out with someone almost his own height. Or when they kissed harder, their mouths opening slightly and Dean felt his chin drag across Cas's five o'clock shadow. The scratching sensation was surprising, both in its newness and in the excitement it produced in Dean's gut. He gasped, then gripped Cas tighter and kissed him deeper.

In recent weeks, Dean had occasionally wondered what it'd be like to kiss Cas. Knowing the two of them, he had expected it to be awkward and clumsy. He wasn't entirely wrong. Cas barely knew what he was doing, but that was okay. Dean was also out of his element. The thing he hadn't seen coming was that he didn't care that it was clumsy, that their noses bumped together, that Cas bit his lip a tad too hard, or that Cas didn't know what to do with his hands. It felt good.

Dean just went with it, trying not to overthink it. Instead he just felt it out. Somewhere in the excitement his instincts took over. In his eagerness he unconsciously moved them forward, backing Cas into a wall. They fumbled their way to the bedroom, knocking down a picture frame in the process. In their frenzy, he found himself tumbling backward onto his bed, pulling Cas with him by the collar of the tan trench coat. Without breaking from the kissing, Dean slid a hand up under Cas's suit jacket and pulled him closer. Then it happened.

When Dean pulled Cas down onto him, his erection rubbed against Cas's hip, but Cas's erection also pressed against him. Both of them were still fully clothed, but the feeling was unmistakable. Dean was completely distracted from their intimate moment. Cas's dick was sizable, like his own, and suddenly Dean felt entirely out of his depths. He had no idea what to do—well, he had some idea, but he wasn't ready to plow ahead into such new territory just yet.

Dean stopped kissing Cas, who had also given in to a more instinctual approach. Cas leaned in to kiss Dean's neck below the jawline and Dean reflexively tilted his head back to allow better access. He had begun grinding against Dean, making them both harder. Everything was happening so fast. Dean started to feel overwhelmed. He put a palm on Cas's chest and pushed up gently.

"Cas, hey—slow down," Dean said, causing Cas to immediately stop mid-grind, with their hard dicks still pressed between them. "I think we should take things slower than this."

Cas pushed his upper body away from Dean and the bed, so that he could look Dean in the eyes. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No! It's not that. I've just—I've never... done stuff with a guy." He felt like his stomach had knotted from just saying the words. The idea of going any farther conjured images of him having a full-on panic attack. "I'm gonna need a little time to wrap my head around this.... I don't want to fuck this up; not with you."

"I'm fine with whatever you need."

"Just some time," Dean reassured him. "Maybe taking one step at a time."

"Can I still kiss you going forward?" Cas asked hopefully.
"Oh, fuck yes—but let me tell Sam about us before you start doing it around anyone else."

"Okay. When are you going to tell him?" Cas didn’t seem to appreciate just how large a gesture talking to Sam would be. The angel looked expectantly down at Dean, who swallowed hard and nodded to himself.

"I can do it," he said as both a reply and self-encouragement. "I can do it... once I can walk easier."

"What do I do about this?" Cas indicated his own erection.

"You can use my shower," Dean suggested. Seeing Cas's confused expression he added,"You'll figure it out."

"Hey, Sammy. Can I talk to you for a sec?" Dean asked as he entered his brother's cabin.

"Sure. What's up?" Sam was lounging in a chair reading a book to Kaylee, who was sitting on his lap. The Mysterious Stranger was far beyond the comprehension of an eighteen-month-old, but she entertained herself by playing with a toy dragon while Sam gently bounced her on his knee.

"So, um, I wanted to tell you...." Dean took a deep calming breath. "Cas and I are gonna try something out."

"Okay. What?"

He was struggling to find the right words. 'Dating' seemed silly. It wasn’t like they were gonna go to the movies and share popcorn—things were too crazy right then and who knew if Cas even liked movies. Maybe he could try watching a movie with Cas one of the nights they were at the camp or in a motel room that had halfway decent cable—Dean cursed his anxious mind for trying to change the subject.

"Being a—well—more than friends."

Sam put down his book and straightened up in his chair. Dean could feel his ears and cheeks turning red. He wouldn't have been surprised if he'd have died of a heart attack in that moment, waiting to see how Sam would react.

"You guys are, like, going to be a couple?" Sam's eyebrow raised and he smiled.

"I guess."

"That's great! I'm happy for you two."

"Really?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" Sam's brow furrowed in confusion, then his smile started fading. Dean looked terrified. He was sweating and trembling slightly. Sam hadn't seen him so upset in about a year, during his last stress-and-Abyssal-induced panic attack. "Did you think I'd be upset?"

"I don't know.... I thought that.... I'm not sure." Dean rubbed his face in a move that disguised him wiping some moisture from his eyes.

"Dean, I'm not Dad. I don't care if Cas is a guy or angel or whatever. I just want you to be happy." Sam was trying to be reassuring and firmly lay out his position.
"I just…." Dean's eyes darted around uncomfortably before settling on Sam's shirt. "I know you're not Dad, but I couldn't help thinking of what he'd say. He'd be so pissed at me."

"Pissed at you? Seriously? I'm the King of Hell and am in a serious relationship with a demon." Sam held up Kaylee. "My daughter has horns. You think Dad would really be pissed at you?"

"I'm probably gonna end up blowing a guy," Dean confessed weakly.

Sam nodded his head in acknowledgement of Dean's point. "Dad had really weird priorities." They both frowned for a few seconds, then Sam smiled at Dean excitedly. "When you called me that morning for advice on how to explain being—"

Dean raised his hand to silence Sam, but it just made Sam smile more broadly.

"You're in love with Cas?" Sam asked in a combination of teasing and gleeful gushing.

"Fuck. I guess. I don't know, man. I mean, it's not like I'm going through all this"—Dean waved his arms around trying to indicate all the stress he'd been experiencing related to his feelings —"because I want to hit it and quit it."

Hael teleported into the clearing between the cabins. She spotted Dean sitting on the floor of Sam and Ruby's porch. He was doing some repair work on the arm rail. A pile of partially burnt wooden beams had been discarded next to the steps. She walked up to Dean.

"How's it going Hael?" Dean asked without getting up.

"Hello, Dean. Everything is fine. I just wish to ask my brother for some advice. Where's Castiel?"

"I'm not sure," Dean answered, but clenched his jaw and evaded Hael's gaze.

"Is something wrong?"

"There's trouble in paradise," Sam said as he collected an armful of charred wood to relocate to a kindling pile.

"Cas and I had a fight. It's not a big deal," Dean said as he finished sanding an edge on the arm rail. He blew off the sawdust and leaned back against a support beam.

"What was the disagreement about?"

Dean ran his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes briefly before answering. "Cas thinks I should have a kid before I'm too old."

He was almost forty. Silver peppered his hair, though it wasn't obvious from far away. His face still had a beauty to it, but when he was tired lines of rough years were visible. Cas had recently started subtly healing Dean while he slept, trying to fight the normal aging process, but they hadn't been at it long enough to tell how effective that plan might be.

"And you do not want to have children?" Hael asked uncertainly as she took a seat on the porch beside Dean.

"It's not that. I just… I don't want to cheat on Cas—that's not the right way to say it…. I know it's silly, but if he can't have a kid, then I don't know."
He looked around to see if anyone else was in earshot. Sam had gone off to help Bobby teach Kaylee some of the basics of power tools over at Bobby’s. Ruby and Tom were starting Alex out on Magic 101. The boy needed to learn some control or else they’d have another burnt-up porch to replace.

"It's my understanding that human male same-sex couples routinely have one partner be a biological parent," she commented.

"That's true, but just because it's normal doesn't mean it solves the problem.... I know I'm being stubborn." He sighed, then looked up at the partially cloudy sky. It would start getting dark soon and there was too much left to do. Reluctantly, he started packing up his toolbox.

"You want to have a child that is technically the offspring of you and Castiel?"

"I know how insane that is." He was embarrassed by how childish he’d been. Cas was just trying to make him happy and he’d turned it into a fight because he was being stubborn.

After a long pause, Hael said something that completely derailed his self-loathing. "He could use this vessel."

"What?"

"Castiel and I are from similar enough choirs that we shouldn't damage each other's vessels to a significant extent. I believe that I could temporarily exchange vessels with him. You two could try to conceive. My vessel would not be perfectly compatible for him, but it should still function in many respects."

Dean was a little taken aback by her generous offer. "That's nice of you...." He was not entirely sure the full implications of what she was offering. "But he's still an angel."

"It's....” She looked a little uncomfortable with the topic. “It's technically possible for angels and humans to breed. It's just a blaspheme."

"You're serious."

He was stunned. Cas had said that there were only a fixed number of angels, created by God. Assuming that God stayed missing-in-action, every death of an angel was a permanent loss for their population. There were no baby angels and he'd never heard of a half-angel, so he had just assumed that the entire species was sterile.... Well, physically he'd be having a kid with Hael's soulless vessel, but there had to be something more to it than that if Heaven deemed it blasphemous.

"Any children you two have would be considered a crime against Heaven. Angels loyal to the laws of Heaven would try to kill it," she warned.

"How's that different than any other member of this family?"

"Hi, Hael," Ruby said while briefly glancing up from some notes.

She was seated at their dining table double-checking Tom's calculations for a luck spell while Sam was making dinner. Dean coming over wasn't a surprise; he'd been promised free reign of their superior kitchen as compensation for helping with repairing the porch. Hael following him in was a little unusual though.
"Actually, that's Cas," Dean corrected while gesturing at the petite blonde woman to his right. Ruby and Sam both stopped what they were doing to stare.

"I'm temporarily exchanging vessels with Hael," Cas explained.

"I didn't think that was possible," Sam commented as he turned down the stove so that he could give the strange development his undivided attention.

"It's difficult and uncomfortable," Cas admitted.

"Then why are you doing it?"

Dean couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. "Cas and I are gonna try to have a kid."

"That's great!" Sam grinned with giddy excitement.

"About damn time." Ruby nodded in approval, then thought of something. "Cas, have you ever been in a female vessel before?"

"No."

"Oh, sweetie, come with me." Ruby got up from the table, grabbed Cas's arm and started walking her out of the room. "We need to have a little talk girl-to-girl."

"I understand how to copulate," Cas muttered defensively.

"It's so cute that you think that's all we're gonna talk about." Ruby patted Cas's back before kicking the bedroom door shut behind them.

"Maybe we should've stopped her?" Sam mused.

"He's like billions of years old. What could she possibly say to spook him?" Dean shrugged, then strolled into the kitchen. He started digging through the cupboards for supplies.

"Now I really want to know what they're talking about." Sam's brow furrowed in a mixture of embarrassment and mild concern.

Dean noticed the look on Sam's face, then eyed the bedroom door. "Ditto."

Dean started seasoning a few steaks while Sam returned to working on his vegetarian hash.

"So, you're probably excited. Cas as a woman," Sam said while cutting up some fresh herbs. Dean made a noncommittal noise that surprised Sam into looking up. "What? No judgement—I just thought that you might miss women. It's been...."

"About ten years," Dean filled in the blank. Sam nodded, impressed with how much time had passed since Dean had hung up his womanizer hat. Dean sighed, then continued, "Don't make fun of me, but I want to get this over with and get Cas back in his body as fast as possible.... It's gonna be weird."

"But it's still Cas."

Dean stopped fiddling with the steaks and looked at Sam. "Have you and Ruby ever messed around with her in a different body?"

Sam frowned slightly at the thought, then smirked. "You still remember where to—" he started, but
Dean threw a handful of steak seasoning at him, hitting him in the face.

Dean supposed Hael’s vessel was pretty. It had blue eyes, but not nearly as vibrant a blue as Cas’s male vessel. Her hair was blonde and fairly straight. She had full lips and a pair of D cups. A decade ago Dean would've happily taken a tumble with a woman who looked like her, but that was before he got married. It wasn't that he didn't find women attractive; it was just not want he was looking for anymore. He'd been with Cas, in the male vessel, for over eight years. That was what he'd become used to. Rationally he knew that Cas was still Cas regardless of the vessel, but it made him uncomfortable to be trying something so different from what they were used to doing as a couple.

They were in their bedroom. Cas stood a little awkwardly next to the bed. She didn't know how to start the process and he wasn't making it any easier. He was obviously nervous. When Cas leaned in for a kiss, Dean returned it with his lips chastely closed. He pulled back.

"I'm sorry, babe. It's just hard—" Dean rolled his eyes "—not as easy with you like this."

"Do you want call it off?" Cas asked.

"No! No. I just need to get used to it." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be fine."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Just please don't take this personally. I just see you one way in my head." Dean closed his eyes in demonstration. "I know you're not your vessel, but it's all I get to see of you—and with you in our friend's vessel... it's just... weird."

"I understand. I have an idea." She went to the nightstand and drank the fertility elixir that Ruby had prepared for them, then turned out the lights. She moved back over to Dean and kissed him again.

He tried to imagine Cas's male vessel, which was made a harder by the female vessel being half a foot too short. But the few drops of the elixir that he tasted on her lips seemed to give him a small thrill. He couldn't tell if it was partially an aphrodisiac or if it was the excitement of realizing they were really about to try to have a kid, but either way he appreciated it.

They each started undressing themselves to avoid bringing more attention to Cas's new body. Dean managed to find some lube in the dark and started stroking himself hard. When he was ready he climbed on top of Cas, who had lay down on the bed.

Looking down Dean could see Cas's bare breasts and long blond hair in the dim light. He grabbed her and flipped her over onto her hands and knees.

"Should I—" Cas began, but her voice was jarringly feminine.

"Cas, I love you, but please don't talk right now." Dean cringed internally with guilt, but he pushed it from his mind. After a few quick strokes, Dean lined himself up and pressed into her. Cas was so tight that for a second Dean worried he'd missed his mark. In the darkness he scowled at the idea that Sam's teasing might've been right, but then Cas pushed back against him in encouragement.

Dean grabbed her hips, which were a little too full, but that didn't stop him. He looked up towards the ceiling and tried to imagine Cas's wings rocking back and forth with each thrust. In hindsight, he probably should've tried harder to make Cas cum, but for their first time having hetero-sex, he
Six months later Dean ran through the center of the camp, threw open Sam and Ruby’s front door, then shouted, “Cas is pregnant! We’re gonna have a kid!”

He excitedly hopped up and down as soon as he got inside their home. Sam rushed over and tackled him with a hug, accidentally knocking the two man-children over into a coat rack.

During the pregnancy Dean ended up doting over Cas more than anyone had expected. It was partially from anticipation, but also it was his chance to show affection that didn’t require physical intimacy. Cas hadn’t left the camp since they had started trying to conceive for fear that the strain on the incompatible vessel might further complicate the pregnancy. Dean occasionally would visit army’s bases for a day or two each week, but for the most part he diligently focused on his family.

There was almost no information available on nephilim. Historically, there had only been five documented cases, and all that was known about them was largely an oral history from the group that had killed them.

The most well-known nephilim were the twin brother and sister, Seraph and Sophia. In spite of the policy of angels not to document nephilim, the siblings had managed to make it into an old hunters’ codex. Their entry in the codex didn’t describe their angelic mother or the fact that more than half of their known kills were of angels, but those details were provided by Cas. It did, however, describe them as hunters from the mid-sixteenth century with a reputation for speed, guile, and resilience against injuries. They were the longest surviving nephilim, both killed in battle by angels at the age of seventeen.

With so little information, there was a certain amount of new terrain being covered. The most surprising aspect was that the pregnancy progressed faster than an entirely human one. Cas could feel kicking and movement by the eighth week. Going into the fifth month, she looked like she was almost full term.

Cas was at twenty-five weeks when she went into labor. Dean was sleeping when he was woken up by her clutching his wrist. Cas was lying next to him, eyes clenched, holding her belly.

"Cas, babe!"

He touched her back and recognized the tension in her body as being a possible contraction. After a few seconds, she relaxed slightly, releasing his wrist.

"I’m gonna go get help. I’ll be back in less than a minute—I promise."

Cas nodded without opening her eyes. He kissed Cas’s hand, then ran out of their cabin. Once he got within earshot of Sam and Ruby’s cabin he yelled for help. He didn’t bother waiting for anyone to get out of their groggy stupor. Ruby was home that night and didn’t sleep, leaving her practically
on call. The light in her and Sam's bedroom turned on as Dean started running back to Cas.

From the very beginning, Cas's labor was incredibly intense. There was no gradual increase, so despite arriving during only the second contraction, Ruby's expression turned grim. She sat down on the bed next to Cas and pushed some of the hair out of Cas's face. Her vessel was sweating and trembling. Even between contractions, she was having difficulty speaking. Ruby had taken up the role of midwife since she'd given birth twice, but she chewed on her lower lip. She turned to look at Dean.

"Pray for Hael."

Dean went out into the living room and hastily prayed. Nothing happened. Cas cried out from the other room. He prayed again, and once more nothing happened. Dean grabbed a lamp off the desk and threw it at the wall, but it stopped just before impact. Sam lowered the lamp to the floor as he entered the living room and looked at Dean with concern.

"It's too soon," Dean managed through his panic, then anxiously started pacing.

"We don't know that," Sam said, but his words didn't seem to register. In frustration, Sam telekinetically grabbed Dean to stop him from moving. Dean fidgeted, then looked at Sam, who gave his older brother a hug. "I know it's scary, but you've got to calm down and just be there for Cas."

Hael arrived an hour later. He had been resting the borrowed vessel at their Richmond base when he sensed the prayer. He tried to fly directly there, but he had difficulty thanks to the incompatible vessel and trace amounts of an anti-flight aura around the Great Lakes area. It took several tries, but eventually he was able to get through the difficult patch to the camp.

The entire labor was confusing and distressing to Dean. He sat beside his husband, who was trying to give birth at a week that by human standards was dangerously premature, while his friend was wearing his husband's body and trying to assist. It was upsetting on so many levels, but he simply held onto Cas and tried to be as comforting as possible.

After forty-two hours of labor, their son was born. Hael cleaned up the baby, wrapped him in a soft blanket, then handed him to Dean. Once the female vessel was healed, Hael promptly transferred vessels with Cas.

Dean had been transfixed by his son, so when he eventually looked up at the two angels, he wasn’t entirely sure which one was which. Cas, in his male vessel wrapped an arm around Dean and kissed him. Tears started falling down Dean's cheeks as they kissed.

They looked down at their son. His wisps of hair were a bit blonder than Dean's, possibly reminiscent of the female vessel. But his eyes—his eyes were the intense light blue that had only ever existed in Cas's eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Something that I was pretty committed to was making Dean & Cas having a kid be as unsexy as possible. There's a whole lot of graphic sex & accidental pregnancies in fic (look no further than this fic) and I wanted to make Dean & Cas having a kid be as intentional & laborious as I could manage. They made a difficult decision, worked at it
for a while, had it interfere with their normal relationship, & “earned” their son. And that’s something that might take 2009!Dean some time to understand.
After the little fight, Kaylee went to go talk to Dylaniel while Tom did what could only fairly be described as ‘dealing with’ Dean. Tom brought him to another dining hall and made sure he was fed, but didn’t bother getting anything for himself. The entire experience went from feeling like being shown around a new school by friends to being babysat.

Dean regretted the turn, but it wasn’t like he was the one being unreasonable. They were the ones who had dumped a bunch of inconceivable drama on him and gotten upset when he started asking questions. Maybe they couldn’t spot the crazy because of the world they lived in—their entire barometer for that kind of stuff was probably broken. They were sending thousands of people into harm's way without batting an eye. Kaylee was lying to gods. Tom had fucked a demon—well… maybe Tom didn’t fall too far from the tree on that one.

“Do you even remember a time when the world wasn’t insane?” Dean quietly asked Tom, while picking through his bowl of woefully-meatless chili.

Tom looked around the mostly empty dining hall, anywhere other than at Dean. “I’m not really a good judge of that sort of thing.” The witch let out a long sigh, then nodded in greeting to Salviel, who’d come to take over watching Dean. “I don’t think it’s ever been insane.”

“You’re in the middle of the fucking apocalypse and you don’t think the world’s gone nuts?” Dean asked.

Tom got up from his seat and started to leave. “It makes sense to me. Maybe I’m nuts, too—or just open-minded,” he said as he took off without saying goodnight.

After finishing dinner, Dean decided he’d had enough of the day. Everyone was pissed off and needed time to cool down. Eventually, Tom or Kaylee would be able to bring themselves to sit down with him and straighten this mess out. There was some sort of explanation, even if they didn't realize what was worth explaining.

Salviel escorted him to some new quarters that were only two blocks from the headquarters. Unfortunately, she once again diligently followed him into the glorified closet. He wanted to be left alone, without having to worry about someone judging him. He didn't even do anything. It was the other Dean. Sitting down on the hard bed, he had an unpleasant thought.

“Does everyone know….” He wanted to ask about the other him and Cas, but he wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Know what?” she asked as she leaned against the bare wall.
“About Dyl’s… parents.”

“Ah.” She nodded in understanding. “You heard about that. Yeah—the angels at least. I’d be surprised if there was an angel that didn’t know.”

**7/27/2011**

The seraphim charged Dean, who tried to dodge but was clipped by the angel. Dean spun around and stumbled to his knees, yet tried to bounce back in spite of having the wind knocked out of him. Cas moved to block the seraphim from swinging at Dean, but the more powerful angel telekinetically threw Cas aside.

Instead of bringing his blade down on Dean, the seraphim held out its palm. The angel’s eyes began to glow as the hairs on Dean’s arms started to stand on end and the air smelled like ozone. Dean glanced at Cas just in time to see him reach out toward him, then everything went black.

When Dean woke up his whole body ached and his right side felt like it was on fire. He was lying on a combination of asphalt and rubble. With a little effort he lifted his head to look around. There had been an explosion or blast of sorts. A truck had been flipped onto its side. Smoke rose from a crater about thirty feet away. Propping himself up, Dean realized that his right side was covered with a bad case of road rash. He tried standing up, which proved a bit challenging because his balance was shot. His left ear was bleeding and couldn’t hear a thing. That seemed like a small blessing compared to the damned crackling that was coming from his right ear. After a few missteps, Dean reached the edge of the crater, then scrambled down in terror.

Cas was crumpled and bloody, pressed into a pile of debris. Dean felt for a pulse. He was unconscious, which frightened Dean above all else. To Dean’s knowledge Cas had only ever fallen unconscious after fighting Uriel and exerting a huge amount of power. There were obvious injuries to his vessel, but he was physically intact.

Dean carefully dragged Cas into the Impala, drove him to their motel room, then laid the angel on the bed. He had never seen Cas so badly injured and had no idea what to do. Taking him to a hospital wouldn’t do much beyond the surface. The real damage was invisible to human eyes. Kneeling beside the bed, Dean prayed to Hael, begging her to come heal Cas.

After a few seconds she appeared behind Dean. She took a step toward Cas then stopped. Her lips trembled in shock as she put a hand to her mouth.

"Please, you have heal him," Dean begged, but she didn't move.

"I... I can't heal these injuries." Her voice was pained and soft, barely audible over the crackling in Dean’s right ear. She swallowed, then shook some negative thought from her head. "I'm not powerful enough to repair the damage. I can't heal above my choir and this is... I will go to Heaven—I might be able to find...."

"What is it? What do you need?" Dean asked, eager to know what he could do to help.

"An angel wielding more power than the amount that inflicted the harm."

As they were beginning the fight, Cas had told him the angel was a seraphim, the highest choir below archangels. It didn’t sound impossible to find an angel capable of throwing around more power than a seraphim attempting whatever that blast was—it just sounded suicidal. Hael touched Dean’s cheek, healing the road rash, then nodded to him as a parting gesture, but he weakly grabbed her wrist to stop her from leaving.
“Hael, if they find out you’re helping us….” Dean didn’t want to turn down any help he could get for Cas, but he knew that Hael would risk being outed as fallen if she started looking for sympathy in the highest ranks.

“I have to try.” She disappeared.

Dean returned to Cas’s side, then felt his clammy cheeks. The vessel’s breath rattled and cut out intermittently. He leaned down he kissed Cas’s lips, but they tasted like blood. He wiped the blood from his mouth, then the tears from his eyes. Dean ran to the trunk of the Impala, grabbed the tin box, and buried it hastily in the closest crossroads he could find. He waited a few seconds, but when no demon appeared he ran back to the motel room to check on Cas.

Crowley was standing next to the bed, looking down at the angel. The archdemon’s expression was disappointed contemplation. Dean’s heart sank when he wasn’t greeted by some snarky one-liner. The demon’s lips curled down slightly, just like Hael’s had while giving bad news only minutes earlier.

“You’ve got to save him!” Dean was caught between demanding and begging. After all, he had to carry some weight in the demon community.

“I can’t,” Crowley replied in a more neutral tone than he usually put on for Sam’s brother.

“I’ll deal. I’ll do whatever—just don’t let him die!” Dean was panicking. He wasn’t even thinking about having Sam get him out of the Pit on a technicality or through raw nepotism. He was ready to make the hard deal, but Crowley wasn’t taking it.

“I wish I could, but demons can’t just flip the switch on angels. We don’t have that kind of power.” He’d tried Heaven and Hell, with no sign of hope. Human medicine and magical healing had never done much of anything for Cas.

“What am I supposed to do?” Dean asked as he sat down on the bed. A single tear trickled down his right stinging cheek.

“He is an angel,” Crowley observed aloud. “I suggest you pray.”

Sam knocked on the motel room door, then entered. Dean was sitting cross legged on the queen-size bed with Cas’s unconscious body. He was holding Cas’s hand, fingers intertwined with his own, to his lips. Sam could hear Dean finish whispering something before turning to look at Sam.

“Crowley told me.” Sam crouched down, next to the bed and touched Cas’s free hand. “I’m sorry.”

It was a bizarre sight. Sam had never actually seen Cas in a vulnerable state before. Back in New Orleans, Cas had been in decent shape by the time he had regained consciousness. Since then, the two of them had almost exclusively seen each other at the camp when Cas and Dean were between hunts. Dean was the only one that ever really saw Cas’s cuts and bruises.

Similarly, Cas was the only one that ever saw Dean’s affectionate side. Sam had known about their relationship for about six months, but he had barely seen any evidence of it. Occasionally, one of them might briefly squeeze the other’s hand and Dean let slip ‘babe’ a few times while distracted, but otherwise he couldn’t think of a public display of affection that he’d witnessed.

Sam was pretty certain that they had some sort of physical relationship. Dean had mentioned the
possibility when telling him about them. Then there was the time he has called them about an
emergency a month earlier and Cas had hastily teleported them to camp while they both were only
about half dressed. As long as they were happy it was fine with him, but seeing Dean holding
Cas’s hand and nervously kissing it…. It was unsettling to see what was surely Dean’s
vulnerability.

"Hael went to Heaven; she was trying to find help…. She’s been gone for too long." Dean lowered
his head behind his hands, which were still interwoven with Cas’s, blocking Sam’s concerned gaze.

"She’s probably just being careful," Sam suggested hopefully, but Dean barely seemed to hear him.
Silence grew as Sam struggled to think of anything reassuring to say.

"Sammy, he can't die." Dean shook his head, triggering several tears to roll free from his eyes. "I
need him."

"He's tough. How else has he been able to deal with you?" Sam said, trying to break some small
amount of the tension. When a tiny sad smile flickered on Dean's face, Sam told him, “He'll make
it.”

Sam pulled a few strings and was able to get Cas and Dean teleported back to the comfort of their
cabin. For almost two days Dean barely left Cas’s side. He slept beside him, holding his hand. He
ate whatever food was forced upon him, next to the bed. And when he wasn’t eating or sleeping he
was quietly praying for Cas to hear him and wake up.

On the second night, Dean was weakly mumbling the same prayer he’d said a thousand times that
day, when Cas squeezed his hand back. It took several more hours before he was fully conscious.
Cas was still incredibly weak, so they stayed in bed for another day.

On the third day, Dean confided to Cas that the hearing in his left ear was still gone and the slight
crackling in his right wasn’t going away. Once he had a little more strength, Cas tried to heal
Dean. The hope was that the cause of Dean’s hearing loss was the impact on the road instead of
the blast caused by the more powerful angel. After they discovered that Cas couldn’t heal the
hearing loss, Dean spent another day in bed, completely unrelated to Cas’s health. Dean
reluctantly allowed Cas to tell Sam about the situation and within hours Flo was tinkering with
four different models of hearing aids.

On the sixth day, Hael found them in their cabin. She looked a little dazed, but unharmed. After
hugging both Cas and Dean, she took a seat in their tiny living room. They were grateful to see
that she was alive, but Dean wanted to know why she had been completely off the map for almost a
week.

"Are you okay? What happened to you?" Dean tried not to sound too critical of her absence.

"I'm not injured," she assured them. “I’m so sorry I couldn't get here sooner. Heaven is in a state
of unrest. They temporarily closed the gates out."

"What?" Cas was shocked. It had been centuries since Heaven had closed its borders.

"Zadkiel was discovered to be a supporter of you two. He was offered rehabilitation in exchange
for public penance. When he was presented to the Host, he openly rebelled…." She stared at
nothing, recalling the memory. "It was incredible. He killed himself."

"He killed himself?" Cas echoed in disbelief.

"He said, 'We can know love beyond obedience and we can know beauty beyond Heaven. I would
The words made Dean blush with embarrassment, but he pushed the spectacle of his personal life being aired in Heaven from his mind. "I don't understand. If he was a prisoner being marched out to read a script, why didn't a guard try to stop him?"

"This is the first time since Lucifer that an angel rebelling against Heaven didn't merely flee. They probably didn't expect him to end his life over something like personal conviction," Cas speculated.

"Mostly it's sparked confusion," Hael replied. "There's an effort to quell discussion of his death and your relationship. But word of his rebellion has spread faster than anyone expected. It's unbelievable."

"I would've thought the big guys up there would just order everyone to stop talking about it?" Dean mused. "It doesn't really sound like you guys have free speech."

"We're telepathic. We can share thoughts covertly." Hael looked overwhelmed by something akin to joy. "Something's changed though. When we spared your lives and now with Zadkiel's gesture... Some of us... we've... been sharing emotions."

"Emotions?" Cas's voice was uncharacteristically quiet.

"We were trying to be careful who we shared it with so that we aren't found out, but once Castiel's love and Zadkiel's defiance reach the low choir..." Hael was too giddy to finish her statement. She just smiled at them, overwhelmed.

A strange realization hit Dean: she wasn’t feeling something like joy—a cheap angel knockoff. She was feeling the real thing. That’s why she looked so dazed. She was processing a huge amount of emotional information. It was like she’d become infected.... Dean thought back to Ziniel and Uriel referring to Cas’s ‘illness’.... And Zadkiel had just poisoned the well.

"More angels fell." Dean wasn’t even asking a question.

Hael nodded excitedly. "Yes, the cherubs."

"Which ones?" Cas asked.

"All of them. Zadkiel’s defiance entered their choir—they were already familiar with love, but now —" Hael giggled in surprised amusement. "They held a vote—a vote! The results were 328 to 22. All 350 fell a few hours ago."

Cas was in a state of utter shock. "An entire choir can't just fall."

Dean could see it now at least 350 angels, touched down on Earth hours ago, looking for what? Freedom? Sanctuary? He looked between Cas and Hael, then asked, "Is Heaven going after them?"
"I don’t think the higher choirs know what to do," Hael replied. "They can't imprison or kill all of the cherubs. As long as the choir stays united it will be difficult to punish any of them."

"What do you mean?"

"There are a finite number of angels overall and in each choir," Cas explained. "Only God can create new angels and that hasn’t happened since before Lucifer's rebellion. If the cherubs stay in rebellion or are killed, the choir's entire function will be lost."

"So your lowest choir just took itself hostage?"

"Essentially, yes. Heaven has suffered a loss that it can't simply absorb."

And he’d thought they were on Heaven's bad side before....

6/15/2021

Dean stepped out into the street lined with fallen angels, demons, hunters, humans, and more. His left hand tightly held Cas's hand, and his right arm carried their son. Dylaniel had his arms wrapped around his dad's neck. The three-year-old anxiously pulled his massive golden wings close. They wrapped Dean's whole upper body. Dean kissed Dylaniel's forehead and whispered reassurances.

The boy's golden wings were a poignant symbol: they were the same shape as Cas's, but the color gold was reserved for Michael alone. Dean's carried grace had stolen that exclusivity from the archangel, and, more importantly, the privilege had been given to a nephilim.

There had never been a couple that lived so openly in defiance of Heaven's edict against relationships with humans. There had never been a nephilim that wasn't hidden at all costs... and this nephilim was the Sword of Heaven. To Heaven, in some respects the boy was the most despised creature on Earth and yet he was one of the two most sacred humans outside of prophets.

Dean and Cas had debated whether to expose their son to the spotlight that had fixed itself on them a decade earlier. The rumor had slipped out that Dean had had a child and it was fairly common knowledge that he and Cas were married. Though many versions of the initial rumor had spread, one of the least retold iterations was the truth. It had been so hard to believe that they would have a nephilim. And their choice to go public with it was politically earth-shattering.

To all of the onlookers it was big news. Dean and Cas were both celebrities and commanders of the army. But to the fallen angels in the crowd it marked the beginning of an all new age. The couple had inspired a revolution in the way fallen angels treated humans, including starting some intimate relationships. And to see them showing their son with pride gave an extra level of validation and courage to the younger couples.

After they passed several hundred onlookers, Gabriel appeared in the middle of the street before them. The archangel had stripped the concealment from his vessel so that he was identifiable to his siblings. Whispers spread through the crowd as the fallen angels explained to the others that he was their long-lost archangel.

"Hey, kiddo. I'm your uncle Gabe." The archangel reached out to touch the boy in a gesture that unnerved the crowd. To the public it was unclear where he came down on the issue of nephilim, which caused concerned murmurs. But Dean and Cas trusted Gabriel to understand the importance of the moment. He lightly tousled Dylaniel's hair, then softly said, "You're going to do such great things and you don't even know it."
Gabriel hugged Cas, then patted Dean's shoulder. He looked over Dyaniel's wings for a few seconds with an uncharacteristically pensive expression.

Cas smiled at his brother. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for all of Heaven."

"All of Heaven may have been your price of admission," Dean commented. After years of conflict between Earth and Heaven, Gabriel had publicly picked his side. The archangel paused a beat, but didn't acknowledge Dean's words.

"Why didn't someone say nephilim were so damn cute?" Gabriel asked before suddenly pointing to Dean in concern. "Just don't show him to Kali. She's part mother-goddess, after all."

Dean buried his face in the lone starchy pillow provided in his closet-sized temporary quarters. He was beyond confused and embarrassed. He didn’t even want to imagine what the angels must think of him. Over the course of a day and a half, he’d met at least a dozen, not including all the random angels that might've seen him on the street.

They all probably thought he was gay. Had Lena even tried to hit on him? She’d gone after everyone else at the poker game, but passed him up. And Artemis hadn’t snubbed him—had she really sensed his lack of sex or did she just discard the idea that he’d had sex with women…. What the hell did a goddess of chastity even look for? But those thoughts both assumed that more than just the angels knew about the other Dean and Cas. How public was the whole mess?

Kaylee had said that he had a special rapport with the angels. Was that code for the other Dean having a thing for angels? Most of the angels that he’d met so far were nice enough to him, but maybe they thought he fucked angels. No wonder Kaylee had specifically warned him not to have sex with the angels. They all probably thought he was some sort of fetishist.

“I'll be outside if you need something,” Salviel told him before disappearing.

He could hear uncomfortable concern in her voice. He didn’t want her pity—her judgment. He just wanted this embarrassment to be over with. It took far too long to fall asleep.

---------------------------------{ Trigger warning: child abuse and homophobia }----------------------------------

He was in a supermarket with Dad. It was late at night and the store was on the verge of closing. They were making their first stop in some new town, buying supplies before finding a motel.

Dean was looking up at his father. He couldn't remember how old he was—just a kid. Sammy sat in the cart and couldn't have been more than three years old. Dad gave him a short list of items to collect in order to save time. That kind of responsibility gave him a little thrill. He’d take care of it in a flash.

He wandered through the aisles looking for the salt. After a minute or two he found the spices and seasonings section. As he grabbed three cartons of table salt the sound of giggling caught his attention. About twenty feet away he saw two teenage boys kissing by a display case. Dean had never seen two men kiss before. It hadn't even occurred to him that it might happen.

"Get out of here!"

Dean turned around, startled by Dad's voice. He sounded angry and Dean was confused by what he'd done wrong, until he realized that Dad wasn’t talking to him. He was looking at the boys.
"Are you talking to us?" asked one of the boys in a tone that wasn't hostile; it was mostly unsure. Both of the boys inched away from Dad, who took a heavy step forward.

"Yeah, I am. Get the fuck out of my sight." Dad looked disgusted and was fuming. Something was wrong; something that Dean suspected he was too young to understand. But Dad knew all sorts of things.

They bought their supplies and walked to the parking lot in silence. Dad buckled Sam into his car seat while he loaded bags into the trunk. Dean wasn't sure why, but every little sound in the dark parking lot made his heart pound and he eyed the spare sawed-off shotgun they kept in the trunk. Dad appeared beside him, startling him once more.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. Some people don't have any decency. It's sick," Dad muttered. Dean froze, uncertain what he meant. His confusion was probably visible because Dad explained, "You know that there are bad things out there…. Sometimes they can be... well… human."

Dean felt scared. The thing that he didn't understand, it obviously made Dad upset and that was saying something. Dad fought monsters and knew everything about anything. He was basically a superhero.

"It's like with witches. They're humans, but they make bad choices and get involved with some unnatural, perverse stuff." Dad frowned and put a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Does that make sense?"

Dean nodded slowly. Dad said that whatever it was could be human. It was the things that looked human that were the worst because they could be anyone. When you couldn't spot a monster by its appearance, you had to keep an eye out for their behavior. He wasn't exactly sure what he was dealing with, but Dad would tell him more as he needed to know it.

He closed the trunk, then walked around the Impala's bumper. As he turned the corner, he found himself outside a motel. He was leaning next to the Coke machine. There was another boy about his age, maybe twelve or thirteen, standing in front of him. They were chatting about comic books. It'd been so long since he'd had anyone to talk to about comics, he'd completely forgotten about grabbing sodas for Dad and Sammy.

The boy moved closer to whisper a spoiler for the latest issue of Gotham Nights. His left foot was between Dean's shoes. He put one hand on Dean's left shoulder and used the other to cup around Dean's ear. The warm breath of the boy whispering the secret made him feel a bit flush. His pulse rose and he could feel himself turn pink. He wasn't sure why, but he moved in a little closer.

Dad was in a bad mood for the rest of that night and Dean couldn't tell what was wrong until Sammy went into the bathroom to wash up. As soon as they could hear the sound of the shower, Dad turned on Dean.

"I saw you with that boy," Dad snapped. "What the hell were you doing?!

"I was…." He was trying to figure out what Dad was getting at. "What?"

"What is wrong with you? This isn't how I raised you. There's evil and real danger out there, and you're acting like some sort of fucking faggot!" Dad threw up his hands in frustration, which made Dean flinch. He saw Dean's scared reaction and sighed in frustration. "Don't you get it? You have to be tough. You have to choose to be strong. In the face of all this evil—it'll destroy you if you're weak and soft. You can't let those things—those perverts—corrupt you."
He didn't understand why Dad thought he was soft. "I didn't do anything."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. I was—"

Dad slapped his face. It wasn't as hard as it could've been, but it still hurt.

"I'm trying to protect you and Sammy—teach you how to survive; how to be men. And you're running around behind my back kissing boys and who knows what else!"

"You're wrong." Dean wanted to tell him that it hadn't been anything—that they'd just been talking, but he'd screwed up. He'd said the wrong thing.

Dad started taking off his belt while shaking his head in a mixture of disgust and disappointment. He thought about running for it, but Dad could be just as fast as him sometimes. Even if he got away, then what? The same thing, but worse, plus spending the next week scaring Sammy with ominous silence. He'd take the beating and just try harder next time. Next time he wouldn't let the boy touch him. Dean closed his eyes.

--------{ End of trigger warning: child abuse and homophobia }--------

A fiery stinging sensation sliced across his chest. He gasped and yelled, but his screams were muffled and lost in the tens of thousands of other cries. His arms and legs were bound to the rack. The flesh of his torso was pulled tight so that the slightest damage would split the skin. There were only three large gashes across his chest, but that was just because every time he ran out of clean skin his body was restored in order to be destroyed again.

"You know, normally I don't like using a whip." Alastair turned the leather bullwhip in his hands, examining its craftsmanship. "It's so quaint. It's almost childlike in its innocence."

Alastair swung the whip again, cutting another line into his flesh. "You can imagine why it's not in my standard bag of tricks. But for things like you, I make an exception.... It's so nice when the groundwork is already laid out for me." The archdemon leaned against the rack for a more intimate conversation. "Speaking of your father, he was a real piece of work. I tortured him too, you know. I'm honestly surprised; you're not what I expected. I thought that the son of the John Winchester would be... tougher. But you're disappointing. Rather weak... and soft."

Alastair pressed the leather into one of the open wounds on Dean’s chest. He tried to keep a straight face, but his eyes clenched. His mind fought to think of something besides the stinging, but it only brought back bad memories. Thoughts and feelings that he'd tried to bury years ago.

Alastair smiled knowingly as he pressed harder before pulling the whip away.

"John and I had so many wonderful chats. We might've disagreed, but I'll admit I respected his professionalism. He was one of the greats among you hunters... though he did having his weaknesses. It's funny that his weak spot was his boys.” Alastair reconsidered his word choice, then corrected himself. “Not love or anything like that—not that sort of weakness. You were his great shame, his two little burdens. But you probably already knew that with how often he'd abandon you. That baby hellspawn brother of yours and you—so eager to please because deep down, you always knew you weren’t good enough.”

Dean wasn’t even looking at Alastair anymore. The cuts on his chest faded to the background of his thought. He was thinking of the time when he was ten and Dad said that he shot like a girl... how he would anxiously check out the motel room window every few minutes to make sure Dad
never caught them watching ‘girly shows’... the time he was sixteen, sitting at a bus stop at midnight with a busted lip because Dad saw him get too close to a drunk classmate he was walking home.

“You know, he almost left you both so many times, because you were slowing him down. He was ashamed of you, but he wanted Azazel too badly. Your brother, he was the perfect bait and you were just a glorified wet nurse and part-time grunt. Too pathetic to be trusted—until Sam left you both. Then John couldn’t care less if you wandered off to die alone somewhere.” Alastair leaned close to Dean’s ear. “Daddy never came to save you, did he? He only came when Sam was in danger, when his last link to Azazel was hanging by a thread.”

Dean couldn’t help it. It was all too much. Dad was right to be disappointed in him. He didn’t feel strong. He’d been scared to die. He was scared of what was waiting for him. He was scared that he couldn't be strong like Dad. A few tears escaped him. It was sickening to know that Alastair was watching him cry.

“You’re weak. Your dad knew it. I know it. And you know it. There’s no use in fighting this. I’m going to break you, now or tomorrow or after hundreds of years of relentless pain.” Alastair held up the whip again so that Dean could see it. “It’s not like you have anything to look forward to—beyond a choice.”

Alastair was offering the deal again, to end the pain if he agreed to inflict it on others. He couldn’t let himself do it—he wouldn’t let himself do it. He wouldn't break. He wouldn't be weak. He’d find a way to be the kind of man he was supposed to be, the kind of person who wouldn't break. Like his dad had wanted him to be. He wouldn't be soft. He'd take the beating and just try harder. He wouldn't let Alastair in.

Dean wanted to tell Alastair to shove the offer up his ass. He tried to speak, but his mouth and jaw were tightly wrapped in leather. The only sound he could make were smothered groans. Alastair patted his shoulder before getting back into position to use the whip.

"This isn't the time for you to talk. You haven't earned that yet." He pointed the whip to the wide, shallow stone basin below Dean. "You know the rules: when it's full you're allowed ten words."

The Archdemon swung the whip again producing another large cut. A few more drops of blood fell into the basin along with another helpless tear.

"See how much progress we're making. You should start planning your words now. Maybe something to pique my interest.”

Somewhere in the beating he lost his sense of time. The dungeon dimmed strangely. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He could hear the dripping of his blood into the basin, each splash echoing loudly. The other screams had stopped for some reason and he was no longer being beaten.

But he was still up on the rack—bloody, naked, and exposed. He felt like he was being watched. Hadn't everyone been watching him? Judging him? Seeing his weakness and his shame. There was something wrong with him and they all knew it.

His heart was pounding and he felt flush with panic. Heat prickled his flesh. It was overwhelming, the intensity of the watching. Something was staring into his soul.

"They don't understand," a voice echoed within him. "These people don't know you. They want you to be something you aren't."
Dean felt like he might pass out, but he fought to stay awake, to be strong. He was scared to be weak again, to feel helpless and alone. He tried to hang on, though the voice overpowered him.

"This isn't your time. These people aren't your family. You don't owe them anything. You don't need them. I can help you."

Dean woke up in a cold sweat. He got out of bed, then peeked out the diminutive window in his tiny room and saw that it was the middle of the night. Going back to sleep was out of the question. He'd had another nightmare. An old one from way back mixed up with the usual Hell routine and some other weird shit thrown in the mix.

He was completely rattled from the whole night and wanted to set some things straight with Kaylee. First, he'd explain in no uncertain terms that he wasn't gay. Then he'd find out how bad the rumors were. If he really was going to see the other Dean tomorrow, he could avoid any groups that thought he was gay until after he figured out what the fuck had gone wrong. Dean threw on his boots and walked out of his room with a sense of purpose that alarmed Salviel.

She hurried to follow him and asked, "Where are we going?"

"I'm looking for Kaylee. I need to explain some stuff to her."

He went to the headquarters, figuring that that was as good a place as any to start looking. It was mostly empty except for a soldier reading an ancient cooking magazine while guarding the lobby.

"Where's Kay?" Salviel asked the guard.

"Inside the vault room," he replied. "There's some sort of meeting going on."

"At four in the morning?" Salviel looked at Dean uncertainly. He frowned in recognition of the fact that Salviel found the late night meeting unusual.

"Some of the regional officers came in and demanded an emergency meeting—not everyone's here yet," the guard continued. "Cecily is tearing her hair out over that."

They were talking about him. That's why everyone was coming in from the other bases. Some shit was hitting the fan behind his back.

Dean started down the hall. The guard made to stop him, but Salviel waved him off. Dean looked back at her and was surprised to see that she wasn't bother to follow him.

"There aren't any windows or exits down there. It's not like you're going to run off." She was trying to give him some dignity, which he appreciated.

When Dean got close to the main room he could hear voices. He moved a little slower and tried to muffle the sound of his footsteps. The door was closed, but the conversation was pretty heated, causing several of the people inside to speak with sufficiently raised voices. It was hard to tell how many people were in there, but there were at least six people talking.

"I don't care; he's an asset. Imagine what we could accomplish with another Sword Of Heaven. With a year or two of training he could be in peak condition."

"We're not going to enslave him."

"Don't be so dramatic. I'm not talking about throwing a collar on him. He's a soldier and this is a
"He's a hunter, not a soldier. And this isn't his war." Dean recognized Kaylee's voice. "I said we would get him home and that's what we're going to do."

"Anyway, couldn't keeping him here mess up the timeline? This is why we don't resort to time travel."

"He's here now and we're still fine."

"Maybe that's because we get him back in one piece and no one's the wiser?"

"Dean would know."

"We could've wiped him—fuck, I don't know. I'm just saying that we can't assume holding him is a safe option."

"Even if we have to send him back, if we don't wipe his memory, we could train him. Get his combat and command skills up to par before throwing him back to 2009."

"We're not putting him in combat while he's here," Kaylee told them. "The last thing we need is to serve him up to Michael."

"Okay, maybe not in the field, but let him train with Tom, Jieshi, and Finch. Imagine what he could do with a few extra years under his belt."

"It's not our decision to make." Kaylee was standing firm on the point.

"The Sword Of Heaven cuts both ways and you know it. The fewer the better."

"Really, throwing away one of the only people that can for sure kill an archangel?"

"And one of the only people that can let Michael fry the world. The commander I trust; this guy I don't even know."

"He's dangerous. We should send him back now before it's too late. I'm sorry, but you arch-vessels are albatrosses."

"Yeah, so you better not shoot at us or that weight around your neck'll get a lot fucking heavier." Kaylee's tone was dark.

"He's on lockdown. He's not going out and they're not coming in. I don't see the danger."

"And that's why you're stationed in the Everglades."

"Blow it out your ass."

"Go to hell, Chair Force." There was the sound of a few chairs squeaking, but he couldn't hear any punches being thrown.

"I'm fine with sending him back, but couldn't we get some benefit before he goes? The commander can't have another kid and Dyaniel hasn't exactly been cooperative, but this Dean is young and—"

"Are you serious?" Kaylee objected. "You're talking about using him for breeding stock. He's a person, not some prize steer."
"Vessels have responsibilities. You're going through the same process."

"I know what I have to do. I've known it for years," Kaylee said. "We're not just springing this on some guy."

"Their line is almost dead."

"Dylaniel will take care of the bloodline."

"Please, he's seen more peacetime than pussy."

"Last time I checked, we're not supposed to be fucking around," Kaylee rebutted.

"He should at least find a partner—"

"He's just a child. Give him a break."

"He sees more combat than any other high-choir vessel. We can't keep gambling with Michael's line. If he doesn't have a kid soon, he needs to come off the field." There was a pause while everyone processed the point. "Or the younger Dean—"

"I'll talk to Dyl—" Kaylee began.

"It may be time to use a cherub—"

"No fucking way!" Kaylee yelled and probably hit the table.

"I don't think circumstances are that desperate."

"No one is messing with anyone's free will." Kaylee wasn't making a suggestion.

"Would a cherub even work on a nephilim?"

"The bloodline conversation is over." Kaylee's voice was focused and commanding. "Nobody is touching Dyl or Dean, unless you're ready to fight a war with 45% of your troops taking an extended holiday in Hell. I will talk to Dyl and make sure he understands his responsibilities."

"You would seriously risk this whole war for one person?"

"No. I'd run them both through the gears if I need to, but I'm not going to take away their autonomy." Her voice softened as a chair squeaked on the floor. "If you sacrifice our commitment to free will and dignity, then we've already lost this war."

Dean could hear footsteps coming from the room, heading toward the hallway. He looked around for a place to hide, but there wasn't anything obvious. Kaylee turned the corner. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw him, but she kept walking. She grabbed him by the upper arm and started quickly marching him down the hall. He was waiting for her to chew him out, but she didn't. When she spoke to him it wasn't an angry shout, it was a tense whisper:

"We're getting the fuck out of here."

Chapter End Notes
I’m posting my feelings/reflections on the dream sequence in an article on Tumblr because I had a lot to say on the topic. It was very hard to write on several levels, hopefully it was just painful enough to read without alienating anyone.

Dean’s concerns about his perceived sexual orientation were immediately put on the back burner after seeing how Kaylee was acting. The other officers’ comments may have been phrased as brainstorming, but she was reacting to them as threats. While he might not agree with her assessment of him, Dean did trust her sense of danger. And based on the silence and speed with which they moved away from the other officers, she had definitely sensed it.

"Tell Dylaniel to find Tom and take him home," Kaylee instructed Salviel as the two of them passed through the headquarters lobby. "Do it now, then go stretch your wings."

"Yes, ma'am." Dean saw a small glint in Salviel’s eye before she disappeared.

They quickly walked down the empty street without speaking, then turned into an unmarked building. The entry room was a strange combination of parlor and storeroom. There were several crates of supplies, a table covered in what were probably spell components, three comfy chairs, and a fireplace with a small fire already burning. Kaylee pulled a talisman off a peg on the far wall, then started squeezing it in her hand. She whispered a few words and threw it into the fireplace.

"How much did you hear?" Kaylee asked without taking her eyes off the fire.

"Enough." Dean leaned against the table, then crossed his arms. "So what: half of them want to keep me, half want to send me back, half want to make me a weapon, and half want to roofie me— I miss anything?"

He wasn’t sure what to make of the new development. The entire idea of staying for an extended period was unappealing. They were in the middle of a war, the food was terrible, he was fighting with the people he liked the most, and the whole mess with the other Dean was unbelievable. If circumstances were different he’d probably be up for fighting the good fight wherever it was needed, but Kaylee was right. This wasn’t his fight. He had left his family in 2009 to go get help and they needed him to get back in one piece. But no matter his feelings on the topic, he was still technically at the mercy of those around him to get him home. The idea that some people might try to take advantage of that dependence was unsettling.

"I'm sorry about…." She waved a hand to indicate the entire situation, then dropped her hand in a shrugging motion. "Fuck, a few things."

She used a metal poker to drag the talisman out of the fire, then picked it up and tossed it to Dean. He instinctively caught it. For a split second he felt like an idiot, but to his surprise the metal wasn't hot. He held up the talisman and gave her a what-the-fuck face.

"You could've fucking warned me." Dean had been referring to the talisman, but sighed at the ambiguity of his statement. "About a lot actually."

"Let's get somewhere a little less politically charged then we can either pull each other’s hair or cry
on each other’s shoulders,” Kaylee suggested, earning a look of annoyance from Dean. She closed Dean's fingers around the talisman, then placed her hands on both sides of his fist. She shut her eyes in concentration, but opened them with a start. "I just realized, you're not gonna like this."

"What?” He had no idea what she was even trying to do.

"You're gonna have to piggyback on my teleport,” she explained. “Demon ports aren't like angel ones. It's not all gentle and fluffy clouds."

“Fine. Let’s just get it over with.”

He didn’t like standing around holding hands with her while feeling like the secret police were about to kick in the front door. She shrugged, then closed her eyes again.

Dean felt like he was being turned inside out. There was a falling sensation, but it was like falling through endless flame. The stench of sulphur and burning flesh was overwhelming. When he thought that he was about to faint, it stopped.

He collapsed on the white tile floor of a shower and immediately began throwing up. Kaylee sidestepped the mess, then grabbed him a washcloth. She squatted next to him to make sure he was okay. Despite eating very little at dinner, he heaved uncontrollably for several minutes until he didn’t even have stomach acid left to expel.

"Piggybacking is hard on the body in general and humans don't really take the demon mojo too well,” she explained once he had stopped. “Sorry about that, but I wanted to get you off the grid as fast as possible.”

Dean curled up into the fetal position. He felt so spent that he barely cared that he was lying in a pool of his own vomit. It was like he was caught in a severe hangover, though his head only hurt a little.

"Is there anything about this time that doesn't suck?” he whispered.

"The water pressure is pretty good.” She pointed to the shower head above him. "I'll go get you some new clothes. Try not pass out while cleaning yourself up."

It took Dean several minutes before he attempted standing up. He gingerly took off his clothes and dropped them outside of the shower. The room was more of a locker room than a bathroom. The shower was at least ten feet wide with four different heads.

It'd been almost a week since he’d had a proper shower, so he decided to indulge a bit. He turned all four showers on high and let the room fill with steam. Truth be told, the water pressure was amazing. After a few minutes he was feeling considerably better, though he was still fairly weak.

When he was done, Dean opened the door to find a pile of fresh clothes on the floor outside the bathroom. As he got dressed he noticed that everything fit him perfectly. He realized that the clothes probably belonged to the other Dean. His stuff was around somewhere; he lived there— wherever they were.

After getting dressed, he started exploring the halls, looking for Kaylee. The place had a weird Art-Deco-and-concrete vibe. All of the technology seemed straight out of the fifties. A few minutes into his search he realized that there weren't any windows.

He turned a corner to find Kaylee standing at the end of a short corridor. She was closing a heavy
metal door, which lead to a descending staircase. She locked the door with a key, then turned, noticing Dean.

"Welcome to the bunker," Kaylee said as she slipped the key into her jacket pocket.

"What's down there?"

"Enough firepower to level the continent."

Dean decided not to attempt lifting the key off her in order to check. She walked past him and continued down one hallway with purpose. Without a better sense of where he was, he began following her.

"You keep an arsenal in your basement?" he asked, glancing back at the short corridor.

"The bunker is basically tied for most secret and secure location on Earth. What better place to keep the things our enemies want the most?"

He had a hard time arguing with that. Salviel had said that Kaylee and Tom lived somewhere that no one knew. His angelic guard had seemed to be in one of the inner circles of trust if they left her alone with him and if Kaylee sent her out on private tasks. If she didn’t know about this place it begged the question of how many people did.

Kaylee led him to a library that opened onto some sort of small command center. She looked around for a moment, then checked a clock and scowled.

"What's wrong?"

She briefly chewed her lip before replying, "Dyl and Tommy are taking their sweet time getting here."

"You think they're in trouble?"

It was hard to imagine them being in danger. Kaylee was technically in command for the whole region, though she had a fair number of subordinates that were openly arguing with her. But she had threatened to withdraw a huge percentage of their manpower… which could’ve just been a bluff the more he thought about it. Would she really punish the entire war effort if someone took matters into their own hands or would she pragmatically just move on? Did her subordinates even know her well enough to make an educated guess of what she might do?

"Tommy's fine, unless he does something really stupid. And no one's gonna risk hurting Dyl. Not that anyone'd stand much of a chance." She looked over at Dean. "I just don't want them out there with all the unknowns. When word gets out that I took you off the grid, there'll be a few people trying to find you, and those two know where you are."

"Would they talk?"

"No," she scoffed at the suggestion, then remembered he was out of his element. "Tommy'd probably say a million words and none of it would mean a damn thing. And Dyl—basically, nobody can force him to do anything. I just don't want to have to deal with getting them out of a brig."

He felt a little guilty. She'd just put her ass on the line to make sure he was safe, and now there was talk of Tom and/or Dylaniel being locked up. All that and they were still sort of having a fight with him. Kaylee had more or less apologized for some vague thing, which he appreciated, but it
hadn't been clear whether they were actually good.

"I'm sorry that me being around has been such a pain in your collective ass," Dean said as a partial apology. He may have regretted the hurt feelings that his words and actions had caused, but he still didn't see how he was in the wrong. Regardless of the interpersonal drama, he felt bad about the political impact his presence was having on their timeline.

"The hammer's been ready to fall on Dyl for awhile," Kaylee admitted while taking a seat at one of the library's tables.

"How old is he?" Dean asked as he sat down across from her.

"Twenty-one."

Dean's eyebrows rose. "He can barely drink and they want him to have a kid?"

He'd suspected that Dyylanuel was young and he was right. Running the numbers in his head, he noted that the other Dean must've had Dyylanuel when he was 40. That seemed a little late to him, but to him the entire idea of having a kid was mind-boggling.

He could see himself as the cool uncle, but not a dad. Not in a significant relationship, gay or otherwise. Granted, the other Dean was 61 years old, nearly twice his own age. A 61-year-old could easily be a grandparent, which was what many of the officers were pushing for. The thought made him incredibly uncomfortable.

"They've wanted him to have a kid since he was sixteen," Kaylee explained. "He's also had suitors paraded out in front of him. All the vessels with a limited bloodline are encouraged to have kids, but us arch-vessels have to control the line. If all the vessels in a bloodline are killed, it's technically possible to create a new one—one our side won't control."

"So what, Michael wants to kill me—and the other me, and Dyl? Then Heaven can just roll out some loyal vessel for him?"

That was a frightening thought. Back in his time, before he'd traveled to 2039, Heaven was only one kill away from having a new loyal vessel. Granted, until they went into hiding in New Orleans, Heaven had no reason to think that he'd be disloyal.

"We're not 100% sure if Heaven even knows how to make new bloodlines for an archangel. Lucifer's the only one to ever pull it off and that took at least decades. They'd rather just make you say yes."

"It's really as simple as that? They get one little word from me and I'm a meat puppet?"

"Luckily, Michael just stays up in the clouds, commanding their troops—"

The sound of voices interrupted her. Tom and Dyylanuel entered from an adjacent room. Tom smiled at Kaylee, then looked at Dean, unsure of the status between them. Dyylanuel glanced at Dean, but his eyes didn't linger in the slightest.

"What the hell is this all about?" Tom asked Kaylee. "I was asleep and Dyl's pulling me out of bed just as Finch was at the door."

"The other officers got into a disagreement about how to deal with Dean," she explained, earning an unsurprised look from Tom. "And Dyl."
Tom's expression changed from amused confusion to something darker. "How to deal with Dyl? What the fuck does that mean?"

"They're freaked out about Michael's line," she replied. "Borgata wants Dyl pulled from the field and there wasn't much opposition to it."

At the suggestion that he be removed from combat, Dyaniel crossed his arms against his chest and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"And—" Kaylee rolled her eyes in a move that reminded Dean of Ruby. "Mateos suggested using cherubs on either of them."

Tom was nearly slack-jawed. "You're kidding?"

"I wish," she muttered.

"I'm gonna break his fucking legs." Tom had entered full-on eldest-sibling mode. Dean knew that feeling well.

"I know. So that's why we're laying low until we can get this figured out." Kaylee rubbed the back of her neck.

"How much is there to figure out? We'll send him," Dyaniel nodded toward Dean, "back to 2009 when Kali gets here, and I'm staying in the field."

"They're gonna have a fit," Kaylee told him. "If you get killed—"

"Fine," the nephilim replied. "Tell them they can pick out a partner for me if it will stop their complaining. You can tell them it took you hours to convince me. It should win you some favor."

Kaylee's eyebrows raised at the generous offer, but she didn't look thrilled by it. Dyaniel seemed a little put out, yet far too indifferent for someone who'd just given away his reproductive rights. Tom stared at Dyaniel in surprise.

"They might still try to bench you until you make good," Kaylee warned him.

"Yes," Dyaniel agreed. "They can try."

Dean wanted to get the awkwardness out of the way. He was going to be stuck in a bunker with them for a while longer and he didn't want to be walking around on eggshells. The root offense was him hurting Dyaniel's feelings, so apologizing to him would probably save him from having an uncomfortable heart-to-heart with Kaylee and Tom.

"I'm sorry about what I said," Dean said to Dyaniel. "I didn't mean to piss you off."

Dyaniel stared flatly at him for several seconds, then replied, "That's a terrible apology."

"God—I'm sorry, seriously." Dean couldn't remember the last time someone had reacted so negatively to an apology. He wasn't sure how to respond. "Come on, give me some credit for trying. This stuff... is just..." He shrugged and gestured around himself in a graceless mess that conveyed only confusion.

"You're not what I expected." There was almost a look of disappointment on Dyaniel's face, though it could've been his imagination.
“Right back at you.” Dean's brow furrowed, but he smiled to try and lighten the mood. “Are we cool?”

Dylaniel deliberated on the question for an unnervingly long time before replying, “Cool enough.” Without waiting to see if there was anything more to say of the subject, he said, “Kali should still be at least 36 hours out. If we're going to be here until then I'm going to go switch out of my gear.”

Dylaniel left the room without any more comments. Dean just watched him leave in confusion. He had no idea how to read the kid's body language.

"You guys are basically fine," Tom translated for Dean. "Just watch what you say around him."

“Speaking of which.” Dean took a breath to calm his nerves. “I just want to go on record here and say that I’m not gay.”

“We know that you’ve had girlfriends,” Kaylee confirmed.

“No, I mean I’m not into guys.”

“You know there’s nothing wrong with that,” Tom said in a combination of confusion and reassurance.

“But—I’m— You know what, whatever.” It didn’t sound like he was going to be subject to the judging eyes of the masses again and his words seemed to be falling on deaf or indifferent ears. If they weren’t going to make a fight of it, he’d try not to either. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

Tom looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it, and Kaylee stared at Dean thoughtfully.

“Okay, we can drop it,” Tom agreed. “How about we show you around?”

Tom and Kaylee gave him a very quick tour that mostly involved pointing down halls to indicate the general direction of features. A little ways into the tour Kaylee mentioned that she’d only managed to get the place halfway out of standby-mode and they had to go do some related maintenance. Tom warned Dean not to mess with anything in the alchemy lab or go out any of the marked exits, but otherwise they were cool with him exploring on his own for awhile.

He found the wing that contained the living quarters. All but one of the rooms had their doors slightly ajar. He assumed that the closed door was Dylaniel’s bedroom, since he could hear some minor activity inside. Nearly a dozen of the rooms were unused, preserved for—did they even have guests in their secret lair?

One of the claimed rooms seemed to be made up for a young girl. The decorations were shades of lavender, yellow, and green. There was a brightly colored poster of some sort of Bollywood movie on one wall. Four bookcases full of fairy tales from many different cultures lined two of the walls. On the floor were a handful of toys, three of which were partially dismantled and reassembled into bizarre hybrids.

Another bedroom a bit down the hall caught his attention. About a third of the room had been converted to a witch's workbench. One wall had a collection of guns and knives that reminded Dean of a hunter's stash. Another wall held a charcoal drawing of a black woman. Beside it was a photograph of Tom when he was in his late teens or early twenties posing between Sam and Ruby.

The picture was surprising on several levels, but the thing that had caught Dean’s attention most
was the fact that Sam didn’t look that much older in the photo despite it being taken at least ten years after 2009. Maybe it was part of the deal with Crowley? It made sense in a way; if Sam was really spending long stretches in Hell, without a way of preventing or slowing aging he’d have died after a few months Earth-time.

After leaving Tom’s room, Dean continued down the hall to find a smaller bedroom containing little more than a very plush bed, dresser, and nightstand, though the walls were something else. Nearly every inch was covered in original artwork. Hundred of pieces of paper and parchment were decorated with black ink or charcoal. It was a weird mix of gloomy and beautiful that somehow made sense. The masterpiece of the room was the heavy black charcoal wings that were centered on the far wall, but wrapped the room. The wings looked exactly like Kaylee’s.

Continuing down the hall Dean saw something in another room that stopped him mid-step. It was a record player that looked exactly like the one he’d kept at Bobby’s. It sat on top of a half-height bookcase. Next to it was a collection of vinlys, which Dean walked up to and flipped through. About three quarters of the records were classic rock that Dean recognized and loved. The rest was largely unfamiliar. He’d heard of Tool and Social Distortion, but had never listened to their stuff. A few of them, like The Mars Volta and Kid606 were completely foreign. He started playing the A side of Lateralus, then began walking around the room.

On one of the nightstands were three framed photographs. The first one he picked up was of a group of five children. The oldest was a black teenage boy with his long hair pulled back in a hot pink headband, a bright purple plaid short sleeve shirt, knee length jeans shorts, and the same silver locket that Tom wore. Next was an adolescent girl with light brown hair done up into a dozen two-inch-long pigtails, a red t-shirt featuring a yellow robot, and jeans.

On Kaylee’s lap sat a very young boy, maybe only three years old. His blue eyes would’ve seemed photoshopped if not for Dean having already met Dylaniel. The young boy was almost smiling, something Dean realized he had never seen before. He looked human, like nearly any other child.

Next to Kaylee, there was a boy of maybe eight years old. He looked exactly like Sam had at that age except with dark brown hair and eyes. Dean felt a little faint at the new discovery and sat down on the edge of the bed. There was another kid—two actually.

Tom held the last child on his lap. She was only a toddler, maybe a year younger than Dylaniel. Her hair was light brown with hazel eyes. She wore a pea green dress and Dean could swear that there was a butterfly sitting on her knee. The youngest girl reminded him of his mom for some reason…. Maybe he’d seen a picture of her as a child.

The boy with the dark brown hair was probably Sam and Ruby’s son, but the little girl could’ve been either Sam’s or his—maybe someone else’s? He had no idea who the kids were or how they fit into the whole thing. Did the room with all the fairy tale books belong to the girl in the photo? He looked at the picture as a whole to try to gain more context.

The five children in the picture were all happy. They were gathered on a park bench surrounded by flowers. Kaylee, Tom, and the boy who looked like Sam were laughing at something. Dean felt a strange sadness at the realization that he didn’t get to experience that day. He didn’t have that happy memory, and in his better future he never would.

He put down the photo and grabbed the next one on the nightstand. It was of Dylaniel when he was about ten years old. He wore a pair of jeans with a ripped knee and a black AC/DC t-shirt. The idea that Dylaniel might like rock music surprised Dean into taking a closer look at the photo. The boy stood with a sort of relaxed dignity, leaning against an arm rail overlooking a beach. The necklace that Sam had given Dean when they were children hung on the boy’s neck. His shirt had
caught slightly on his belt making a several-inch-long sheath visible on his hip.

Dean barely knew anything about Dylaniel, but looking at the picture reminded him vividly of his own childhood. They didn’t really act alike. Dean had always been a little goof—except around his dad. Dylaniel seemed serious all the time…. Well, maybe not serious; he’d almost loosened up while they were playing poker. It was more like he was waiting for the situation to turn serious at the drop of a hat. The way Dylaniel had brought guns to the card game reminded him of the sawed-off he’d kept in his backpack during high school.

The last photo was by far the strangest one to look at. It was a selfie of Dean, with a few grey hairs. He was laughing while trying to face the camera, but he was being distracted. Cas was half kissing his cheek and half resting his forehead on Dean's temple. Dean was in the process of playfully swatting Cas away and his silver wedding ring was just barely in frame. Cas's eyes were the same intense blue as his son's and Dean's smile was the same as his son's.

Dean stared at the photo of the other him and Cas for several minutes, unsure of how to feel. It wasn’t some sort of joke or trick or whatever he might’ve otherwise tried to dismiss away. That was the other Dean and he was with a guy… and they were married. He didn’t understand it. The guy Cas was wearing seemed okay looking, but Dean pushed that thought from his mind. To go so far afield must’ve taken something huge. It was hard to imagine what the other Dean must be like.

Putting aside the entire gay issue, he didn’t understand what he was supposed to think of the situation. He didn’t know the angel at all. They’d only had a few brief conversations before he came to 2039. The idea of having feelings for anyone so early was completely insane. The Cas he knew was painfully awkward and largely dysfunctional. The thought that maybe he could actually be happy with him was unnerving on more than one level. Dean put down the photo and continued walking around the room.

He wanted to know more about the other version of himself and after the argument yesterday there was a lot to be said for finding out what he could on his own. Kaylee, Tom, and Dylaniel seemed nice enough, but they all held unreasonable expectations for him. It was nice to just investigate without being judged.

On the second nightstand was a worn paperback copy of *Glory Road* by Heinlein. Dean picked it up and flipped through the book. Pressed between the pages was a six-inch-long golden feather. He held it up to the light and marveled at it. He'd seen yellow feathers and even a few feathers that'd been painted gold, but the one he held was the real thing. After a few minutes he slid the feather back into the book and returned it to the nightstand.

There was a small wooden chest of drawers on top of the nightstand. Inside the first drawer he found a set of tiny screwdrivers, miniature electronic components and batteries. The second drawer contained three small syringes, two of which were still sealed in plastic. Next to them were half a dozen glass vials labeled 'Sustanon 250.' One of the vials was half consumed. The last drawer held a small pipe, rolling papers, and a meticulously organized collection of weed. Dean looked at the used syringe and stash of weed and wondered about the extent of the other Dean's sobriety.

He opened the top drawer of the nightstand looking for more clues and immediately regretted it. He should've known better than to go digging through a drawer within reach of the bed. Hastily, Dean closed the drawer and backed away from the bed. Way too many mental images went through his mind. He felt like he might throw up again. It wasn't fair for the other Dean to just up and pull a complete 180° on him. He hurried out of the room, for fear of finding anything more.

The last bedroom—well, he wasn’t exactly sure if it counted as a bedroom because it lacked a bed. Otherwise it seemed to have many of the standard furnishings. There was a dresser of clothes, a
bookcase, a reading chair, and a large work desk. The books were in several different languages, some of which Dean couldn’t even begin to identify. There was a small philosophy and classical literature section, but it was mostly world history, the magical arts, and chemistry.

The desk was cluttered by a project that was only partially complete. There were open books with notes in the margins. A pile of schematics for what looked like grenades sat on one end, with an ominous cylindrical device resting atop it. Most of the books and notes were in a foreign language, but from the few pieces he could pick out it looked like the person was trying to develop some sort of weapon against angels that wouldn’t hurt the vessel.

The walls were mostly empty, except for a few photos that were mounted so that they could be viewed from the desk. There were several photos of the children at varying ages and in different subsets. There was a candid picture of Sam and Ruby sitting on a pier looking up at a clear night sky full of stars. In one, Bobby was being playfully tackled by half a dozen children, most of which he didn’t recognize. Another had Ruby and three women dancing around a bonfire with drinks in hand.

The last photo stopped him. It was the other Dean lying on a couch with a newborn Dylaniel sleeping on his chest. Dean was smiling down at his son with an expression on complete contentedness. Seeing how happy the other Dean looked made that strange sadness inside of him grow again, but there was more than that. For the first time in a long while he felt the pang of hope, and it scared the hell out of him.
Dean found his three hosts in the library. Tom and Dyaniel were playing chess at one of the tables while Kaylee was reading in a nearby armchair.

Dyaniel had changed into light grey jeans and a dark grey t-shirt with a badly faded logo on it. He'd switched from his sword and pistols to merely carrying dual knives in hip holsters. The nephilim sat a little rigidly in the desk chair, but he did seem to be incredibly focused on his next move.

"You want to place a bet?" Tom asked Dean.

"That sounds like a sure-fire way to piss someone off," Dean replied.

"My money's on Tommy." Kaylee interjected without looking up. "Sorry, Dyl."

"I’m not offended. He'll probably win," Dyaniel said as he moved a bishop to capture Tom’s knight.

"Dyl, stop being such a shark," Tom told his cousin, eliciting a minor shrug of false innocence, then glanced up at Dean and asked, "Did you having fun exploring? I can take you down to the garage later, but we probably shouldn’t go out for a spin."

The idea of seeing Baby again was very comforting. He just hoped that she was around and in one piece. Maybe that would help get him grounded again. Aside from the record player and little family resemblances in Kaylee and Dyaniel, everything he’d seen was unfamiliar…. Well, there was also the resemblance in the two other children.

"That’d be cool. I was wondering... I saw some photos and, well—who're the other kids? A boy with dark brown hair and a younger girl with light brown hair." They were almost certainly relatives, but he wasn't sure if they were his or Sam's kids.

"Alex and Sa'dah—Sadie—our brother and sister," Tom said with a nod toward Kaylee. He didn’t look up at Dean while responding.

"God, how many kids do Sam and Ruby have?"

"Currently: two," Kaylee answered flatly.

Dean brow furrowed in confusion, then shock relaxed every muscle in his face until he was slack-jawed. He didn't want to ask, and based on Kaylee's grim expression he probably didn't have to.
demons didn't communicate with anyone more than two ranks above them unless spoken to first. Currently the act was considered disrespectful of the hierarchy, though Sam suspected that the custom had originally derived from fear. The weak didn't want to interact with anyone capable of making their existence even more miserable.

But some lesser demon had overcome incredible odds to meet with him. Zie was stationed on Earth, fighting in the AFE, and had waded through a huge amount of bureaucracy—seeking approval for leave and pleading zir way through the chain of command to get onto Sam's radar.

Bethlim's form was small for a demon, but there was a glow inside zir that Sam rarely saw; it was righteous indignation. Zie moved with minor hesitation, uncertain of how to act in Sam's presence. Zie probably had never even spoken to zir own archdemon, let alone the king within the Citadel.

"You went to a lot of effort to meet with me. What would you like to discuss?" Sam wanted to acknowledge the demon’s struggle, but he kept his tone neutral until he knew more details.

"I've been serving on Earth for over four years. Some of the humans, they're tough. I like working with them."

"But something's wrong?"

"A few of them are dead—I know they came down afterward. We all knew that's how it'd shake. I told them what it'd be like and how to hedge so they could come back to the fight. But they didn't come back—their souls were trashed."

"They didn't survive the change?" Sam's brow furrowed in confusion at the issue. It was normal for the majority of souls to perish during their torture rather than turning into demons. Morrison suspected that their destruction actually provided some of the dark magics that powered Hell, but in the grand scheme demons were the more desired outcome. Desired, but never guaranteed. The destruction of some human souls shouldn't come as a surprise to any demon, even a young and lesser one.

"No, they didn't get the chance to change. I knew something was wrong—if I made it, these guys woulda. They were incredible and knew what to expect. So I found some Torqueans—" Bethlim shook slightly with anger. "They took a few lots of the souls and just dumped 'em instead of working them. I want someone's head. Let those torturous fucks get torn apart for a change."

The idea that a group of Torquean were destroying inventory instead of doing their jobs was unnerving. The middle of a war was one of the worst times to be cutting corners on production. They had retaken the Pits and had recently finished staffing all of the dungeons, but there was still a population deficit to be fixed within many castes. And with the quickly escalating conflict on Earth, the demand for additional soldiers was increasing.

"I'll have some people look into it," Sam told zir, then nodded to an assistant, who made a note of it.

"Sir." Bethlim hesitated, fearful of overstepping zir bounds. "Can you have them make it a priority? To get it stopped?"

"You have more friends you're worried about?"

Sam was testing to see if zie would admit to being emotionally invested in humans. It was obvious to him. Why else would a demon go to so much trouble for someone beyond their caste? But he wanted to see if he could get a demon on record as considering humans friends.
"Sir, my boyfriend's a human."

That was a new one. He'd obviously heard of human-angel relationships, but he'd thought he was the only human reckless enough to take a chance on falling for a demon. He wanted to help Bethlim, not just because he could relate, but also because there was something incredibly important about preserving those rare relationships. Maybe if they survived long enough to be known they wouldn't be so rare.

"I'll look into it myself."

It was fairly uncommon for Sam to be the one to call a meeting of the High Council. Usually Crowley acted as Sam's go-between with the other archdemons. It gave Crowley a bit more authority and helped buffer Sam's personal life from his most demanding—he wasn't sure whether they constituted subjects or employers. Either way, Crowley was generally responsible for setting Sam's schedule and that suited them both fine... most of the time.

When Sam took the initiative on something it was usually big, either in scale or innovation. He had learned many of the customs of the plane, but he had a unique perspective that allowed him to make suggestions others would never even humor. A significant number of his ideas had turned out to be impractical, yet his efforts had made a real difference in the daily lives of both demons and those who interacted with them. What he was planning would undoubtedly make an impact, one way or the other.

"We need to create a new caste."

Sam didn't sugarcoat or try to finesse the unpleasant topic for the Council. He knew there'd be a backlash, but once the outrage was out of their system everyone could get down to business.

"We can't create new castes—only Lucifer can create them!" Denerus, Archdemon of the Arbris, exclaimed.

"Where does it say that?" commented Morrison with a shrug-like gesture.

"It defies tradition," Weller countered, but below her shell she was surprisingly calm.

"I understand that, and I respect what tradition means, but if we don't act this place will collapse," Sam explained.

"Our hands are tied—"

"By what?" Crowley interrupted. "It's not like we have a bloody constitution."

"The fact is that our system is overwhelmed. It wasn't designed to handle a situation like this," Sam continued his pitch. "We have too many souls coming in and can't keep this up. We don't have the manpower to process them and we don't have the space to store them. Right now we're burning souls that would've otherwise survived the change."

"Let them burn," Iblett suggested. "We can skim the stock for the strongest ones, and who cares if the weak ones are destroyed?"

Crowley's expression was pure disgust. "Never mind the unbridled waste."

"It'll increase the average quality of our demons."
"We don't need to up our average. We need to mind our numbers. We can't afford to burn perfectly good souls." Sam sighed. "If things continue as they are we'll run out in approximately fifteen Earth years."

"Run out?" Weller asked.

"The war hit its critical mass—the humans are facing extinction. That's why we're seeing so many new souls. They're dying faster than they can reproduce. This isn't some kind of situation where they're finding a new equilibrium with their surroundings. They're being killed off." The news shook everyone. "We can't afford to waste souls. We need more soldiers on Earth protecting our supply and we need more storage to keep the current surplus."

"Where are we supposed to find storage? Every inch of Hell is in use," mused Pizel.

"We're going to expand, either upward or into the rock walls." Sam wasn't suggesting; he was instructing. "That's the new caste. We need demons with the explicit charge of improving, expanding, and maintaining our infrastructure."

"We don't know what's beyond the rockface. It could be anything," Pizel said in concern. "The gates are imbedded in the stone, but who knows how deep it is."

"Then we better pick our best researchers and engineers to be in the new caste, because we're expanding one way or another." Sam spoke firmly. "Denerus, get your people to find us some saviors."

"I can see the issue, but if we attempt to disrupt the system too much, like adding a new caste or expanding Lower, what will it say to our people?" asked Hathai, the substitute-arch for the Luxia. "We'll be telling them that Lucifer's design was flawed. It will destabilize our civilization's faith."

"If we coddle that faith it'll destroy us all," Sam countered. He generally liked Hathai. She took a 'don't ask don't tell' approach to demons who retained their human faiths, but he was frequently faced with the struggle of having a state religion. "There might come a time when our people need to look that faith in the eyes and say 'this is wrong.' It might be today."

"You're pushing your luck," Hathai commented. She'd never directly threatened Sam. Her divine authority was less than his and she wasn't a fool. She knew he could get away with killing her with only minor political backlash and she also knew that he didn't actually worship Lucifer.

"We all are," Sam replied, but offered her a more palatable spin. "We're not insulting Lucifer's vision. We're showing that he made us capable of evolving—of surviving. This is our Second Season, after all."

"I'll inform my people." Hathai nodded, then advised. "You should make penance for your earlier tone. Those outside this chamber won't hear it, but Lucifer hears all."

"I will," he assured her, earning a smile. He wasn't actually sure if he'd do anything later. Swinging by her favorite temple would probably win him some favor with the caste he was most likely to piss off with this whole mess.

"Self-flagellate on your own time," Crowley commented. "Is there anything else? We all have a lot to do."
"I'd like to put additional manpower into researching our power sources. If we can't save the humans, we'll need to know what impact that would have. Similarly," Sam paused for a moment to brace for the mire he was about to walk into, "we're going to reopen the research into reproducing without torturing souls. If the humans die out, we'll have an incredibly pissed off Heaven with no one else to fight. If they come to our gates, we need to have a way to replenish our ranks."

"Sir, you're the only demon that's ever successfully reproduced," Morrison said hesitantly.

The topic had been the elephant in the room ever since it was confirmed that Kaylee existed. The idea that demons could someday reproduce on their own had been a pipe dream for so long that no one really knew how to go about striving for it again. But to have Sam advocate for it was unexpected and significant. For years he'd been trying to keep his sex life out of the purview of others and avoided the mere discussion of having more kids like the plague. Things really were desperate.

"I'll cooperate with the research," he told the Council. "But me having kids is not a plan. We're talking about saving our species—all Abyssal. We need something more."

1/29/2019

"You've got to be kidding me." Ruby crossed her arms and stared at Sam, unsure of how serious he was. "I could've sworn after we had Alex you said that the Council was gonna back off on the whole us-having-more kids thing."

"It's not really the same old pitch." His smile was a bizarre mix of guilt and optimism.

"You're serious about this?"

"It's not like I want it to happen like this, but it makes the most sense." Sam lowered his voice as he looked around for anyone home who might be in earshot. "Ruby, if Earth loses this war, we need to have a backup plan. Our people deserve a chance to survive on their own. As is, we're barely a species. We're... we're a byproduct."

She'd been working in the research and development division of the Maji for years and knew the importance of having good data—she just didn't like the idea of being the guinea pig. They'd undoubtedly find a way to make the experience as discreet as possible, but he was still asking her to have sex with him while being observed. Actually, to try to conceive another kid in front of them, which probably meant multiple attempts. And if they were successful, she'd be expected to stay in Hell for the full term of the pregnancy for monitoring.

It had been so absurd when Sam had asked her that she'd assumed he was kidding. He'd managed to gather ten varieties of french fries as tribute. He'd even tried to frame it as giving Dylaniel a playmate close to his own age. Despite all the bribes and smooth talking, it was the prospect of getting some hard data that appealed to her most. But all those reasons were secondary.

"You're talking about having another kid." She leaned back in her chair. "This isn't some science fair project."

"I know that." Sam looked a little hurt. "I love the kids—I'd love another one just as much."

"I know you're a great dad, I just.... This feels different."

"You mean intentionally having a kid for once?" He couldn't help but chuckle at their situation.
Their son, Alex, had been another accident. Sam had invited Ruby to sit on his lap while he was on the Seat in order to give her the gift of the rare experience. The thrill of sharing the moment and the heady-power that the Seat provided turned the innocent experiment into something more. One thing led to another and their unusually-magically-attuned son was conceived on the throne of Hell—forever to exist as a reminder to be careful about contraceptives and having sex while under the influence of magic.

"Yeah, I guess." She had to concede the point. "I don't know how Dean and Cas did it."

"Now that you mention it, it's weird that they went for like eight years without accidentally getting pregnant." He furrowed his brow playfully and she gently kicked at his shin.

"Mr. Diplomat, didn't anyone ever tell you not to be such a smartass when you're begging?"

"Are you really going to make me beg?" Sam knelt down in front of her chair, then folded his hands on her lap.

"Maybe not out here, but you on your knees certainly doesn't hurt." She smiled at him as she spread her legs, making him unconsciously lick his lips.

"The sacrifices I make for my people," he said softly while sliding his hand up her thighs.

"I get to name this one."

They'd decided to try having sex on the Seat again, since the one time that they had tried it previously had resulted in Alex. With a little luck they'd be able to get the whole awkward experience out of the way in one go. After extensive trial and error, the Maji that had successfully extracted the children's syf had developed a temporary measure to protect Ruby's limbs from accidentally contact with the Seat. The salve was a little oily, but effective—and Sam enjoyed helping her apply it.

On the surface they appeared to be alone, though they both knew that there were dozens of scrying spells monitoring different aspects of their actions. It was a little embarrassing at first. Neither of them was much of an exhibitionist. Yet after being left alone for an hour they relaxed and casually worked their way up to it with some long-overdue foreplay. In a way it was nice. For the immediate future the only thing on their to-do list was each other.

After they stripped each other down, Sam sat on the throne. With a wider range of motion this time around, Ruby decided to climb on Sam facing him. Her knees and shins rested on the Seat, which felt hot to her touch, but not painful. She straddled him, then leaned in to kiss him. As they kissed, he could feel the intoxicating power start to move through him.

Sam pushed into her, causing her to gasp before lightly biting his ear. They kissed desperately as she rode him harder and faster. He had no reason to hold back, so he completely gave in to instinct. His hands clenched her flesh. He could sense her passion and it consumed him.

It felt like he was caught up in some incredible force that had its own momentum just waiting for him to release. Above him was the love of his life; below him was something that craved that love. It was energized by his touch and when he thrived its heart started beating again. He could feel it reaching out below him, roots penetrating the very heart of Hell. When he felt Ruby orgasm, it flared, bringing him closer.

He pushed deeper into her, feeling her. But there was more—he felt aware... of his body, her body, the tree's roots pulsing with energy... and for the first time he noticed that in the cold, dark
bedrock there were the roots of other lost titans, long dead and dormant, lost for countless lifetimes. It should've shaken him, the death and loss, but he was used to death.

He wanted to create life. They were in a land of eternal death and he wanted to see it bloom. That place... it was alive once. It had been beautiful once—it was the source of the first life. He could feel it, spited and cast down, just like the demons who called it home. He wanted to save it. He wanted to save them all.

He gripped Ruby's shoulders, pulling her tighter to him. She moaned, then whipped her hair back, and he met her solid black eyes. She wore the meatsuit, but he looked past it to redemption incarnate: the woman who'd saved him from despair; the demon he loved.

His eyes rolled back as he came, then he rested his face against her chest as he hugged her. Their hearts were pounding and a few drops of sweat trickled down his back. Her fingers moved through his hair, then he felt her tense slightly.

"Uh, Sam... something happened."

He looked up at her, but became distracted by the brilliant colors. The throne room was partially engulfed in a forest. Surreal vines climbed the walls. Young trees unlike any he'd ever seen on Earth were growing from the stone floor, which was covered in thick, flowering moss.

He'd created small amounts of plant life in Hell before, but he had always made a plant from Earth and they'd always died. Similarly, the sprouts that he'd brought up to Earth years ago had all died within hours. But these plants weren't imported. They were native—they'd been there all along, dead roots below the surface waiting for someone to will life back into Hell.

"That all this good of evil shall produce," Sam whispered to himself.

Three days after Sam and Ruby brought Sa'dah home from Hell, Sam was rocking the newborn while Ruby was taking inventory of their old baby clothes. It was a little strange that they had only decided to try for another kid a week earlier, Earth-time. There was a bit of an adjustment period for the rest of the family to get used to it. Sam worried that this was only going to make explaining to the four-year-old Alex where babies come from even harder. But overall, everyone was supportive and things had been surprisingly simple... until that third day.

"Mom? Dad?" Tom called out before he found them in the nursery. "You two should see this."

He guided them out of the cabin and around its exterior. Turning the second corner, they were at the back of the house, which looked on to the Canadian wilderness. Tom bent down and pointed to a small grouping of plants along the base of the cabin. Seven wild rose bushes were growing around the nursery.

"These weren't here last week," he told them.

Ruby looked around at their surroundings. There weren't any other rose bushes in view. These sort of plants were native to the area, but she'd only ever seen them grow on the far side of the lake, maybe a forty minute walk away. Moreover, the rose bushes were almost a foot tall, which was more than a rose bush could grow in a week... especially in February.

"Did you cast any spells around here?" Ruby asked Tom as she examined the plants.

"No way. I told Kay and Alex not to mess around near the cabins after Dean and Cas started trying for Dyl. I don't think they've done anything since Sadie came home, but they'd be casting
over by the field if they were."

Sam kissed Sa'dah's tiny forehead as he looked at the rose bushes. Ruby sighed, then shared an unsure glance with him. Alex had a stronger affinity for magic and powers than Kaylee, which the couple secretly attributed to his unusual conception in Hell, so neither was particularly surprised that the even stranger conception of Sa'dah might have some repercussions. They were expecting powers, but not so soon, and not like that.

2/14/2025

"We're getting hit pretty hard right now. Angels are piling up on our gates, thirty deep on some of them," Sam explained to Ruby. He spoke to her through the goblet of blood on his desk. That was the best form of communication between Hell and Earth, but the angelic presence at the gates was causing some mild-to-moderate interference. "We’re having to fortify. I might be stuck down here for awhile."

All thirty-three gates were under assault. The six main gates were pressed almost to the breaking point. Ten of the less important gates had been sabotaged from the inside in order to temporarily prevent them from opening, allowing defensive forces to be reallocated to the other twenty-three. After the storm was weathered they could repair the sabotaged gates without too much difficulty. That tactic pissed Hell’s engineering caste off to no end, but until they figured out how to make better seals on the gates it would have to do.

"Any chance you could send a knight or someone with some gusto up before things lock down too tight?" she asked. "I'm gonna try moving a palette of category 3 anti-angel bombs to our Boston base. I'd send an angel to babysit it, but that sounds like asking for friendly fire."

"I'll send Mir up to you." Sam glanced at Mir, who nodded in agreement. The knight was tough and stubborn enough to happily run Heaven's growing blockade. When Mir disappeared, Sam told her, "He should be there by the time you get this."

"He’s here. I'll—" The signal cut out. "—you after—" Sam sighed at the poor signal quality. "—this bullshit."

"Ruby, it’s getting super choppy. We’ll talk afterwards." Sam tapped the surface of the blood to end the call, then left his office.

When he stepped out onto one of the Citadel’s exterior walkways he pursed his lips and rested his elbows on the stone half-wall as he watched the ominous spectacle. Massive currents of demon clouds spiralled upward from the closest quadrant of Central District toward the Howling Gate. The Howling Gate was one of the six Devil’s Gates located directly above Central, but it was the only one that was catastrophically damaged. As it was, the gate couldn’t be wholly sealed without destroying it entirely and potentially ruining a large section of the land below it. If Heaven kept pressing on all their gates, the angels would eventually realize that that one buckled ever so slightly more... and if Heaven hit it with everything they had, there’d be another battlefront.

Sam looked down at the half-wall he was resting against. A purple vine with small, white and green bell-shaped flowers was growing on it. He smiled at the unique creature, then waved an assistant over to him. The demon approached and waited for instruction.

“Cecily, I want the handlers ready to go. If the angels break through, I want to hit them with everything we’ve got. Let them see what fiends they dropped down here to be forgotten.”
Mir appeared next to Ruby in the body of a stocky Latino man with clothing that seemed to indicate the meatsuit had been in a casket not a minute earlier. He even smelled faintly of embalming fluid. The knight flexed, tearing the his suit jacket but offering more flexibility, then offered her a thin smile and nod. She winked at him and turned her attention back to her phone call.

“He’s here. I’ll see you after all of this bullshit with the gates.”

“Ruby—” The signal cut out. “—choppy—” Sam was undoubtedly stating the obvious. “— afterwards.” He hung up.

She turned to Mir and gestured for him to follow her as she walked through the AFE supply depot to the crate of explosives. “These are moderately high-powered angel-fucking bombs.” She spoke in Abyssal for the knight’s benefit and it obscure her comments from any angels that might overhear. “Depending on the state of the angel, one of these could be lethal. Mostly it’ll just overload their powers, causing some burn-back on them—maybe permanent damage. If you have to use these, be conservative. Assume a kill for friendly fire and sub-maiming for an enemy. Blast radius is twenty feet, give or take, and there is a thirty second fallout period, so mind the wind. Any questions?”

Mir stared at her, then picked up one of the rectangular prisms. He turned it over a few times, pointed at it’s unclear labeling, then shrugged.

“You arm it by pulling the tab; then it has a three second fuse.” She started to continue walking then turned back to him suddenly. “It will cause physical explosion a couple feet in diameter, so don’t just hold the fucking thing in your hand.”

Mir nodded in understanding, then returned the bomb to its crate as an alarm started blaring. Ruby ran into a small command room containing three other AFE officers, four comm techs, and a handful of grunts. The lone angel among the group was unconscious on the floor and several short-range radios were broadcasting warnings of shots fired around the perimeter. Mir was about to leave to join the fight, but Ruby put her hand on his arm. Something about the situation was wrong. Over the chaos, the comm tech shouted that they’d lost their connection with the other bases.

“So fuck the perimeter— Pull everyone in and fortify the core buildings!” Ruby ordered. “They’re after something and it’s not our lawn.” She gestured at the two closest combat-ready soldiers. “Coles and Brown, you’re with me!”

She ran out of the command room, followed by Mir and the two soldiers. She took them to the warehouse that stored a small cache of weapons. A dozen troops were falling back from their positions outside when they arrived. After taking point at the doors, they noticed Ruby, who was looking over the descriptions on the crates.

“What’re we fighting?” Ruby asked.

“Templars and maybe a few angels,” answered one of the soldiers.

Ruby indicated for Mir to tear the lid off of the crate in front of her, which he did. She pulled out a belt of grenades and threw it to a nearby soldier.

“If the bullets don’t work, tag them with these, then try for headshots. How many are there?”

Their stockpile wasn’t large, but it had more than enough stuff to bite them in the ass if Heaven managed to seize it. As frustrating as it would be to lose all their hard work, she could easily rig
the lot to detonate without leveling the whole base.

"Not many—maybe eight on this entrance," said the lookout. "It's weird; they're not really trying to advance."

"They've got us cut off and hunkered down," Ruby mused aloud. "They have to know we're fortifying as we speak.... Why didn't they try following you guys in?"

"Maybe they're waiting for backup?"

"They planned this. We're the ones waiting on backup.... They hit our angels, our comms—Something is going on. It's just not here." Ruby grabbed one of the anti-angel bombs, then pointed to Coles. "Hold this building or use five of the AM-8's to drop it to the ground. I'm gonna go find out what the fuck they're after."

Mir followed her back toward the command room, but stopped a few feet out the door. She stumbled from a stinging sensation in her chest, but Mir softly grabbed her to offer support. The sensation was pure fear, adrenaline, and pain, but it was coming through the link to her coven. It wasn't coming from any of the older children's schools. It wasn't coming from Flo, who was on another base a few miles away. It was Tom. Their home was being attacked. It was the real target.

“Camp, now,” she said to Mir, then disappeared.

Cas had to sit down. Like many of the angels in the lower choirs he'd been weakened by the telepathic attack on pirate radio. He had been listening to a conversation between Dean and two comm techs right before the attack. There had been a strange spike in the power draw across multiple bases, which had thrown their network out of sync for some reason. Dean was in the process of advocating the trusty approach of rebooting all systems when it began.

The three angels in the operation room all clutched their heads, screeching in agony. Dean had caught Cas as he became dizzy and fell. Thankfully, a few of the higher choir angels, or maybe just Gabriel, had severed the whole connection before too much damage could be done. Dean helped Cas over to a ratty couch to recover.

"What just happened?" Dean asked as he knelt down to look at Cas.

"Pirate radio—the signal—it was too intense. Someone took down the connection." Cas looked more pale than usual. "We're under attack."

"Primary network is down!" shouted a tech across the room. "I can't ping any of the other bases."

"We need to find a way to get comms back up. Call their cells, pop over angels, fucking smoke signals—get it up now!" Dean yelled as he ran to the closest mic for the internal speaker system. After switching it on, he addressed the base. "Incoming. Repeat: incoming. Enemies unknown."

There was the deep rumble of an explosion outside. Everyone braced for a moment to see if their building was affected, but there wasn't any obvious damage. Despite being a little shaken, Cas hurried beside Dean and a dozen other combat-trained soldiers to join the fight. As they were running through a corridor, Cas grabbed Dean's arm and stopped.

"Are you okay?" Dean asked when he saw the look of concern on Cas's face.

"He's praying to us."
Dean didn’t need to ask who. Dylaniel was the only person who addressed prayers to both of them. He looked around and his heart hit the ground.

"It's a feign. They're going after the kids."

Bobby finished his morning coffee, then took a stroll around their little camp. It was fairly quiet nowadays. Most of the children had gone off to a private school in northern Oregon that was opened-minded towards arcana. The intention was to get the human children better integrated into society with the hopes that they could have the choice of whether to join the AFE or enter civilian life. All but two of the coven's children were in college.

Tom had opted not to attend college, to Sam's unvoiced disappointment. He was twenty-one and could've easily gone out to make his way in the world. Despite only having the equivalent of a high school education, he was incredibly well-rounded and quick on the uptake. His dad saw his own sophisticated thoughtfulness in him. His mom saw her sense of innovation in him. And his uncle Dean saw his street smarts in him.

It was possible that he would've left home earlier if the younger kids hadn't been born. He had been 11 when Alex was born and 15 when Dylaniel and Sa'dah were born. The age difference gave him more of a caretaker relationship with the kids than he'd had with Kaylee. He opted to continue studying the craft and working on his combat skills while helping to take care of his younger siblings and cousin.

While Tom was passable, none of the other kids were human and with a little diligence almost anyone with their ear to the ground could figure it out. Angels, demons, and non-humans had gone mainstream in recent years. There was growing tension between factions as everyone was adjusting to their new and exposed reality. That meant that given enough time in an integrated school setting, the kids would probably be found out. Within the current political environment they didn't have the option of a civilian life. Despite the inevitable track towards service, the adults tried to intersperse a wide range of education.

Bobby had been debating when to start Dylaniel and Sa'dah on firearms training. They were six and five years old, respectively, which was still a bit too young. Neither of them had been very receptive to wrestling or boxing lessons. Dylaniel's aversion to most types of physical contact had left him overly evasive in the ring. Sa'dah, of course, hated conflict and didn't like the idea of risking injuries.

The kids were all having breakfast in the converted visitor's center dining hall, so he decided to stop in at Belda's cabin to chat about plans for the rest of the day. They pulled up chairs at her small dining table when there was a cry for help from the kids. As they turned to look out the window, a dozen angels appeared between the buildings.

"You never cook the eggs enough," Alex complained.

Tom, unmoved by his little brother, dumped a scoop of scrambled eggs on Alex's plate regardless.

"If you want to cook breakfast, by all means.... I'll teach you how to use the stove and everything," Tom said, though he didn't expect Alex to take him up on the offer.

"I don't need a stove," Alex replied while holding his hand over the eggs and cooking them more with the First Light.
“Good luck stirring anything when you need both hands for burners.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Alex muttered, then suggested, “Kay could help me.”

“I’m not helping you every time you want to cook,” Kaylee scoffed. “We have tech for a reason: so we don’t have to stand around holding pans.”

“You just don’t like the stove,” Tom commented as he served eggs to Sa’dah and Dylaniel.

“Are eggs animals?” Sa’dah asked as she stared at her plate.

“No,” replied Kaylee, causing Sa’dah to smile and pick up her fork.

A week earlier Sa’dah had learned that steaks came from cows and had since regarded all food with newfound caution. No one was particularly surprised by her decision to avoid eating animals, though after the fact Sam had playfully gloated to Dean. The jury was still out on whether Dylaniel would also join Team Vegetarian, but Dean and Sam had exchanged a glance when Dylaniel decided to forego his burger at the discovery of what beef really entailed.

“Do you all know how you want to spend the afternoon?” Tom asked the younger kids. Kaylee still had a backlog of reading assignments to get through, but Alex had sped through his math homework for the remainder of the week. Dylaniel and Sa’dah were still learning to read and write, but they generally studied at night when it was too dark to do activities outside.

“Can we visit the tree?” Sa’dah asked hopefully. She had a favorite tree about half a mile from camp. No one was entirely sure what she saw in it, but she insisted that it was the most beautiful tree she’d seen on Earth. All in all, she hadn’t seen that many Earth trees—only the ones within two miles of their camp—but Sa’dah had very strong opinions on nature.

“Sure, but on our way there you’re going to count the other trees you see,” Tom said with a smile. “Let’s see if we can get a sense of how big a hundred is. Maybe on the way we can look for tracks —”

Dylaniel’s eyes widened and flashed with blue light. He dropped his fork, then looked around in a stupor. Tom stopped talking and hurried over to the boy to make sure he wasn’t having some sort of fit. They’d never seen him act like that before and had no idea what was happening.

“We need help!” Kaylee yelled out the open window as she got up to aid Tom.

“Angels are coming,” Dylaniel said in a confused voice. Tom, Kaylee, and Alex exchanged a concerned look. “They’re coming now.”

Tom released Dylaniel and ran to the buffet to grab his angel blade. Alex caught Dylaniel, who looked like he was on the verge of passing out. Kaylee took up position to form the third side of a triangle around Dylaniel and Sa’dah, then she looked down at the nephilim.

“Dyl, pray for your parents.”

Dean and Cas touched down in the center of camp with their blades drawn. They were immediately engaged by five nearby angels. After quickly dropping two of the attackers, Dean was able to tumble past the other three and make a break for Belda’s, where there was already a fight in the works.

Bobby’s left shoulder was bleeding from a deep cut, but the old hunter was still fighting an angel,
blade-to-blade. Dean charged the angel from behind, killing her with a single stab through the back. As he dropped her, he saw Belda bleeding profusely on the floor from a slash to her neck.

“Cas!” Dean yelled as he tried to apply pressure.

A second later, Cas appeared at Dean’s side. The angel had three minor cuts, but seemed alright. “Go find the kids,” Cas instructed Dean and Bobby as he knelt down to tend to Belda.

“This way,” Bobby said, then started running for the visitor’s center with Dean on his heels.

The visitor’s center had eight angels in it, but the kids weren’t there. For a moment, Dean was panicked, thinking that maybe they’d been taken, but then he noticed that the angels were still searching for them. Five dead bodies on the floor indicated that the kids had put up a fight before fleeing.

There was a slight hesitation on Bobby and Dean’s part as they faced down an eight-to-two fight, but two other women appeared on the opposite side of the large dining hall. Dean sighed in relief at the sight of Anael—it seemed that angel-to-angel communication wasn’t entirely down. She’d brought a friend who he could only assume was her demon partner, Jieshi.

It was a complete brawl. Dean took one angel down in less than two swings, but his thigh was cut by another and he was knocked over into a table. Bobby took out the angel that shoved Dean, but then he had to dodge as Jieshi was telekinetically thrown across the room and through a window. The demon blinked back into the hall before she had even hit the ground, but the momentum of the throw still caused her to roll across the floor, knocking over an enemy angel. Anael killed the two angels closest to her before teleporting closer to help protect Dean and Bobby.

Ruby and Mir arrived in time to see half a dozen angels appear in the center of camp. She assessed the clearing for any friendly fire, then pulled the tab on her anti-angel bomb and threw it toward the group. A moment later, Cas came out of Belda’s cabin nearby. Ruby didn’t even have time to curse. She blinked to just in front of where she’d thrown the bomb, caught it in mid-air, and tried to throw it away from Cas’s direction. The blast was a little too close for comfort and she was knocked back into the pack of angels.

Despite Ruby having suffered some minor burns, the angels behind her were in much worse shape. The six angels were bleeding from their mouths and eyes while convulsing on the ground around her. Mir hurried over to help her up and finish killing the angels. Thankfully, Cas had the good judgment to stay away from the immediate blast area.

“Where’re the kids?” Ruby asked Cas as she staggered toward the fight that was finishing up in the visitor’s center.

“I don’t know.” Cas’s eyes glowed blue as he looked around.

Cas and Ruby entered the dining hall as Jieshi was killing the last angel. Everyone scrambled to start looking for the kids when Ruby held up her hand. She could sense Tom—he was hurt somewhere nearby.

“His fucking forts,” Ruby muttered. “They’re in Isa’s cellar.”

Ruby didn’t bother running. She blinked straight to the cellar door and wasn’t surprised in the slightest to find that it was warded from the inside. She knocked on the heavy wooden door. In the distance behind her she could hear another fight breaking out.

“It’s Mom,” she said urgently. “Let me in.”
The cellar door opened and she dove inside. The interior surface of the door had a large bloody ward on it that made her heart sink. Tom and Kaylee were positioned to be between the other children and any attackers.

Tom held an angel blade in one hand and a gris-gris bag in the other. Blood dripped from the hand that held the magical bag and there was a long shallow slice across his lower abdomen that bled a little too much. He was trying to use his body to shield Kaylee as much as possible, while still allowing her to reach around him to use the First Light.

Behind them, Alex sat on the floor silently holding Dylaniel and Sa'dah on his lap. The ten-year-old’s elegant black wings were out and folded awkwardly, doubled-up and wrapped protectively around the younger children. Dylaniel's brow was slightly furrowed, betraying his concern, and Sa'dah sobbed quietly against Alex's chest.

“Calvary’s arrived,” Ruby assured them. “We’re gonna get you all out of here.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Open up,” Dean said from the other side.

Ruby opened the door and everyone rushed into the cellar—almost everyone.

“Where’s Belda?” Ruby asked, but was only met with a grim look from Cas.

“There’re gonna be more any minute,” Dean said, trying to take control of the unpleasant situation. “What the fuck are we doing?”

“I think…” Ruby examined Tom’s ward on the cellar door. She cut her own palms with her blade, then placed both hands on the ward. “Yeah, I can keep the door fixed for a few minutes, but we need to get out of here.”

“How did they even find us?” asked Bobby as he held his bleeding arm. Anael healed Bobby, while Cas healed Tom.

“They could have tagged one of us. Used a locator spell on the tracker?” Ruby suggested.

“None of us were there,” Cas pointed out.

“Maybe they tracked one of the kids or just waited until we were gone?” Dean added.

“More are coming,” Dylaniel said as his eyes flashed with blue light again. Cas collected his fatigued son from Alex and began looking him over with concern.

“They’re after the kids.” Cas’s distress was clear in his voice. “We need to find another place to hide them.”

“Take them to one of the bases,” suggested Bobby.

“All of networks were down and they were hitting us hard,” Dean explained with a sigh.

“Anonymity might be our best bet right now,” Ruby reminded them.

“Do we have any bases they don’t know about?” Cas asked Dean.

They could hear people moving around above them. Ruby quickly added two symbols to the ward painted on the cellar door and said a few words activating another defensive spell. Someone
banged on the cellar door causing a loud crackling noise followed by the smell of burning flesh.

“Somebody come up with a smart idea fast,” Ruby muttered.

“We’ll put up blood wards—it worked before,” Dean suggested.

Ruby shot down the idea. “That’s not gonna cut it if we have a tracker on us and we’ll be in this same mess.”

“Can we put them somewhere that angels can't port to?” Bobby asked.

“Not without taking away our mobility too,” Cas countered.

“They could go to the Citadel.” Bobby didn’t want to even suggest it, but they were running low on time and options.

“We don’t know what that would do to Dylan. They’ve got protections against angels down there,” complained Dean. “And Tommy might have problems down there too.”

“I can take it,” Tom objected.

“Hell’s being jumped as we speak,” Ruby said through gritted teeth as she channeled her powers into the ward. “I don’t think we could even get through. Every gate is being fought over. Heaven intentionally cut it off.”

There was another bang on the door, which made Ruby falter slightly. Mir and Jieshi caught her and physically reinforced her. Dean glanced at the kids, then buried his face in his hands.

“Split up the kids.” He hated even suggesting it. “They each get two of us to protect them. If one of them or us is being tracked then the whole group won’t be exposed. Call for reinforcements if you need it, but make sure your kid has at least one guard.”

“We’re stronger as a group,” Cas said, a little surprised by the suggestion.

“We’re a group right now. If Heaven is throwing everything they have at us…” Dean felt sick at the thought of turning it into a numbers game, but it was the surest way to find out if they were being tracked and any kid not being tracked would immediately be safe.

“Okay, split up in case of trackers. Everyone do purification spells to try to knock off basic tracking spells, then throw up some wards until we can do some proper cleansings and find a safe place to relocate. Is that what I’m hearing?” Ruby asked as another blast shook the door and caused her to cringe in pain.

“Where are we taking them?” Cas asked.

“Anywhere Heaven won't look,” suggested Bobby.

Sam was patiently watching the Howling Gate when a vision began flickering in the back of his mind. He let it come to the surface to see if it would give him any insight into the battle. But it wasn't about Hell, or the war, or even really angels. It was about his youngest daughter.

Bobby was holding Sa'dah's hand while they walked down a city street. A man was following them, guarding them; it was Mir. The knight was with them for some reason instead of Ruby. They were making their way to a nearby motel.
The talisman that Bobby had used had deposited them by one of their many safe houses. It had once been the home of Tara's friend, but apparently the building had recently been burnt down and was now just a pile of burnt wood and rubble. When they saw that their hideout was destroyed, Bobby suggested that they just find a quick place to get off the street.

Someone was following them. Mir stopped and looked back at the man, who froze. There was a moment where Sam hoped that the man would just walk away, but that wasn't how his visions worked. Something was about to happen.

The man splashed Mir with holy water, attracting the attention of at least two dozen passersby. Within moments Mir was hit with binding powder and had been swarmed by several people. Bobby picked up Sa'dah, then started running. There was yelling, but Sam couldn't make out the words. Several people blocked Bobby's path.

Someone grabbed Sa'dah's arm and started pulling her away from Bobby. She was kicking and crying. Bobby drew a gun on the people who were trying to take his granddaughter, but there were too many people who were too close. He managed to shoot three attackers before he was tackled to the ground.

Sa'dah jerked and flailed wildly as she tried to free herself. Her frantic movements broke their grip and she fell to the ground. The impact startled her, causing her eyes to change black. She tried to crawl away, but her ankles were grabbed and she was dragged back into the growing mob.

Sam broke through the closest gate: the Howling Gate. The action was instantaneous, but in his panic and anger he burned to death twenty of the angels on his way out. He appeared in the intersection of a street in Los Angeles. Bobby, Mir, and Sa'dah were somewhere nearby. He reached out with his mind and could sense Mir about a block away, but he was hurt. Sam blinked there.

There was the mob of forty or fifty people. He rushed into it, throwing people out of his way. A few men made the mistake of trying to grab him, but he just burnt them with the First Light. After that, most of the crowd fled, but a smaller group of half a dozen men and women didn't run. He recognized the homemade red crosses on their clothes. With a clench of his fist he crushed their throats, then flicked his wrist, throwing them to finish dying somewhere out of his way.

He couldn't think clearly enough to blink any closer. When he saw Sa'dah he ran to her. He fell to his knees and held her. Her throat had been cut with an angel blade and someone had started carving 'dem' into her forehead. The white dress she'd been wearing was half-soaked through with her blood. Clutching her body, Sam rocked back and forth, silently crying.

Bobby's beaten and bloody corpse was ten feet away. Mir's meatsuit was nearby, surrounded by the dozen humans he'd killed before having his limbs cut off. Sam wasn't able to process any of that as he rocked his daughter's small, fragile body in his arms.

He didn't fully take in his dead and injured friends. He didn't take in the group of several dozen humans and Templars coming toward him. He didn't even take in the two dozen angels teleporting in around him. They didn't matter; nothing mattered.

His baby girl was dead.
Ruby was sitting on a bed of a Wichita motel room where she and Anael had taken Alex. They had just finished with the anti-angel warding and purification spells when the television switched over to breaking news. Minutes earlier Los Angeles had detonated. There was no mushroom cloud or blast wave, just intense burning white light. The reports were still coming in and everyone was struggling to understand what had actually happened, but somehow she already knew.

Bobby and Sa’dah had been there…. The white light could’ve only been Sam. Something had gone horribly wrong, but she didn’t know what it all meant. She hugged Alex while looking to Anael, who nodded in concerned understanding to her, then she immediately ported back to Hell. Her journey was ominously unobstructed. There were no angels at the gates. They had all wisely fled.

A strange quiet filled the Citadel. The hallways were dark and empty of their normal minions going about important business. It was almost never lively in the Citadel, but there was at least a hum of activity. Instead there was a sense of foreboding.

She found Sam sitting on the hard stone floor of the throne room. He was cradling Sa’dah’s body in his arms. Her light brown hair contrasted with the whiteness of her bloodless skin and her now-crimson dress. Two strips of white fabric had been torn from Sam’s jacket and used to wrap part of her forehead and neck. Despite the careful bandaging, blood stained through the strips hinting at her injuries. Sam’s torn jacket bore matching stains on his arms and chest.

Ruby staggered, then fell to her knees in front of him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes. For a moment she tried to fight back the tears, but she broke down. Sobbing, she rested her head on Sam’s shoulder.

Ruby’s hand moved to touch Sa’dah’s cheek, but she hesitated. She didn’t want to feel the cold skin of her daughter’s body. The discovery was too soon for rage to overtake her. It was unreal; a bad dream she could barely process. Had things been different, Sam would’ve been trying to comfort her. He might’ve held her back or cupped her cheek lightly while saying reassuring words. But he hadn’t even looked up at her. He was in a state of shock. He was the one that needed care. After taking a moment to try to collect herself a little, Ruby softly kissed his cheek.

"Baby, I...." She couldn’t find any words. There wasn’t anything that she could say that would make the situation better. He knew the love she held and the pain that the loss was creating in her, because he was feeling the same way. Their flawed yet beautiful little world had been shattered.

"I’m done."
"I’m done with Earth. They can have it."

"What?"

Ruby was shaken by Sam’s words. He’d never spoken like that before. For years he had slowly
been talking about Earth with more of a professional interest, but she hadn’t ever imagined that he’d lose his personal connection to the plane. It was their home—it had been their home, and now somehow in his mind it was expendable.

Beyond what this turn said about Sam’s mindset, it also had terrifying implications. The idea of withdrawing was the result of tragedy, but it could also be the cause of even more. She knew that Sam was speaking from a place of grief, yet she couldn’t help wonder if he’d secretly humored the thought beforehand. If he had thought about it for any length of time, then he’d know how disastrous it would be for Earth…and if he said it in spite of that knowledge, maybe he was beyond the point of caring.

“We’ve been throwing ourselves into that war.” He swallowed hard, not entirely comfortable with what he was suggesting. “It’s not safe up there, but we can defend ourselves here. We could pull everyone down and just leave it.”

He didn’t look at her when he was talking. He kept staring at Sa’dah. He hadn’t looked up since Ruby had arrived. His hair hung around his face, inadvertently blocking out everything else. The only thing in his view was Sa’dah and his own bloody clothes. Ruby touched Sam’s chin, actively turning his face up to hers. His eyes were pink from crying and his skin was gravely pale.

“Sam, you need to promise me that you won’t make any decisions like this.” His lips trembled and moved a bit, but he didn’t speak. She pushed some of his hair behind his right ear and caressed his cheek the same way she wished he would hers. “Please let me help you.”

Dean hadn’t actually been to Hell in all the years that Sam had been in charge. He’d heard that there were changes, like the plants that supposedly grew sparsely throughout the demon-only sections. But when he arrived it wasn’t the ever-so-slightly nicer environment he was expecting. The plants had turned an ashen grey and he feared that a strong breeze would make them dissolve to dust. The trees had lost their leaves and flowers, creating a skeletal appearance. The vines grew menacing thorns that may have been literally razor sharp.

Just inside the dimly lit throne room was a large stone table, topped with a body wrapped in white linen, befitting a hunter’s pyre. Bobby’s baseball cap lay over its heart. Dean rested his hand on Bobby’s chest and cried. The elder hunter had been a better father to him than John ever could’ve. He had known that Bobby wouldn’t be around forever, but somehow he’d tricked himself into thinking that the old paranoid would at least escape a gruesome death. Maybe he’d die in his sleep or surrounded by his grandchildren… The thought, ‘He did,’ was pure agony, but Dean tried to bury his feelings for a little longer. When he’d collected himself, he walked deeper into the large hall.

In front of the throne was a smaller stone table with a child’s body wrapped in white linen. She had three red roses on her chest. It was too much. Dean’s fingers clutched the edge of the table in a desperate attempt to stop himself from collapsing outright. His legs felt too weak to keep him upright, so he tried to lower himself to a kneeling position. At the end his strength gave out and his aging knees slammed onto the stone floor, but the physical pain barely even registered compared to everything else.

He was overcome at the death of his niece, yet at the same time his head swam with frightening what-ifs. What if his son had been the one found by the mob? Would they have spared the half-angel? The Templars would try to kill a nephilim just as much as a demon, but did the other humans in the mob even know the difference? Did it even matter anymore whether someone was an angel or a demon—did it only matter that they were an outsider? Had he made the wrong decision about splitting up the kids? If he hadn’t suggested it, would Sa’dah and Bobby still be
It was his job to make decisions that risked lives every day, but not the lives of his family—not of their children. He didn't know if it had been the right choice and he probably never would. It wasn’t even clear if Sam knew why Bobby and Sa’dah had been in Los Angeles in the first place. If Ruby had told him, did she tell him whose idea it was? Did anyone else blame him as much as he did? Dean shook his head, then looked up, past Sa’dah’s body, to his brother.

Sam sat on the throne, which had shed all its petals. He looked devastated. Sam’s face was grim, caught in some deep, unpleasant thought. Ruby had insisted on cleaning him up and getting him into some new clothes while having the bodies wrapped and Mir returned to his tomb to recover. Sam wore his normal outfit with the long jacket, but it looked almost villainous as part of a solid matte-black outfit. Dean pushed the idea from his mind.

"Sammy, I’m sorry. I can’t even...." Dean was crying, but Sam had run out of tears long ago. "I just can’t even begin—"

"Do the other kids know?" Sam asked quietly. He didn’t look at Dean. Instead he stared at the floor—at nothing at all.

"No. Ruby asked me to come. She was worried about you.... She said you were talking about pulling out of Earth." Dean felt horrible talking about it while Sa’dah and Bobby's bodies were still fresh, but with one impulsive sentence Sam could undo a decade of work. The family would have to deal with their deaths, but first they needed to bring the family back together.

Ruby had gone back up topside to get Dean before returning to Alex, but other than that there hadn’t been much communication between the groups. Tom had piggybacked on Kaylee’s teleport in order to join her and Jieshi in hiding at Rufus’s cabin, which had lost its cable connection years earlier, meaning that they were almost certainly out of the loop. Alex was only ten years old, but he was a smart kid who’d quickly be putting the clues together. Dylaniel had been asleep when Ruby had told Cas and him about everything. They were scattered with varying amounts of information, waiting for the other shoe to potentially drop. They needed to have a new sanctuary, where they could all learn about Bobby and Sa’dah and grieve together. But first they needed to make sure Sam wasn’t about to throw Earth to the wolves.

"I can’t do it anymore." Sam shook his head. "I can’t put my family—my people—their lives at risk for...."

Dean stood up and asked, "For what?"

"For them. For Earth, for the humans." Exasperation started creeping into Sam's voice. "We’re moving mountains, rewriting the rules, dying for them by the thousands, and they think we’re scum. It’s like Hell’s just the place where the humans throw their trash."

Listening to Sam’s words, Dean felt like he’d grabbed onto a single hair and glanced up to realize it was attached to a tiger. He could see Sam being upset over Sa’dah’s death, but this went far beyond that into territory that he wasn’t equipped to handle. All he could do was try to stay on message.

"Sam, you can’t pull out of Earth,” he pleaded. "If you do, it'll be a massacre. Almost half our people are demons. We need your guys."

"Like the humans are really so worth protecting. They're killing each other in droves. We've been dragging them kicking and screaming back from the brink of extinction and what are they doing
with their second chance? The Earth is being poisoned—They killed Sadie—she was good and innocent!"

As Sam began to yell, Dean got the distinct impression that the throne room was getting darker and colder. His eyes helplessly flicked up to the massive black chandeliers to confirm that their flames were shrinking in what seemed to be justified concern. The realization that Sam’s anger might really be changing their surroundings scared him, but he didn’t want Sam to see that fear, lest it drive a deeper wedge between them.

"Heaven and the humans," Sam shook his head in disgust. "It's like they don't even care what's right anymore. She was five years old! And the humans—"

"The Templars," Dean interjected, while moving around the table to be closer to Sam. He didn’t want Sa’dah's body to literally be between them. "I know there’s a lot to hate up there—trust me, Sammy, I know that so well. But you've gotta point that hate at the people who deserve it. You know there are good humans—I'm a human. Dylan’s half human. Tommy is human. Bobby... was human. Some part of you is human. I know overall we're fucked up, but I’m begging you, please don’t give up on us."

Sam closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the Seat. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Dean cautiously approached his brother. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was afraid of more: Sam hurting him in a fit of rage, or Sam giving up.

“What if I can’t...” Sam whispered, then opened his eyes and looked up at Dean. “I just don’t feel it.... I don’t feel anything.”

"Sammy, please.... Years ago I promised that if you let me be there for you I’d try to be the kind of person who wouldn’t give up on you." Dean placed a hand on Sam’s arm. “Let me be there for you—let your family be there for you. Just please promise me that you won’t give up."

3/20/2025

Dean woke up to an empty bed. He pulled on some pajama pants and a t-shirt, then ventured into the hallway. The bunker had an air of security that everyone had needed after the attack on the camp which had resulted in the deaths of Belda, Bobby, and Sa’dah. It had taken almost two days for the solution to be found and the family reunited. Dean had been upset when Sam explained the price of the location of one of the most secure places on Earth, but he had to admit that in a Crossroads bargain it was hard to bid higher than the King of Hell’s soul. It was unfortunate, though the deal was dwarfed by recent events and potential outcomes.

He found Cas in their son’s bedroom. After moving into the bunker, nearly every night Cas had gone to check on Dyaniel and each time he would end up watching over him until morning. Cas’s concern was both heartbreaking and endearing. Dean walked up behind Cas and wrapped his arms around the angel. He rested his chin on Cas’s shoulder, then nuzzled his cheek.

He thought about losing his mom when he was only four and how Tom lost his father when he was six. Dyaniel was six and facing the death of his surrogate sister and grandfather. Dean's childhood and most of his adulthood had been spent under an oppressive silence about his mother's death. It was still painful to think of her, probably because he almost never spoke about her. He was the only human alive who had ever known her—that realization was crushing.

Unlike him, Tom didn't seem to have a problem talking about Gabin. He had even developed a biweekly tribute of making fruit pancakes while singing obnoxiously loud. From a young age, Sam
and Ruby had encouraged him to be open about the loss and celebrate the life. It seemed like a more healthy approach to accepting the death of a loved one.

That sentiment was a little difficult to hold onto at the moment. The pain was still too fresh. Amazingly, Sam had somehow managed to shoulder his massive emotional load. The AFE would stay intact and Earth would live to burn out another day. With that settled, Sam and Ruby focused on their remaining children almost exclusively. They tried to be open about the losses, but some days were just too painful—though, it seemed like those days were becoming less frequent.

Dean and Cas had been there for all the kids, but they tried to pay special attention to their son. Dylaniel had always been hard to read and seeing his reaction to death for the first time had intimidated Dean to no end. Unsurprisingly, Dylaniel became very quiet. He was quiet in general; the disturbing part was that he had stayed quiet. Dean’s lips pursed at the thought while Dylaniel rustled, then looked up at them.

"Is something wrong?" His voice was deceivingly calm, but his brow furrowed anxiously.

"No, little man. We're just being overbearing parents," Dean joked in an attempt to not worry Dylaniel. He went over and sat down on the edge of the little bed. "Is it okay if we talk for a bit?"

"Yes." Dylaniel nodded, then repositioned himself to sit beside his dad. The boy technically still spoke, but he’d reverted back to his younger speech pattern of only saying four words at the most per sentence.

Dean patted Dylaniel's back and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. It was comforting to see that he wasn't falling back into old habits of avoiding physical contact, though he'd always been more tolerant of interacting with his parents. Dean made a mental note to ask Ruby to see if Dylaniel was still willing to give her a hug. In the meantime, maybe some of the damage could be talked away.

"Your xe and I know that it's been hard since..." He hesitated to say their names, then felt guilty. "Since Sadie and Bobby died. It's okay to be sad or scared or angry. It's okay have questions or be confused. You can talk about it."

Dylaniel stared at his knees for almost an entire minute before accepting Dean’s invitation. "What’s Heaven like? That’s where they are, right?"

Cas and Dean exchanged an unsure glance. They had assumed that someday Dylaniel would ask about Heaven. He had undoubtedly overheard them discussing Heaven's military activities over the years, but now he’d realized there was more to the story. Heaven was a place, which served some function beyond sending bad people to hurt good people. Cas sat down on the bed on Dylaniel's free side.

"I used to live in Heaven," Cas explained. "That’s where all angels come from, even ones who are fallen. I haven't been there in a very long time, but it was very beautiful and peaceful."

"Do you miss it?" Dylaniel asked.

Cas smiled sadly, then his eyes flicked to Dean before returning to their son. "I miss parts of it, but Earth is my new home. I’d like to be able to return someday for a visit, but I’m happy here."

"You don’t know what it's like in Heaven now." It was almost a question.

"I imagine that many of the angels in Heaven are distressed by the war. Their numbers are much smaller than they used to be, so that is likely causing them difficulties.” Cas decided to pull back
on the complicated answer and focus on the part Dylaniel was really concerned about. “But the human souls that are there shouldn’t be affected. They should be happy.”

There was growing concern over the fate of Heaven. As the angels’ death toll increased the discussion had shifted away from what the proper role of angels was on Earth to whether a sufficient number of angels would even survive the war to maintain Heaven. Several choirs had fallen in their entirety and, of those, two choirs had populations of less than twenty. If the cherubs, the virtues, or any other choir truly did die out, how could Heaven ever recover? And if the keepers of Heaven disappeared, what would happen to the countless human souls that inhabited it?

After Dylaniel was introduced to the world, the idea began floating through the AFE that maybe nephilim could take up their xes’ charges to compensate for the losses. The suggestion had been met with polar opposite responses. Within the AFE, human-angel relationships suddenly took on a new importance and they were actively encouraged to have children. But Heaven had publicly condemned the idea that nephilim would ever be allowed in Heaven, let alone given a place in its hierarchy. The issue was important and would eventually come to a head, but it wasn’t the issue at hand.

“Sadie isn’t human,” Dylaniel astutely observed, to Dean’s disappointment. He could already see where the line of thinking was headed. “Is she happy there?”

The fact was that no one knew exactly what had happened to Bobby or Sadie. They feared that Bobby was imprisoned, being worked over for information. In general, Heaven wasn’t too rough on the AFE soldiers who had somehow gotten past the pearly gates, but a member of the inner circle like Bobby was something else. All of the recruits since his death hadn’t seen him, which meant he probably was under lock and key.

But Sadie had only been five years old. She didn’t know anything of value and was the sweetest kid anyone had met. She was more commonly described as angelic than demonic... though the angel she resembled most was Lucifer. They didn’t want to believe that Heaven would punish a child just because of their parentage, but the policy against nephilim was definitely ominous.

“We don’t know. We’re pretty certain she’s there, but we haven’t been able to find out what she’s doing.” Cas tried to be honest, but left the wording ambiguously more hopeful than it should’ve been.

“How large is Heaven?” Dylaniel tilted his head. “Where the human souls are.”

Dean suspected he was trying to imagine Bobby and Sa’dah on some clouds or whatever cliche he’d heard of. It felt a little wrong to let him feel hopeful about the situation, yet it seemed cruel to take that vision away from him.

“It’s so large that it can’t be described in human terms. Each soul has their own domain, but they all overlap. Sometimes souls can travel to each other’s domain, but normally they’re separate.” Cas smiled at a thought. “They’re like honeycombs in a beehive, but in more than three dimensions.”

“And all the good humans go there when they die?”

Dean cringed at the false characterization. He’d gone to Hell... though it was easier to tackle the subject as a whole rather than launch into explaining to Dylaniel about how his parents had first met.
“Maybe not all, but some of them,” Cas explained, apparently on the same page.

“My parents—your grandparents—are there,” Dean added in the hopes of creating some level of certainty to the whole human souls aspect of the conversation.

Dean had always assumed that his mom had made it in and after his escape from Hell it seemed reasonable to think that his dad would be there too. His suspicions had been confirmed by Cas, who had looked them up as part of his research before saving Dean from Hell.

Since Dylaniel’s birth, Dean had been weighing the risks of trying to contact his mom. A few years earlier, Cas had suggested that maybe during one of the holy ceasefires Dean could go with him to visit Heaven in the hopes of seeing her. In theory no angel could perform an intentionally harmful act during a holy time, but neither of them were 100% confident in the moral integrity of Heaven. Despite knowing it was dangerous, he was tempted to go. He wanted to hug her, tell her that he’d found someone, and that they had a son…. He wanted to tell his dad the same information, but the tone would be completely different and the hug would be replaced with a punch in the face.

Dylaniel’s brow furrowed again. “And they’re protected by angels?”

“They’re guarded by angels,” Cas corrected, though it wasn’t clear if the boy understood the subtle distinction.

“But the angels were…. They were trying to….” Dylaniel shook his head as he reevaluated what he was trying to ask. "Were they trying to kill us or take us?"

“We’re not sure,” Dean answered solemnly.

“They tried to kill Tommy,” Dylaniel clarified.

Inside the cellar, Dean and Cas had both seen the serious slice across Tom’s torso. Dylaniel had undoubtedly witnessed a heated fight that was clearly not about taking Tom alive.

"Tommy is a human, like me," Dean said. It felt a little weird to have to occasionally make that distinction. "Heaven isn't really interested in most humans one way or the other."

"But Heaven wants to hurt you."

Dean sighed while tousling Dylaniel’s hair, unconsciously hoping to instill some youthful innocence back into the boy.

“Heaven wants to take me, but I’m fighting them so that they don’t.” He was trying to think of a better way to explain the situation when Dylaniel interrupted him with yet another painfully precise question.

"Why does Heaven want to take you?"

"Your dad’s a vessel,” Cas answered when Dean hesitated. Dylaniel was too young for this. They’d always waited until the kids were ten to have the vessel talk, but this whole conversation was an avalanche of hard truths. “He’s a vessel to a very important angel in Heaven, Michael.”

"He’s not in me or anything," Dean assured his son when he saw Dylaniel eyeing him with concern. "I have to agree to be possessed, and I’m not going to do that. I promise."

"They want to take you." Dylaniel wasn’t asking a question, he was processing the information. The boy picked up on some facts as if from the ether, so Dean never doubted his ability to come to
the right answer with seemingly little supporting data. He nodded as some piece clicked into place. "They tried to take me because I’m a vessel too."

Dean hugged Dylaniel. It was taking all his willpower not to tear up. He didn’t want to panic his son anymore than he already was. Dylaniel didn’t understand what it meant for his life going forward, but soon he’d start finding out. The fear, the responsibility, the expectations—he wanted to spare Dylaniel all of it.

"It's okay, they aren't gonna get you," Dean whispered as he kissed the top of Dylaniel’s head, then relaxed the hug slightly.

The boy stared intently at his knees again before speaking. "I'm... I'm scared of Heaven and the Templars." Dylaniel didn't look at either of his parents while confessing.

"That's fine." Dean patted his son's back. "They scare me too."

"I don't want to be scared of them." Dylaniel nodded at some thought, then looked up at his dad with conviction. "I want them to be scared of me."

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Dean didn’t want to go into the bedroom. He didn’t want it to be true... yet he had to know. It seemed impossible for the phone call to have been a mistake, but impossibility had never stopped them from believing in something before. The three guards watched him grimly as he passed them.

There hadn’t even been a fight. Based on the positions of the bodies, Alex had been stabbed in the heart while he was sleeping. Nasrin had probably woken up when Alex was stabbed since she had partially fallen out of the bed while reaching for her adopted angel blade on the nightstand. Dean pulled one of the sheets over her naked corpse to give it some modesty, then he circled back to Alex's side of the bed and sat down on the floor.

They’d lost another kid. Alex wasn’t even 18 years old. Had this been a traditional war he wouldn’t have even been old enough to enlist. But this wasn’t some death on a battlefield. This was an assassination.

He’d been found like that five minutes earlier when a ghoul down the block sniffed out a dead body. Aside from the ghoul and four soldiers, Dean was the only one who knew—well, not the only one.

He forced himself to stand up and examine the bodies. The stab wounds were the unmistakable three-sided-pierce of an angel blade. While it was almost guaranteed that every living angel had one, it was also true that at least two thousand non-angels had them too. In the 23 years that he’d been fighting angels, Dean had collected over a hundred blades, though he’d given away all but two.

The more telling piece of evidence was the fact that Alex hadn’t woken up. Independent of the fact that there was no motive, the killer probably wasn’t a demon because all of the First Light had a knack for sensing demons—especially Alex. The kid had always been a little more Abyssal than Kaylee or Sa’dah, and probably could’ve noticed a demon sneaking up on him even if he was asleep. So the killer was likely an angel, human, or non-human.

Dean touched his face to make sure he wasn’t crying, then called for two of the guards to come in. There was going to be a huge amount of work to do and time was of the essence.
"I want extra security on all our high-value assets—and find out where my niece is," Dean instructed.

"Yes, sir," the guard replied, but before she could leave Dean gave her another task.

"Also, I want a current headcount for the base and the best we can get for an hour ago. Send word to the other bases that I want records of every arrival and departure for the last three hours. Lock down travel as best you can," Dean told her, then hastily added, "Don't tell anyone that he's dead.... It's need-to-know."

"I-I understand." She nodded sadly, then left.

Dean returned to Alex's body and examined the injury in more detail. The entry wound was large enough that the blade had probably gone in to the hilt. He couldn't bring himself to check for the exit wound. Upon closer inspection, he saw that tiny blue veins spread a quarter of an inch outward from the wound.

He clenched his fists and struggled to not yell or break anything in his anger. It wasn’t common, but he’d seen the little blue veins before. They were a telltale sign of a destruere curse on a weapon, a popular tool in the battle of controlling vessel bloodlines. Alex’s soul had been destroyed upon his death. It wasn’t clear if it was done in order to prevent one of Lucifer’s vessels from potentially being resurrected or to prevent his soul from reaching either Heaven or Hell. No matter what the reason, he was gone—completely and forever.

Sa’dah’s status was still presumed to be a prisoner of Heaven, which was a bittersweet thought—mostly bitter. Maybe someday her soul could be rescued, either to be properly resurrected or, more likely, allowed to rest. But Alex.... The outright destruction of a soul was irreparable damage that brought the crime to a whole new level.

"Call in Kushiel," Dean instructed the second guard through gritted teeth. "I need this angel blade identified."

"Sir, I doubt that an assassin would be so careless as to use their own blade."

"It's still a lead."

Alex's death was bound to cause tension between the demons of the AFE and the rest of it. He was considerably more open about his demonic nature than Kaylee. Since Sa'dah's death, by default his eyes were black and his horns were out. It was both his tribute and rebellion. His Abyssal pride had made him incredibly popular with Hell-aligned demons and rumor was that even Lucifer's demons had a soft spot for him.

Sa'dah's death had caused literal riots both on Earth and in Hell. Demon-human relations temporarily fractured when word had gotten out that Hell's youngest princess had been killed by a mob of humans. The AFE and leadership of Hell had pushed the message that the Templars were to blame, but some of the demons failed to see the distinction between humans backing Heaven and the humans who withheld support for the alliance.

On the other side, the neutral humans were outraged at the destruction of one of their cities. The deaths of over seven million humans demanded drastic action, but the question was what could be done. Apart from a dozen people from Sam's inner circle, no humans actually knew what had happened in Los Angeles. Yes, a princess of Hell was dead, but was it Heaven or Hell that threw the big punch? Hell blamed Heaven and Heaven blamed Hell. Sam had buried the guilt he’d had,
to be hidden away lest the humans realize what had really happened. In the end, all but two human territories banned all non-humans and humans that supported any side. Supply contracts were temporarily halted and borders were tightened.

It had taken at least a year to repair most of the damage that had resulted from Sa'dah's death, but Alex's would be another catastrophic blow. The fact that he had been killed within a camp would undoubtedly start a metaphorical witch hunt. Using an angel blade could've been either a cautious move, indicating that the killer wasn't certain that Alex was mortal, or the foundation of a frame-up. Both scenarios were unpleasant. Either their security had dropped the ball so badly that an outsider had done the deed, or it was someone within.

As he was trying to wrap his head around the murder and its implications, Ruby arrived. She ran into the room, then collapsed by the bed. Her hands couldn’t quite reach Alex's arm before they fell weakly to the floor. It was all she could do to just hold herself up. She'd gone through too much in a few short years.

Dean knelt down next to Ruby and hugged her. After a moment she turned to him, then wrapped her arms around his neck. He could feel her crying on his shoulder. Part of him wanted to stay strong, but he just didn't have the energy to pretend. A few tears broke free from him as he held her, imparting and finding whatever comfort he could.

"I know, Rube." He patted her back.

"Why?" She asked, face still resting on his shoulder.

"Maybe there was just an opening—maybe they panicked over Nasrin."

Aside from Tom, who wasn't a vessel, the kids weren't supposed to date... or more accurately, have sex. It'd been an unexpected political topic, but many of the power players in the AFE had made it their business. Nobody wanted to risk the bloodlines getting out of control, which became a real possibility once the kids turned into teenagers.

It was a closely-kept secret that Kaylee snuck around occasionally, but Alex wasn't so subtle. He wasn't carelessly running around having one night stands—unlike Kaylee, he didn't have complete control over a hypothetical unplanned pregnancy—but a few weeks earlier he had begun publicly dating a former bodyguard. There had been an emergency meeting of the AFE commanders when word got out that Nasrin was spending the night in Alex's quarters.

There was a heated argument that mostly consisted of Alex refusing to end up in some sort of arranged coupling. His family backed his decision, but there were all sorts of people who disapproved of his choice. Heaven generally feared the prospect of having any more of Lucifer's vessels in play. The conservative members of the AFE command disliked potentially entrusting Lucifer's bloodline to a 28-year-old human, sharpshooter who had never known her dad. They'd rather have had Alex paired up with a seraphim or some other high choir vessel—someone from a more coveted lineage.

The idea that Alex might've been killed over his sex life was unnerving on multiple levels. It felt like such a waste on the surface, yet, looking at the big picture, maybe it could be worth killing over. Dean didn't think there was a particular danger of Dylaniel getting into a similar situation, but he made a note to talk to his son about the issue. He was only 12, but the subject should be covered before the mysterious nephilim version of puberty struck.

“I'll tell Sam.” Her voice was pained.
He didn't envy her. Sam was sure to be a wreck, and who knew what he'd do. With a pang of guilt, Dean thought that maybe it was better that Sam wasn't in charge of Hell. The loss of Alex while Sam was ruling might very well have resulted in Hell pulling out of Earth for real, or worse, laying into Earth with unbridled aggression.

Kaylee would obviously be devastated, but she'd grown up taking loss for granted. She didn't seem to have lofty dreams of being able to keep everyone safe. The thought that that was somehow comforting made him cry again.

Tom and Kaylee had lost their younger siblings. He’d had a brief taste of that agony before selling his soul for Sam— Sam had lost two kids in this miserable future. The thought caused a tightness that threatened to crush his heart. He needed to protect his own brother from this, no matter what. He had to spare him the kind of suffering that this Sam had seen. This Sam….

“Where’s my brother?” Dean asked softly.

They’d said Sam, Ruby, Cas, and the other him were alive, but in all the talk of the past he’d never pushed the issue of their current activities. The four of them seemed to be big shots in this time, so he figured they were off doing whatever it was that bureaucrats or commanders did… but Kaylee was pulling double-duty for some reason. She was commanding one the AFE armies and she’d taken over Sam’s responsibilities in Hell.

“Where’s Sam?” Dean asked, a little more forcefully.

His three guides exchanged glances. Dylaniel was unreadable as ever, but Tom and Kaylee both seemed distressed.

“He’s here, at the bunker,” Tom replied, a little uncertainly.

Dean looked around the room, for some reason expecting to see Sam just standing around. Everyone had been acting like the four of them were the only ones there. Hell, they’d said the place was in standby mode until less than an hour earlier and it sure as hell didn’t seem like anyone had arrived since then.

Dean was confused and more than a little concerned by the way they were acting. “What the fuck is going on?”

“He’s here, but he’s… not well,” Kaylee explained. "You probably don’t want to see him like this."

“Like what? What’s wrong with him?”

He was imagining Sam missing limbs or laid up in a bed somewhere. Maybe he was a vegetable or something? There was this fucking war. He'd been an idiot to think that they could go thirty years with so few casualties. All those mental images... but it didn't prepare him for Kaylee's answer.

“He’s possessed... by Lucifer.”

Chapter End Notes

Shit's getting real in 2039.
“I used to live a few towns over,” Matt commented as he looked out the car window.

Dean’s assistant had volunteered to go on the goodwill mission as an excuse to check out his old corner of the world. They were driving along Highway 65 and had started passing through the remnants of Branson, Missouri. It had been a fairly small town even before the war had gotten serious. Afterward it dwindled to nothing as its people sought protection in larger cities. Most of the buildings were crumbling from a decade of neglect compounded by the occasional tornado.

“Is anyone still there?” Dean asked.

“My cousin was still on her farm as of ‘24, but I haven’t heard from her since.”

The driver of their SUV tapped on an attachment to the dashboard that consisted of six thin, metal gauges resting against two crystals. She checked her sideview mirrors to see the status of the last car in their convoy, then picked up her walkie-talkie.

“Am I the only one getting interference on the aura nav?”

“Ours is sputterin’ too. Ben says it’s probably just some drift from the south,” replied one of the other drivers.

They were traveling to the human city-state of Little Rock, which was just inside of the massive chunk of the southeastern United States that had been living under an anti-magic aura for almost 15 years. Occasionally, especially during hurricane season, the winds would be so strong that a little bit of the effects would spread further north. With the unpredictability of magic in the area, they decided to just drive down from their Springfield base.

“And that’s why we don’t fly in this kind of weather,” muttered Simiel, who was seated next to Dean. Dean shrugged at the comment, then offered the angel his bag of pretzels. Simiel grabbed two, popped them in his mouth, then leaned forward and addressed the driver. “I’m still feeling fine. If the interference gets too strong, I’ll let you know.”

“Does it feel weird?” Matt asked Simiel. “When you don’t have your powers?”

“Exhausting… which means a lot since we don’t fatigue normally.”

Dean didn’t comment, but he anxiously played with his wedding band. He and Cas both had bad memories of the blacked-out stretch of land. He’d asked Cas to stay home for this mission. The excuse had been that he wanted one of them available for Dylaniel if necessary, but the truth was that he didn’t want Cas to feel that helplessness a second time. He couldn’t imagine the physical sensation of having your powers nullified, but if Cas experienced it again he’d probably be risking some serious post-traumatic stress. Dean took a few deep breaths while wiggling his toes when his
thoughts were interrupted by the walkie-talkie.

“It looks like the bridge is down. Any bright ideas?” asked the lead driver.

“There are two other bridges just east of here if we cut through town,” Matt suggested.

It took a little backtracking, but they managed to find a path across the creek. They ended up being forced through what used to be a quaint downtown shopping district. Dean checked his watch, curious if they had enough time to scavenge a bit before continuing on their journey. It was still an hour until dawn and the prospect of digging through rubble in the near-dark wasn’t very appealing.

“I think I just saw a kid on the right side,” said one of the drivers over the walkie-talkie.

Dean looked out the window, but only saw shadowy ruins.

"You sure?" asked Dean's driver.

"I saw her too," confirmed the last driver. "She looked like a scrounger."

Their cars had slowed as everyone internally debated whether to check on the girl. A razed town wasn't any place for a kid. If she was with family that was something, but it wasn't uncommon for orphaned kids to be anchored to their old home, unsure of how to find what counted for civilization these days. If she was alone, they could give her a ride to Little Rock and return her to her people.

"Let's check fast," Dean conceded after grabbing the walkie-talkie. "Have your weapons ready, but try not to spook her or frighten any parents that might be lurking. Let's just do our due diligence and be back on the road in ten."

The four SUVs pulled to the side of the road, then the nine passengers got out. They fanned out a little bit and began looking through the fallen buildings where the girl had been spotted moments earlier. Dean and two others called out to the girl in hopes of both getting her to come out and not catching some trigger-happy drifter off guard.

A flare shot up into the predawn sky and exploded in a lavender flash. The sight made Dean’s stomach drop. The lavender tint of the light was almost certainly caused by balsam powder being added to the explosive. Traditionally the powder was used to prevent demons from smoking out, but in the last few years the technology had advanced. Mixed with a little angel blood and burnt, it not only halted demonic flight but angelic as well for several hours in the whole area.... And he sure as hell didn't order that flare.

"Ambush!" Dean yelled as he dove for cover between an industrial water heater and a three-foot-tall section of what used to be a brick wall. Semi-automatic gunfire broke out on at least three sides of his party. Their attackers would try to weed out the humans and non-human natives with ranged weapons, but then they'd be forced to come down into melee range to kill the angels and demons.

Dean looked up at the sky and prayed to Cas. He'd barely started before there was a flash of intense light, then nothing.
After a long stretch of time, the car came to a stop. The trunk was popped and two sets of arms pulled him out. They didn't bother being careful with him. His elbow and head both collided with parts of the car on the way out. He made a token effort to resist them, but with his wrists and ankles bound he knew there wasn't much hope of running for it.

He counted six steps up to what felt like a deep wooden deck. They roughly dragged him over the threshold of a building—probably breaking his tailbone in the process. After a few minutes of lying on the linoleum floor, he was hoisted into a chair. His zip-ties were cut, but his limbs and torso were immediately duct taped to the chair before the black bag was finally removed.

There were eight people standing around the room watching him. The telltale red crosses of the Templars marked their clothes and body armor. To Dean’s surprise three of the Templars had minor injuries from the ambush, which they were patching themselves.

It was unheard of to see Templars with injuries outside of combat. That was one of the perks of being servants of Heaven; they had incredible healthcare. The leader even had a cut on his arm that was being wrapped—probably a slice from an angel blade based on the angle and width. After receiving his bandage, he stepped forward and got down to business.

"You're Dean Winchester."

Dean appreciated that the leader didn’t start by hurting him. There was a directness that, when combined with the leader’s greying hair, made Dean hope that he was in the hands of an experienced professional—someone that was at least predictable. Of course, professionalism was not necessarily a two-way road when you were being held by the people who had undoubtedly just killed your friends.

"And you're an asshole." There wasn't any point to denying who he was. All that would get him was being killed immediately, which was its own gamble.

After finding out that Heaven wanted to turn him into a massively destructive meat puppet, they’d agreed it was probably best if he went to Hell after dying. Sam had not only voided the ban on Dean's soul, but the brothers made a deal in an attempt to game the system. The Crossroads was able to reinforce the defenses of the AFE's bases in exchange for Dean selling his soul. The contract only became due upon his death, so there was no countdown to hellhounds this time around.

The problem was that when Crowley was evaluating Dean's soul for purchase, he noticed that Heaven had managed to get some hooks in it already. His resurrection had cost Heaven five angels at a time when that loss was unheard of, so Heaven had tried to prevent having to go through that all over again. While repairing his soul, an absolution clause had been written into it, granting him unhindered access to Heaven upon death.

Figuring there was no harm in trying, Dean, Sam, and Crowley decided to proceed with writing the Crossroads contract onto the same soul. As a result, Dean had no idea what would happen if he were to die. He could go up, down, or maybe be torn into nothingness. Ideally, he wouldn't find out for a long time.

He didn’t want to die, but he wasn't feeling like playing nice either. These were Templars: if he could kill every one of them he’d do it in a heartbeat. And they wanted him dead too—but not as badly. For these little sycophants it wasn't nearly as personal.
"When your masters get here are they gonna just give you the treat or do you have to let it balance on your nose firs—" Dean prodded, but was interrupted when one of the Templars struck his chest with a cat o’ nine tails. He tried not to cry out in pain, but wasn't completely successful. Blood trickled from the broken skin. "You tore the wrapper."

He knew that Michael would just repair any damage they inflicted, but hopefully they wouldn't feel so confident going forward. The leader threw the subordinate with the whip a meaningful glance.

"Where are you heavy munitions caches for the eastern states?" asked the leader.

"Fuck you."

Another underling punched him in the stomach twice before being called off.

"Where are they?" the leader asked again.

Being interrogated didn't make sense. Once Michael was in him, they'd have access to everything he knew. Their highest priority should've been getting him to say yes. Anyway, no matter how much it annoyed him to be around Templars, they weren't the optimum choice for interrogators. These Templars weren't following the playbook.

"Someone's playing with their masters' toy," Dean hissed.

His words made the leader scowl. He'd struck the nerve. Heaven hadn't yet been informed of his capture. The Templars were shaking down the AFE commander before they tackled the separate task of handing off the vessel. Things weren't completely hopeless after all.

With a little luck, Cas had heard his initial prayer or someone had noticed that his party hadn't checked in, and the ambush was being investigated. An obvious assumption when everyone found out that he's missing would be that he'd been taken to Heaven. There might still be some recruits with ears on angel radio or one of their moles in Heaven could clue Cas in that he wasn't up there.

From that point it would take at most a day or two for the news that he was missing to hit pirate radio and maybe another day for Heaven to catch wind. Then either the Templars would have to turn him over to Heaven or else the shit would really get crazy. The AFE and Heaven would probably throw everything they had into finding him. One side had fumbled the ball and the dog pile would ensue.

On top of the AFE and Heavenly forces, Sam would almost definitely... overreact wasn't the right word. This was a pivotal moment that required however much force it would take. But if Sam found out there were Templars involved there was no telling what he'd do. Total war might be back on the table and if the scorched earth happened to actually be Earth, then so be it.

So that gave Cas maybe a day or two to find him through some sort of miracle. It also meant that he had to try to stay alive for a day or two, which sounded equally daunting.

Cas was getting ready to leave to visit Hael. He finished checking on Dyaniel, who was reading in his bedroom. Alex and Kaylee agreed to stay at the bunker while he was gone, though Dyaniel wasn't likely to get into trouble. Before taking off he wanted to chat with Ruby to double-check her availability for later in the day. He started walking towards the library, but was stopped in his tracks by a prayer.

"Ambush at—"
It was Dean. The emotions carried in the prayer were reined in panic and fear. For a moment he could barely think of what to do. He teleported into the bunker library, where Ruby and Kaylee were talking. They looked up at the uncustomarily hasty entrance.

"There's been an attack. I don't know how large," Cas said, then broke eye contact.

"Where are you going?" Ruby hastily asked before he could teleport away.

"Dean."

Cas tried to teleport as close as he could to where Dean had prayed from, but there was some sort of anti-flight aura in the area. After trying to teleport in at different angles, he realized that there were several dozen square miles of territory to be covered on foot. He prayed to his angelic subordinates for help with the search. After about forty minutes, they'd found the location of the ambush.

It had been a massacre. More than one body had been broken into pieces by an explosion. All of the mortal corpses had been finished off with two shots to the head for good measure. Cas recognized Dean's assistant; he'd been shot in the femoral artery and no doubt bled out in seconds. Cas worked in silence as he checked the bodies and tried to find Dean under the newly-formed rubble.

The AFE's four SUVs were still smoldering. Three of them had charred corpses inside them. Their faces were too disfigured to identify, so Cas tried to sense whether one of them might be Dean, but the interference from the drift was causing him to doubt himself. He ended up checking the bodies for telltale signs like his wedding ring.

One of Cas's lieutenants found him standing on a mound of brick and concrete assessing the bleak scene. Cas unconsciously tried to wipe the ash from his hands in an unnervingly human gesture. She reported that they had found several fresh sets of tire tracks leading away from the fight, though the tracks were only visible until they reached the highway.

He called in an order to have checkpoints set up, but with a forty-minute head start the radius of travel included several roads within the anti-magic field or in territory controlled by other factions—and that was assuming that the attackers stayed on the roads. But it was a start.

Ruby had contacted the AFE to relay Cas's warning, but there hadn't been any reports of an attack. Without much more to go on, she contacted both Sam and Tom asking them to come home right away. She was catching them up on what had happened when Cas appeared next to them. He looked distraught. After quickly glancing around to make sure that Dylaniel wasn't in earshot, he sat down at one of the tables and covered his face.

"Dean is missing," he finally explained.

"What happened?" asked Sam.

Ruby and Tom both sat down on either side of Cas while Kaylee and Sam remained standing.

"A party he was leading was ambushed in Branson. He prayed to me, but it was cut off. I went.... I couldn't find a body," Cas replied causing Ruby to reach over and hold his hand. "It looks like he was taken."

"We'll find him," Ruby said. "We'll get everybody looking for him. There are leads; we just need to get more people on this."
"I'll talk to the Council," Sam volunteered. "You two should alert the AFE—"

"Hey," Kaylee interrupted. "What about Dyl? What do we tell him?"

"Until we know...." Cas's lips thinned. "Don't tell him."

Ruby rarely attended high-level meetings of the AFE commanders. She preferred to stick with the R&D team, only to be dragged into the discussion of the big picture to the extent it helped her work. That day she was in it deep. She was Cas's primary advocate and source of emotional support in the debate of how to proceed with finding Dean.

Rather than making Cas retell everything again, she brought the group up to speed for him. Dean's convoy was attacked. He was missing. There was a search underway, but it was just the limited resources Cas could assemble on short notice. They needed to act, and fast.

"It's almost been two hours since the attack. If they slipped past the initial search radius then we're looking at hundreds of square miles, ignoring the possibility of him being on a plane. And let's not forget about if angels took him," Finch pointed out.

"Do we have any ears of angel radio?" asked Tamara.

"Two recruits. I had them tune in as soon as I heard we were having an emergency meeting. They know to alert me of anything out of the ordinary," assured Hael.

"If Heaven has him we are completely fucked already, so let's focus on something we can get our hands on. Can we get guards stationed at every operational airport in a 200 mile radius? There can't be that many with solid tarmacs," added Bishop, a former master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force. An assistant nodded at the instruction, then stepped out for a moment to relay the message.

"We can get a few hundred angels out doing flyovers with their eyes peeled—" Tamara mused.

"We've already started trying with the angels, but that might not be enough.... He was less than fifty miles from the dead zone." Ruby referred to the anti-magic territory. "Our angels are reporting significant drift of the effect north of the border. If they dragged him in there it'll be like trying to find a shadow while blindfolded."

"We'll send predator-class non-humans," suggested Anael. "Kitsune and vampires might be able to catch his scent."

"Someone has to say it: send some ghouls too," added Finch. "We can't limit ourselves to only looking for a live body."

"It's still hundreds of miles in diameter. We only have a hundred or so predators and ghouls," complained Molok, a demon from the Cruciare caste.

"It might not be perfect, but it's better than nothing," rebutted Ruby. "Finding Dean is our highest priority and if it means that we send our fucking bookkeepers out on foot looking, we do it."

"We need to find him, but we also need to control this situation," Bishop interjected. "If Heaven doesn't know he's missing and we tip them off then we'll turn the entire search area into a battlefield."

"His disappearance is need-to-know. Call in whatever resources, but do it quietly," said Anael in agreement.
"Little Rock is going to wonder why he didn't show up," commented Tamara, drawing everyone’s attention. They’d all been focused on Dean and Heaven that they forgot about the other faction in play.

"Maybe they won't be as surprised as you think," muttered Finch.

"You think they set us up?" asked Molok.

"There was an ambush en route to them. They knew he was going to be attending."

"And what do you suggest we do about it?" Anael responded. "They have 9 million in a fortified city where our angels, demons, and witches are practically useless."

"I'm not buying this whole untouchable status," replied Finch. "We can hit them if we need to."

"What if we're wrong? Are you ready to attack a human city on a gamble?" Ruby countered.

"After Los Angeles, we can't risk fighting a human territory. We'll push the rest of them to Heaven's side and then we'll have a billion more Templars to deal with," argued Bishop.

"So what, we let them walk all over us?" Finch raised his voice in frustration.

"We don't have any evidence of their involvement. They've been a neutral human state for years. We should ask for their help, not plan our attack," suggested Shola.

"You're assuming that Little Rock wants to stay neutral. If they really are in on the ambush, then not only will they not help, they might try to throw us off," Molok pointed out.

"You're being paranoid," interjected Tamara.

"One of our leaders was ambushed and taken," said Finch. "I think a little paranoia is warranted."

"What do you want us to do, interrogate the governor of Little Rock?" asked Anael in exasperation.

"We could use a truth spell, but it'd have to be in person," Molok mused.

"The humans aren't going to let us near their leaders with a truth spell—or any spell," said Hael.

"They're in a dead zone anyway. We'd have to get them to leave their territory."

"This is insane— Fuck, worse than that, it's impractical, and we're running out of time!" Ruby slammed her hands down on the table to head off any interruptions. "Down-the-line vote on whether to be honest with Little Rock. Whatever we decide, we decide now!"

The phone call to the governor of Little Rock was placed on speakerphone so that everyone could hear, though only four people were authorized to speak. Anael, Tamara, Ruby, and Shola were in charge of handling the request for assistance in the search. Cas was asked not to speak during the call for fear that, if the conversation turned sour, he would say something regrettable. He leaned against the wall on the far side of the room from the phone and tried to distract himself by monitoring pirate radio.

The governor hadn’t been surprised by the call, but he hadn’t expected such unpleasant news. As soon as he picked up the line he’s asked why the party hadn’t arrived yet. Hael shot Finch a
glance as if to highlight Little Rock’s innocence, but Finch just mouthed ‘lying’ back. Ruby stared daggers at both of them to be silent while Anael briefed the governor on the situation.

"Fifteen of our people died trying to get your people aid—" Tamara stated, emphasizing the point, until she was cut off by the governor.

"Well that's unfortu—was the Winchester killed?" the governor asked.

Ruby cringed at the nonchalant choice of words, though he sounded legitimately concerned. They all had good reason to be… some more than others. She glanced at Cas, who was pointedly looking out a window.

"He’s missing," Ruby answered. There was silence from the other end. "Listen, it was an ambush, on a mission that our side kept confidential."

"Are you suggesting that—" he started objecting, but Shola cut him off.

"Improbable bad luck happens, but not twice in a row—not with this." The Crossroads demon’s tone was professional and menacing. "We’re expecting your people’s cooperation with the search, and if we hit another incredible misfortune, then we will have a serious problem."

"You want us to suffer the repercussions if we hit bad luck?” the governor asked. “We didn’t do anything!"

"Look at this from our perspective. This is being generous. There are AFE commanders who don’t want to give you that benefit of the doubt, and you don’t want me to get me started on the King.” Shola didn’t even need to mention Sam’s name or Hell. Everyone knew who she was referring to. “After the princess died in that horrible attack on Los Angeles, he's been fixated on his family's safety. If he had some reason to think that your people were involved in his brother's disappearance...” She let everyone imagine the worst. "So, we would take your people’s assistance as a gesture of goodwill in this... delicate time."

"We're at your service."

The Templars had no idea what they had gotten themselves into when they had decided to torture Dean. He’d been worked over by the Archdemon Alastair for decades. In his mind there was no question that he wouldn't break, the only question was whether he could strike the necessary balance in his performance to not get killed. If the Templars suspected that they had no hope of breaking him they would probably just hand him over to Heaven sooner. But if the Templars thought that they could beat intel out of him like a piñata, then he risked them accidentally overworking him to death.

He tried to endure the beatings while pretending to struggle with a little snarkiness thrown in for good measure. Unfortunately, it was hard to play the game when they incidentally did manage to push one of his buttons. One Templar with a particularly strong right hook had simply given up on interrogating him and had switched gears to merely taking out some aggression.

"Do you know what they call you?" the Templar asked while cleaning his hands.

Dean spat a little blood on the floor before answering. "Last time I checked it was the Michaelsword. What do they call you? Assuming that they even know you exist—"

The Templar wheeled around, hit Dean in the face, then he squeezed Dean's jaw.
The truth was that Dean knew every nasty name that all the sides called him. There were dozens of slurs or curses thrown at him each week. That was just part of leading a largely misunderstood faction in a nuanced political climate. Not to mention his prominence in various cultural movements—with this crowd it was guaranteed that they hated him on both counts. Occasionally it bugged him, depending on the context, but for the most part he shrugged off the hate as the enemy trying to compensate for not being able to outright kill him. The fact that these enemies could easily kill him made the current turn in the conversation ever so slightly disconcerting.

"You are the poison—the sinner," the Templar snarled. "You and that fallen scum dragged the worst sins of Hell back to Earth and Heaven. You're the viper in the garden, but it's not enough that you damn so many humans—you're tearing Earth and Heaven apart because you're just a selfish dick."

Dean couldn't help but roll his eyes. He'd heard that song so many times he could dance to it. It was his turn to try to convince the Templar that his intentions were noble. Then he'd be shot down in some sort of argument about moral absolutism. Sam could've turned those arguments into hours-long discussions that left everyone else in an existential crisis, but Dean's approach usually involved it quickly devolving into witticisms like 'Go fuck yourself.'

"We're the ones trying to save Earth—" Dean began.

"It was going to be paradise, but you had to drag us through the dirt." It was no surprise that Dean wasn't even allowed to finish his sentence. "You're the reason the angels fell, that demons walk the Earth, that our cities are crumbling apart! I had a family and then your war tore it apart!"

Dean's brain hiccuped on the last bit. He had been so focused on the routine, that he'd forgotten the fact that there was a person working him over—maybe a person who was even less stable than expected.

"I don't know what—"

The Templar hit him again. "It's not fair! My kids were taken away—they were pure, but you—your filthy little half-breed son gets to live. You weren't happy enough corrupting the angels; you had to go muddy their race."

For a fleeting moment he had wanted to express some sympathy for the man, but the line had been crossed. He'd hit Dean's biggest weakness. Any hopes of playing it cool or de-escalating the situation were dashed.

"Don't you fucking talk about my son," Dean growled.

"You mean the scrawny little cunt that Heaven's gonna flay?" The Templar leaned in closer and lowered his voice to a venomous whisper. "When we give you to Michael, how long do you think it'll take before you say yes? Months? Years? And how long do you think your boy's gonna last without you?"

"Shut up." The thought was too sickening for him to think of a better comeback. The family would try to protect Dylaniel as best they could, but he was only nine years old. He had barely recovered from Sa'dah's death. Completely independent of the physical danger he might be in with one less guardian, the loss of his dad would crush him.

"He's big game. You know that, right? Aside from you and that demon brother of yours, he's at the top of every Templar and true angel's list. Bagging that demon girl was huge, but when we get
It wasn’t the most intelligent thing Dean had ever done, but that realization only really sunk in after his teeth had sunk in... to the Templar’s ear. Blood gushed into his mouth as he thrashed his head, tearing free a good amount of flesh. Dean spat the ear and blood at the Templar, who screamed... At least it shut him up.

Dean watched as two other Templars ran in to help their injured colleague. As he was being helped out of the room, the hurt one said something to the newcomers.

After a few minutes the newcomers returned. They didn’t bother asking questions. First they laid into him with their fists, then one of them circled behind him. A pair of hands held his head still as the other Templar drew a knife.

"Dean's missing. We don’t know if he's dead or captured," Sam explained to the horrified High Council. “The AFE already has hundreds of search teams looking for him, but they're essentially flying blind. We need as much intel as we can get on this situation."

“I take it you couldn’t make a deal on his location?” asked Crowley.

“There’s warding in the way or maybe the anti-magic aura is blocking it....” There was a slight pause while everyone debated mentioning the third possibility, but Sam finally added, “or he’s been taken to Heaven—possibly dead.”

He knew the shitstorm that he was bringing up and he also knew that it’d be on everyone’s minds. It had been the first or second thought of everyone when they found out that Dean had gone missing. Everyone wanted to know what to do if Michael came on the scene, vessel in tow. Everyone was scared, and that made the situation all the more dangerous.

"If he says yes to Michael, then our troops are going to be completely exposed. That's an archangel who knows every secret the alliance has.” Morrison voiced the general concern.

"He won't break," Sam stated firmly.

"He broke in Hell," countered Hathai.

"The stakes are too high now. He didn't understand what he was doing back when he was in Hell. And he has a son. He wouldn’t risk his son's life even for his own," Sam assured them.

"We should still have our troops ready to pull back," suggested Pizel.

"That'll cause a panic if word gets out,” Sam replied. “Or it could cause rebellion among the demons with loyalties on Earth."

Since Bethlim, Sam had been hearing about more demons in relationships with humans and non-human natives. Some of the demons had gone so far as adopt their significant other's children as their own. Even Anael and Jieshi were rumored to be more than professional partners.

The prospect of telling all their troops that they might be abandoning Earth was unnerving. When Sam had briefly humored it after Sa'dah's death he had been too distraught to consider the consequences. But now.... It was thirteen years after he'd started passively encouraging demons to form ties with the other species. In all those years many of them had developed loyalties that threatened to divide their people if they were faced with a choice between their homeland or their families.
“We’re not ordering anyone down before we know that Michael has a vessel, but I want us ready,” Sam instructed. “We need to be able to house every single demon we have on Earth. Also, if Michael does get a vessel, we should expect a massive increase in our soul intake. Make sure we can store as many as possible. They might be all we have to last us.”

“Sir, your family should relocate down here,” Denerus suggested, earning nods of agreement from several other archdemons.

“One of my sons is human,” Sam reminded them. “I don't want him exposed to this place if we can avoid it.”

Beyond the immediate family, most people tended to forget that the King of Hell had a human son, if they knew at all. Tom wasn’t against the association in general even with the potential for it to endanger him. There was always the risk that someone would try to use Tom to get to his family, but the incorrect perception that he was somehow less favored had somewhat devalued him as a hostage.

“And my nephew is half angel.”

“His angel parent can take care of him,” Hathai said in a particularly cold tone.

“I don’t think Cas is in any state right now to be the sole caretaker for his son.” Sam felt a little guilty making the judgement. “He’s too upset. He needs support, not to be given extra responsibilities and abandoned.”

Cas was a good parent as far as Sam was concerned, but his brother-in-law had a way of prioritizing Dean above everything else. Sam couldn't say that if push came to shove he wouldn't subordinate his kids to Ruby. He'd actually done something very similar to what he feared from Cas when he had chased after Ruby during the attack on the coven when Kaylee was still a newborn. But just because his concerns were hypocritical didn't make them invalid.

Sam had always found Dean to be the more emotional and nurturing parent of the pair. It'd be a little dismissive to say that it was because Dean was human. There were plenty of emotional and nurturing angels. It was probably more that Dean had grown up with a dad that never instilled positive emotions and was only nurturing of survival skills.

Cas didn’t have the burden or benefit of actively making up for his own unhealthy childhood—Cas didn't even have a childhood. The angel was kind and supportive, but at times Sam couldn't see a difference between the way Cas treated Dylaniel compared to any of Sam and Ruby's kids. In a way they'd taken on a very communal family unit after Dylaniel was born. With each parent having considerable professional obligations, they took turns caring for the kids as a group. Though Dean always went above and beyond to try to help Dylaniel.

Sam didn't doubt Cas's ability to care for Dylaniel under normal circumstances, but during a stressful time Dylaniel might need extra attention and Cas might be under-equipped to handle the situation. He didn't want to abandon either of them.

“We hold positions across the board until we see the stormfront,” Sam ordered. “In the meantime, I want the Maji and Crossroads working together on finding him. Find every loophole. Push every spell to the breaking point. We have hours for every minute up there. Let’s make them count.”

They didn't bother feeding Dean and the water tasted a little like piss—whether it was his imagination or someone's idea of a joke, he refused to drink it unless it was a matter of life or
death. He didn't know if starving him was a form of torture or just their way of saving rations; probably both. He'd been their prisoner for an entire day based on the fading light coming through the mostly blacked-out windows in the room they'd left him in.

The interrogations and beatings had become less frequent, which worried him. They were probably trying to figure out what to do with him. Maybe biting the guy had made him too much of a liability? Maybe they thought he wasn't worth all this effort? It would've been nice to have some idea what was going on, but his intel was severely limited.

Lying on the thin hardwood floor of the second story bedroom, he could've heard all sorts of things... if he wasn't deaf. The Templars had taken the exterior half of his cochlear implant before dumping him in the bedroom. Without the transmitter that was normally worn by his right ear, he couldn't hear a thing. It was frustrating as hell to be bound, in the dark, without the ability to hear.

After a little effort he managed to slip his zip-tied wrists past his butt and around his legs. He gingerly reached up to his forehead and touched the stinging cuts. It was hard to focus, but he could make out what felt like letters. He'd love to return to favor, but that meant getting rescued or escaping first. And he had the growing impression that escape was his best bet. With his arms in front of him, he started crawling around the room looking for a way out.

He crawled to the bedroom door, reached to try the handle, but it was locked from the outside—no big surprise there. The building was likely warded, since they hadn't risked putting an anti-angel ward on his body... or they'd taken him into the anti-magic territory. Either way he was running out of time. If the Templars were losing their patience with him, then Heaven would soon show up and he'd be completely fucked. He couldn't just keep waiting; he needed to get out of the house if he was going to try to pray for help or flee on his own.

After looking around the room he had a dumb idea, but considering all the factors he figured a certain amount of gambling with his life might be necessary. He worked his way over to the far wall, carefully pulled himself up, broke one of the darkened windows, then threw himself out. He didn't have the kind of control during the fall to tumble and ended up landing hard on his back. Through some miracle, his head and neck missed the impact. He was on the wooden deck that apparently surrounded the home. It took all his strength to roll onto his stomach and begin crawling for it. He'd almost reached the edge of the deck when two Templars grabbed his feet and dragged him backwards, over the broken glass.

After the escape attempt, they moved him to a windowless second floor closet. To prevent him from standing up or crawling they connected the zip-ties on his wrists and ankles with a third tie. He was left on his side, which is how he stayed for a very long time. Every inch of him hurt—too much to let him sleep, though not quite enough to make him pass out. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to escape from that setup, so fatigue and despair paralyzed him until he was literally shaken out of it.

The floor shook from some sort of rumbling. It reminded him of an explosion, but he couldn't be sure. There were several small flashes of light visible through a crack on the floorboards. Out of nowhere about ten bullets shot through the floor a few feet to his right. He rolled to the left wall and pressed against it trying to make himself as small a target as possible.

There was a fight going on downstairs. He started yelling out to his rescuers and banging on the wall to try to get their attention.

After a few minutes, a woman that he didn't recognize as one of the Templars opened the door. She said something, but he couldn't hear her. Her being backlit made it nearly impossible to lip read, which he was normally terrible at anyway. A moment later a man turned up at her side and
handed her something. The woman walked over to Dean and squatted next to him. She carefully helped him into a sitting position, then began putting the transmitter for his implant back on him. He felt like crying he was so relieved that the cavalry had arrived.

Once his implant was in place and switched on, he turned his back toward her to help her access his zip-tie bindings... but she didn't move to cut them. Instead she stood up and looked down at him in amusement.

"Hello, Dean. How long has it been, about twenty years?"

His heart sank. "Lilith."

"I'm so touched that you remembered." Her smile made him shiver. "I’ll admit I had fun with you last time... but I have a lot to prepare. However to show I’m still a good host I called in one of your old friends to keep you company instead. He’s so excited to see you again."

Alastair. Dean felt as though all the blood had drained from his flesh.

"He’s still working out the kinks of playing with live humans—your kind don’t really hold up so well. Try not to let him down. I know he has such high hopes for you."
Dean tried to fight off two of Lilith’s underlings as they grabbed him, but his bindings prevented him from doing much more than wriggling on the ground. One held him down while the other jabbed him in the thigh with a syringe. He felt his limbs turn limp, then the room spun around him before he finally passed out.

He briefly saw the inside of a van. Based on his perspective he must’ve been lying on the floor. He was gagged and his implant’s transmitter had been removed again. His back was killing him for some reason, which unnerved the hell out of him. The van turned a corner causing him to slide sideways, but he couldn’t bring himself to react. He blacked out again as the van started shaking from driving over rough terrain.

The next thing he remembered was being dragged along a dirt path. There was a dilapidated factory next to an untended wheat field. Industrial farm equipment was rusted and abandoned in the distance. He tried to pray to Cas, but nothing happened. As little as he thought of Lilith’s gang, they weren’t stupid enough let him get into a situation to be able to pray for help. He closed his eyes in disappointment and drifted off again.

When he finally came to for real Dean found himself in another nondescript rundown building that could’ve been in a million quiet corners of the world. The building may have been another factory, community center, or a sizable residence; he couldn’t tell. He was in a fairly small room, but through its open door he could see a long hallway containing at least two other doorways.

The contents of the room left no doubt in his mind that he was going to be tortured. A table displayed two dozen implements of pain that Dean recognized and a few that he didn’t. He had even been prepped while he was unconscious. His wrists and ankles were strapped to bare wall studs. The icing on the cake was that he was naked, which only underscored his feeling of vulnerability.

After a few minutes of solitude, a guard passing by the door saw that he was awake. Alastair came in a moment later and said something to the guard, who nodded, then left. The archdemon assessed Dean briefly before reattaching the implant’s transmitter. Dean had to fight the impulse to resist the act out of spite, but he endured the further humiliation in order to regain his ability to communicate.

“I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to see you,” Alastair began. “I’ve been so busy lately with everything. You know how it is. But I always had hope that I would get a chance to work with you again.”

“No…” Dean’s heart was pounding as he tried not to think about the last time they were together. He wanted to be rebellious, but simply being around his mas—Alastair made him feel weak. He spoke in something only slightly louder than a whisper. “Go… fuck yourself.”
“Tisk, tisk. What happened to your manners? I see we’ll have to review the basics while we’re at it. You should be thanking us, Dean. Saving you from those people. The things they must’ve done to you. Don’t worry, we killed them all—all of them that were there. You know how important it is not to leave loose ends.” One of Alastair’s eyebrows arched at a thought. “Which raises the question, did any of the Templar women try to seize your line?”

“Wh-what?”

Alastair was almost certainly referring to the bloodstream of Michael’s vessels. Dean’s discomfort with the whole interaction hit an entirely new level as he realized that he was being asked if he’d been sexually assaulted. It seemed absurd on its surface. The Templars had successfully bagged the Sword of Heaven—they didn’t need to take out an insurance policy. Yet he couldn’t help rerunning his hours of captivity in his head. With a fleeting moment of relief he reflected that except for the time in the trunk of the car, he’d been awake the entire time and didn’t remember any of them taking advantage of him.

Though, it was worrying that Alastair had been thinking about the subject. He wasn’t sure what Lilith wanted with him. A day earlier he would’ve assumed that they’d just want to destroy his soul and kill him on sight, but clearly that wasn’t the case. Dean was trying to figure out the implications of what Alastair had asked when the archdemon cupped Dean’s balls with his hand.

"Your bloodstream, it’s such a sensitive subject for us all," Alastair explained. “We used to have such interesting chats. The current status of your line is of particular interest. I’ve heard that you have at least one child.”

Dean could barely process what Alastair was saying. He was painfully aware that the master torturer’s hand hadn’t released him. He wanted to reply with something defiantly snarky, but his thoughts filled with the sound of blood and tears trickling into a pool below him. Some long-dormant part of him cried out that it wasn’t time yet to talk—but he wasn’t that person anymore.

"I..." Dean could barely get the word out before he faltered, handicapped by the trauma of the past and concern for his balls. "I don’t have anything to say... to you."

"Don’t worry. I’m not angry.” Alastair stared thoughtfully at Dean before releasing him, then strolled over to a collection of knives, brands, and whips. The archdemon started picking them up one at a time, meticulously selecting a tool. “It’s not your fault. They took you from us when you were doing so well. I’d like to try to make things right.”

While Alastair was debating between a hunting knife and lancet, a woman came into the room. She had red hair, firetruck red lipstick, and wore all black. Her smile was predatory and made Dean even more aware of his naked state. She walked over to the table, then leaned against it to wait for something. Alastair gestured toward her in introduction.

"I want you to meet someone. This is Abbadon. She’ll be lending me a hand. You see, as a Knight of Hell, she has quite a rare gift."

Thirty-four hours after Dean went missing, a messenger arrived outside the AFE’s Springfield base waving a white flag. A routine search of the demon turned up a plastic bag containing a piece of bloody gauze and Dean's silver wedding band. There was a vampire on base who was able to confirm that the blood was human and its freshness. By her best guess, it had been shed less than an hour earlier.

Kit was brought in to try identifying the blood. The kitsune had been mentoring under Dean for
almost ten years. They'd been in at least a dozen fights together where Dean had suffered minor injuries. He turned a little green when he confirmed that the blood was, in fact, Dean’s.

The messenger refused to talk to anyone other than Sam, so a meeting was urgently arranged. Sam, Cas, and Ruby teleported to the base. When they arrived, they found Tom waiting for them outside the brig. Tom’s trusty informant, Kit, whispered something to him while patting his shoulder, then slipped away to avoid any family drama.

Sam stopped in front of Tom, who crossed his arms in determination. They hadn’t wanted to draw any of the kids into the whole ordeal any more than necessary. It was true that Tom was twenty-four years old, but he had been categorically excluded from the loop. Yet he’d managed to insert himself back into the whole mess.

“He’s here to talk with me,” Sam told his son in a tone that made it clear that they weren’t about to have a discussion. “We don’t have time to argue, so if you can keep yourself an observer, then I’m not going to fight you on this.”

“I can.” Tom spoke with a discipline that he didn’t normally show outside of spellcasting.

Sam nodded, then the group went in to see their prisoner.

The demon was bound by a devil’s trap that was inscribed on the fifteen-foot-high ceiling. It looked like his vessel had taken a minor beating, probably from soldiers who knew Dean personally.

“The Sam Winchester, in the flesh.” The demon eyed Sam with morbid curiosity.

He just wanted to skip all the posturing and cut to the chase. “Is Dean alive?”

"He's alive—might end up with a few pieces missing.” The demon looked to Cas, then grinned. “I hope you didn't want another kid.”

Cas lunged at the demon, gripped his throat and slammed him through the wooden floor into the concrete foundation below. He started pummeling the prisoner, but Sam telekinetically pulled him off the demon.

"Cas.” Sam spoke in a calming voice, but he wasn't sure how effective it could be all things considered. “I know you're upset—""They're mutilating Dean!” Cas struggled against the telekinetic hold.

"And we need to find out how to get him back." Ruby gently but firmly held Cas’s right arm. It was part physical confinement and part providing comfort. He looked down at her, then stopped struggling against Sam.

The bloodied messenger managed to stand up amidst the splintered floorboards. He took in Cas’s pained appearance, then started laughing. Sam immediately released Cas and gripped the demon’s throat, silencing the laughter.

"You came here to talk. I'm not going to let you laugh or jerk us around.” Sam squeezed the demon's broken soul to emphasize the point. “So talk before I decide you have nothing to say.”

"You can’t blame us for taking precautions. We can’t have too many of Michael’s meatsuits running around," said the demon.
Cas looked as though it was taking all his willpower not to kill the messenger. Sam knew that Cas had also perceived the threat against Dylaniel, and decided to keep the conversation moving before Cas did anything regrettable.

"If that's true, why should we believe he could get out of this alive?"

"You know, as much as we want him dead, we want you alive more. We're looking to make a deal, one Winchester for another. That's like a family tradition for you, isn't it?" The demon smiled broadly at Sam, who didn't want to turn to see Ruby and Tom's reactions to this development. "No angels, no knights, no demons—cause we'll be ready for them. And if this goes wrong, he'll be gone and there won't be a shred of soul left to find."

"How would we make the trade?" Sam asked with a little less confidence, but he recovered quickly.

"There's a farm three miles northeast of the intersection of CR 410 and CR 430 in northern Texas. Be there at 6:00pm local time. Don't bother raiding it because he won't be there until showtime. Don't try to trap it beforehand because we've already got eyes on it. Don't try to be cute because it'll get him killed."

"If I agree to this I'm not going alone," Sam replied as if stating a fact. "Dean can't get back on his own. I get someone who'll come along that's capable of taking him home."

The messenger thought on Sam's point. "You can bring his angel boy-toy to get him, but you wear warded handcuffs."

Sam glared at the demon for a few long seconds. "Deal." Sam extended his hand to the prisoner, who shook it.

"By the way," the demon added. "Every minute over that you make them wait, they'll take a pound of flesh, so don't drag your heels."

They had just over an hour until the exchange was supposed to occur. Sam, Cas, and Ruby agreed that as much as rescuing Dean was also the concern of the AFE, trying to accommodate a massive bureaucracy with such a short time window could be disastrous. The last thing they needed was to have one of the more aggressive commanders unilaterally interjecting a hundred troops into the delicate situation.

When they got back to the bunker, Kaylee was anxiously waiting for them. She'd been left at home and hadn't been tipped off to the prisoner's location like Tom. It had been agonizing to sit around the bunker waiting for news, while trying not to alarm Alex and Dylaniel. The two boys had probably suspected that some sort of important mission was in the works—that was a common enough occurrence—but neither of them had been told that Dean was even missing. She didn't want to be the one to tell them, so instead she'd granted them full access to the bunker's media library, then retreated to another room to wait.

She barely let them take a breath before starting her questioning. "What did he want? Is Dean ok?"

"Dean's alive—" Sam started, but Tom interrupted him by jumping to the bad news.

"They want to trade Dean for Dad."

Kaylee looked at everyone's expressions. She hardly needed to ask what everyone thought of the matter. Her dad and Cas were visibly resigned. Her mom was harder to read, though she seemed
worried and conflicted. Tom exchanged a knowing glance with her—at least she was guaranteed one person in her corner.

"You can't turn yourself over to Lilith." Kaylee was almost pleading with him. There was no point beating around the bush when there was so little time and she appeared to be on the losing side of the argument. "She’ll kill you."

"I'm not going to just turn myself over. Cas and I will go get Dean back." Sam’s voice lacked the confidence that she’d learned to recognize while studying him in Hell. It was telling, even if the others weren’t as attuned to his tonal range. She’d seen him sell salvation to sin itself, but he knew just how flawed his suggestion was. He was winging it in his desperation.

"That's a dumb plan," Kaylee said flatly.

"It's the only plan we have." Sam spread his hands to indicate an open floor. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Bring backup."

"If anyone aside from Cas and me show, they'll kill Dean," Sam explained.

"Sam, you can't use your powers on Lilith, let alone with the warded cuffs," Ruby began voicing her doubts.

"We'll use some fake cuffs—and I don’t want to fight Lilith to begin with."

"This is still a terrible idea." Kaylee continued her criticism. "What if they just use a rifle on you?"

"I'll keep a barrier up." He was suggesting trying to maintain a telekinetic shield, which had always worked better in theory than in practice. "Anyway, they want to make sure Lilith's the one to kill me."

"You can’t keep a barrier up indefinitely while topside,” Kaylee pointed out. “They could hit you from any direction—you know they're gonna get you exposed."

"And just because Lilith called dibs on the killing blow doesn't mean the rest of them won't hurt you,” added Tom. “You'll be up against at least Lilith and who-knows-what-else."

"They'll have at least one knight," Cas commented.

"What?" said Sam and Tom at the same time.

"If there's any risk at all that we'll save Dean, they'll want to make sure the... castration is permanent. The knights' powers were directly given to them by Lucifer. Their damage can only be undone by Lucifer, Michael, or God. It would be a likely precaution."

"So, it's gonna be a bunch of demons, at least one archdemon and a knight against the two of you with Dad's hands literally tied." Kaylee chewed her lip in frustration. "Fucking foolproof."

"It has to be just the two of us," Sam said. "Lilith is going to be looking for backup."

"She's gonna be looking for angels or demons. What do they care about a human or two?” Kaylee suggested. “Dean or you would trip their own alarm if they have their sensitivity high enough to pick up the blips. And how would they know how to look for me? They wouldn't even know how to
ward for a hybrid. I only trip the highest-end demon alarms—"

"No way." Sam’s demeanor switched from a weak attempt to hide his pessimism to protective sternness. "It's too dangerous."

"Which is why you need backup," Kaylee objected.

"You don't have enough combat experience—your powers are spotty."

"When it matters I can do it!"

"You're too young to be fighting archdemons and knights. This isn't a discussion," Sam told her firmly. He sighed, catching himself before he’d raised his voice, then tried to make his plan more rational. “Cas and I can get in close without blowing the whole thing up. We have the combat experience. We will handle it."

"Like Dean would want you two risking your lives for him? I don't know if you noticed, but you're both being hypocrites." She stared her dad down, but he didn't waver.

Kaylee spun on her heels and marched out of the room. Tom sighed, then followed her down the hall. The last thing Sam wanted before going on a dangerous mission was to get into a fight with his kids, but he wasn't about to let them join him.

Ruby touched Sam's hand as she walked out of the room, silently asking him to follow her. She guided him to their bedroom to talk in private.

"Sam, I know this isn't what you want... I just..." Ruby chewed her lip. She barely knew how to start talking about the subject. There was hardly any time to process what was happening and the few thoughts that came to her first were unspeakable... but she had to share them with someone.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Sam encouraged her as he wrapped his arms around her.

"I don't want to be thinking it." Her voice was hesitant.

"Tell me."

"I know Dean is family—I get that. I really do. But if Lilith kills you it'll bring us one step closer to the apocalypse... and if she kills Dean, soul and all, that'll take us one step back from the brink."

"And the next step back will be killing Dylan," Sam replied quietly.

"I didn't mean—I don't want to be thinking like this, but somebody has to."

"Trust me, you're not the only one who thought it." Sam took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. "Cas is going to go no matter what and if he goes alone they'll both be killed. I can't just let them both die. I can't start sacrificing our family."

"You're part of our family." Ruby wrapped her arms around his neck. "Sam, please don't do this. You were right when you said it's too dangerous. I can't lose you. The kids can't lose you—not after Sadie."

She was begging him not to go, but she wasn't fighting him. It reminded him of an argument that they’d had years ago about taking risks. Ruby had faced danger to be the kind of person who might inspire their kids and in his fear he’d tried to stop her. Now the tables were turned, but she left the choice to him.
"I don’t want to be the kind of person who would let my brother die when there was a chance I could’ve saved him."

After Sam left to get ready for the exchange, Ruby decided to go check on Alex and Dylaniel, then went to find Kaylee and Tom. She opened the door to Tom’s bedroom and wasn’t surprised in the slightest by what she found. Kaylee was packing Tom’s rifle and ammo case into a duffel while he quickly painted protection runes onto Kit’s back. The three young adults froze when they spotted Ruby. She looked at the runes, then picked up another brush and began working on a complimentary set.

"Who’s using the rifle?" she asked.

"I am," Tom replied without looking up from his work. "I have eight corrosive rounds, which should at least take out some meatsuits."

"Try for headshots. It won’t kill them, but it’s hard to use a meatsuit without eyes," Ruby suggested, then glanced at Kit and Kaylee. "You two are going short range?"

"If I can blink we’ll both go melee as fast as possible," Kaylee explained. "If it's completely a no-fly zone I might have to switch up the telekinesis until I can get close enough to wreck them all with the Light."

"Just because they’re brutes doesn’t mean you can underestimate them," Ruby warned. "They’ll probably try to block flight as soon as your dad and Cas hit the ground. The easiest spell for them to throw together would fall under the gravis excappare effects—just break any clay pots you find."

"Like in Z-Zelda," Kit said as he stifled a chuckle while trying to hold as still as possible to avoid messing up the runes.

"Those types of spells would still let them smoke out, so watch for anyone running for it. They could try to get reinforcements."

"I can grab runners," Kaylee replied.

"Kaylee, once you get in, try not to use any powers until you’re ready to hit them. I know you normally don’t trigger demon alarms, but you don’t want to be pushing your luck with crossing some sort of minimum threshold." Ruby paused for a second while considering the last rune in her set. "Tom, I have a spell that might help hide you all."

"You could come with us," Tom suggested hopefully.

"If they’re using magic to look for demons I’d definitely trip it." She finished painting the rune, then put down the paintbrush and exhaled slowly. "I wish I could go…. But I know you’ll do great."

Ruby stopped herself from adding anything that conveyed her fears about the situation. There had been a chance that she could’ve stopped Sam—maybe she could still stop the kids, but too many pieces were already in motion. If she could physically stop some or all of them from going it would be a betrayal that they might not be prepared to forgive. Sam was blinded by the risk to his brother, and the kids were blinded to the risks to their assorted father figures. If she was able to aid Sam instead of endangering him more, she’d be gearing up with them. She didn’t want to try to tell them all the reasons it might not work. She wanted to tell them how they might win.

"First priority is don’t let your dad and Lilith kill each other. If any of you get a shot at Lilith you
take it." She got back down to business before the negative emotions could creep into everyone’s minds to breed doubt. "You’re only gonna have a brief window after your dad and Cas arrive before they try to make the handoff. The shit’s gonna hit the fan somewhere in that window, probably once the facade of a handoff falls through. You gotta pick your targets, get your first shot lined up, and melee has to be ready to move all in that little window."

"Any ideas on how to slow them down without starting a brawl or letting all of them know we're coming?" asked Tom.

"Maybe let one of them know," Ruby mused as she pulled out her cell to call Flo.

Alastair and Abbadon worked Dean for hours even after they stopped asking him questions. There was no longer the pretense of an interrogation. They just wanted to hurt him. Dean got the strange feeling that Alastair really was trying to save him in some twisted way. The archdemon was personally invested in the torture, so much so that Abbadon had had to step in at one point to prevent Alastair from overworking him.

After a cut that came dangerously close to his jugular, Abbadon leaned over to Alastair and said something to him in Abyssal. Dean could barely recoil at the sound. Alastair considered Dean for a moment, then she pointed at the deep gashes on his torso and arms. Alastair studied the damage, nodded consent, and left the room. Abbadon unshackled Dean, then dragged him into a featureless, windowless room. Once her hand was off of him, he sank helplessly to the ground. His back stung against the hardwood floor.

"Try not to bleed to death," she said as she handcuffed him, then left, closing the door behind her.

Dean’s first thought was to allow himself to succumb to unconsciousness, but then he noticed his one spot of good luck. She had only bothered to cuff his wrists, and she did so in front of him. With the exception of his injuries he wasn’t actually that immobilized. He gingerly rolled onto his stomach and began crawling around the room looking for anything that might be helpful.

He found a ten-inch length of thin wire in a particularly dusty corner. It wasn't long enough to make an effective weapon, but he was grateful for the tool. Dean took the thin wire and tied it into a slipknot, then began running his fingertips along the floorboards, checking the nailheads. The building was old and over time the wood had expanded and contracted repeatedly, separating the wooden planks from their nails ever so slightly. He found a partially exposed nailhead, tightened the knot around it, then wrapped the remainder of the wire around his fingers. Carefully, he tugged from different angles until the nail came free.

The nail was less than two inches long, just a finishing nail. If he wanted something that could actually hurt a person he’d have to pull up enough floorboards to reach the nails used in the studs. It was slow going, but he systematically worked through one board at a time. Having the first nail made the process easier. He could gouge away the wood around the other nail heads and use the first nail head to help pry up the subsequent ones. After removing the nails from each board he was sure to put the board back where it had been previously, that way if someone came they wouldn’t see the hole he was slowly making in the floor.

It was nerve-wracking work, but eventually in the side of a four-by-four stud he felt a square nailhead. Dean frantically worked to extract the antique nail. It was four inches long and based on the rust it was probably iron. He replaced the floorboards, then clutched the nail tightly in his hands. His thoughts weren't quite a prayer—he knew no one could hear him. But he whispered to himself that, futile or not, he was going to ram that tiny spike into some demon's heart.
Tom marked each of their foreheads with the cloaking spell Ruby that had given them before they teleported to Texas. The spell was far from a safe bet, but it was designed with subtlety in mind. It wouldn’t create any holes in whatever magical maps Lilith might be using to monitor the area, yet it would lessen Kaylee’s chances of tripping any high-quality demon alarms. More than that, it actually made them slightly harder to see when they weren’t moving.

Kit and Tom had to piggyback on Kaylee’s teleport, which made both of the men have to take a minute to recover. Thankfully, both of them had piggybacked on her ports before and knew what to expect. Despite the nausea, as soon as Kit hit the ground he started sniffing for bodies. They opted to arrive one mile south of the meeting spot, then approach it on foot. They had thirty minutes to get in position and prepare for the inevitable fight.

Kit guided them across the dry grassy hills, occasionally stopping to sniff the air. About fifteen minutes into their march he signaled for everyone to get down. They crouched in the thigh-high grass and waited. The kitsune looked through the grass, watching the tiny dot of a demon patrolling on a hilltop to the northwest.

“Can you grab a demon that far away?” Tom whispered to Kaylee, but she shook her head.

The three of them lost five minutes waiting for their route to clear, then they ran to make up time.

They managed to find a decent vantage point overlooking the farm. Their path had taken them into some slightly rocky hills, which gave them a few good options for hiding. The ledge where they finally settled was barely big enough for all three of them to fit, but its small size made it less conspicuous. A large boulder provided cover and a good rest for Tom’s rifle.

"I-I can smell Dean," Kit said without bothering to glance down at the farm. Lilith and her entourage had arrived, with three minutes to spare. He closed his eyes in concentration. "He’s b-bleeding... and he has b-burns... and...." Kit furrowed his brow and opened his eyes.

"What is it?"

"There’s other human b-blood; not his. M-maybe a spell?"

"Anti-flight?" Kaylee asked their resident witch.

"I’m not sure why an anti-flight spell would use human blood. I'd take a bird over a human," Tom commented. “I don’t know what they’re trying to pull with the human blood.”

“The intel m-might not help us. Time to send it up the chain of command,” Kit said as he dug through the duffel bag. He pulled out the shortwave radio, and handed it to Kaylee with a nod.

Dean had nearly fallen asleep when two demons came for him. In his disoriented and naked state he couldn’t think of a way of hiding the nail. The demons weren’t looking for contraband, so he managed to mostly slip it into a crack in the floor before he was dragged away. As soon as he was out of the room he began questioning his decision to stash his only weapon, even if the weapon was relatively ineffective.

The situation turned out to somehow be both better and much worse than he’d feared. The decision to leave the nail was probably correct since his hands were immediately examined as he was shackled in the room where he had been tortured earlier. This time however, he was shackled to the table, stomach side down. A small fire pit held smoldering embers and what he recognized as branding equipment.
“I wish things could’ve been different,” Alastair said as he leaned down to be at eye level with Dean. “But it’s important to remember your priorities and sometimes sacrifices are necessary.”

He had no idea what Alastair was talking about, but it scared the hell out of him. The archdemon patted his shoulder, then nodded to Abbadon. The knight grabbed a yellow-hot metal poker with a fine point and went to work.

The pain on his back that had been bothering him before was nothing compared to the branding. It was an overwhelming combination of the searing agony, the almost cold sensation after the nerve endings had died, and the sickening smell of burning flesh. He screamed and shook violently, but four demons held him down while she worked. Nothing would’ve made him happier than to pass out, yet he didn’t until he was turned over and she went to work on the front.

He woke up in the same room they’d left him in before. Gauze and bandages wrapped his torso to protect the wounds on his back. The same treatment had been given to his crotch. It was crushing for him to realize that the bandages between his legs were ominously flat. He couldn’t even bring himself to move—to check the extent of the damage or otherwise. All he could do was stare at the ceiling and wonder how things could get any worse.

He was tempted to give into despair, but a tiny spark of defiance was still alive in him. If there was anything he could do to be a pain in their collective ass he would. His fingertips dragged along the bandages around his lower abdomen when he had an idea. Slowly, he crawled across the floor, to the crack with the iron nail in it. He slipped the nail inside the bandages along his right hip just as the door opened and a pair of demons grabbed him.

The demons roughly checked his bandages to make sure they were secure and dressed him before teleporting him directly to a different building. He was dropped onto the concrete floor of a basement, then largely ignored. There wasn’t much point in trying to escape or attack, he was still handcuffed and now he was outnumbered a dozen-to-one. The group of demons was intently discussing something. Lilith seemed to be giving orders. Something big was about to happen.

It wasn’t clear what Lilith was telling her subordinates. If he’d had the exterior half of his implant he could’ve at least been able to discern their tone of voice, but the transmitter had been taken out after he passed out the last time. As he was studying their interaction he was shaken from his concentration by a strange static cherp. Reflexively he looked around the basement, but there wasn’t any way he could’ve heard anything to begin with. When he was getting ready to dismiss the sound as his imagination there was another burst of static, which evened out to a soft hum.

"Uncle Dean, it’s Kaylee.” The fidelity wasn’t great, but he could hear her voice somehow. He tried not to react, though none of the demons were paying much attention to him at the moment anyhow.

"We’re broadcasting on your implant’s frequency. Dad and Cas are getting ready to make a trade for you. They know it's a trap, but they’re complete idiots. They don’t know that Tom, Kit, and I are here to help. We're trying to finish getting in position to give them support, but we could use a bigger time window once they touch down. Stall them at the end if you can. And keep an eye out for spells that you might be able to disrupt subtly—they might be using blood or a clay pot.”

Dean covered his face with his hands and tried not to cry for fear that it would draw attention to him. The torture, the loss, the sound of Kaylee’s voice, the thought of Cas and Sam knowingly walking into a trap, the kids jumping in to help save him—it was almost too much for him to take. He could feel his eyes start to water, but he steeled himself as best he could.

"Also, we love you."
"I know it's hard to keep situational awareness in the fray, but Kay you can't be blinking between my barrel and targets," Tom said as he flicked the caps off his rifle's scope, then started adjusting the alignment as best he could based on the wind. "Keep the sun on your right side with targets in front of you whenever possible so you don't block my shots."

"If w-we count eight shots, you coming d-down?" Kit asked.

"We'll see if I can get all eight off."

"Do we even want a long fight or short one?" Kaylee asked while flexing to test how constricting her clothes were. She took a knife out of her belt, then cut along the seam of her pants at the knees.

"Just o-one w-w—" Kit restarted. "A w-win."

"‘Just a win,’" Tom parroted in agreement.

"They're gonna lockdown flight…. I can feel it." Kaylee glanced down the long rocky hillside to the meeting spot. Her heart sank as she realized her limits. "Even downhill, I'm not gonna be able to run the distance in time."

"Are there any anti-flight auras that don't affect you? There might be a chance—"

"I've never been able to blink through the slightest aura…." Kaylee looked at the meeting spot, their location, then at the surrounding landscape. Her mouth moved, but she was too caught up in thought to articulate for several seconds. "Tommy, how far out is the meet up?"

Tom double checked the infrared laser measure mounted beside his scope, then returned to making his calibrations.

"About 400 yards."

"Have an idea?" Kit asked hopefully.

"I have a really bad idea." She gave a weak shrug. "What is flying if not a controlled fall?"

"That's g-gliding," corrected Kit.

"No way. You don't have enough altitude to get you there," Tom said after assessing the scene.

"I only need like thirty more feet of height." She nodded as she spoke, more reassuring herself than the others. "I can use telekinesis to throw myself straight up, pop the wings, and if I arc west into the wind I should have enough lift to make it."

Tom stopped fiddling with his rifle in order to speak directly to her. "If they have guns, they will shoot at you and you will have no cover." He was worried, but knew how hard it'd be to talk her out of any given idea.

"I can keep a barrier up," she suggested.

"Can you? While flying? Because half the time I still beat your ass in paintball even when you're cheating—and you're on the ground."

"My powers work better under pressure. I'll make it work."

"It's suicidally reckless."
“If you have a problem with suicidally reckless plans, then you came on the wrong fucking outing.” Kaylee pointed at the terrain between their perch and the target. “My alternative is being almost as exposed, but for at least four times as long. If I can’t blink, then I have to either use my wings or watch the show.”

“Fucking hell…. Fine.” Tom sighed, then nodded toward another ridge. “The two of you take off from over there so you don’t give away my position. But wait for my pull. It's a pain in the ass to shoot once everyone starts running around in a panic.”

“See you on the other side.” Kaylee hugged Tom, then followed Kit into the tall grass.

After talking with Ruby, Sam went to try to make amends with Kaylee and Tom. He'd found them talking in the hallway outside Tom’s bedroom. Apologies were exchanged surprisingly easily and he gave them each a painfully brief hug before going to check on Alex. He hated the idea of leaving Alex in the dark as to the situation, but he couldn’t take another fight right before having to leave.

He made a trip downstairs to have a set of fake warded handcuffs made. While he was in Hell he warned Crowley that he might be unreachable for a while and that Kaylee could sit in for him if there was urgent business. It wasn’t unheard of for Sam to let Kaylee take the reins, but each time previously Sam had been overseeing her. Crowley may have been curious, though he didn’t ask any questions. Somewhere in their ancient partnership a degree of trust had formed and Sam remorsefully took advantage of it.

Before leaving for Texas with Sam, Cas tried everything he could think of to contact Gabriel. Unfortunately, the archangel had a habit of going off the grid with Kali for months at a time. After giving up on reaching his brother, Cas decided to spend his last ten minutes with his son. He found Dylaniel in the parlor watching an episode of Planet Earth with an expression that his family knew to be wonder. Cas sat down on the couch next to him, but he didn't bother watching the television.

If Dean had been there he would've known what to say or do. He’d have used those precious minutes to find comfort or impart some sort of warm memory should the worst happen. Instead Cas was alone in a completely foreign social interaction. The boy had no idea the danger that his dad was in, nor the gamble that was going to be taken. Cas settled on taking a page from Dean's book. He gently patted Dylaniel's back, asked him some questions about his favorite parts of the show, then gave him a partial hug before having to leave.

Cas met Sam in the library five minutes before six. Neither of them were optimistic about the situation, but that wasn't stopping them. They both rationally knew that trying to save Dean was an unjustified risk. The problem was that it wasn’t a rational matter—it was a personal matter. The power to save Dean, however small the odds, lay solely with them. Everyone else could argue about the right answer, but they carried the weight of making the final decision... and neither of them could bring themselves to say no.

A minute before six, Sam put on the fake cuffs, then the pair teleported to just east of the farm. They walked around a barn and turned to approach from the south. The location of the exchange was easy to spot. A dozen demons stood in a clearing between the barn and a small house.

Sam quickly accessed the group and recognized two of them as being very powerful demons. He recognized Lilith, who stood in the front with a smug grin. The other one he didn’t recognize specifically, but the power radiating off him was distinctly archdemon.
"Lilith's in front. Arch in the white-button-up," Sam whispered to Cas before they got within earshot of the demons. "None of them are knights."

"There should be a knight here. Something's wrong," Cas whispered back.

"Everything's wrong," Sam muttered.

They stopped about twenty feet away from Lilith. The whole scene was painfully reminiscent of a standoff in some western movie, but this contest was horrible uneven.

"Hi, Sam. It's been, what, eighteen or nineteen years? Way to make a girl feel like you're avoiding her." Lilith was way too pleased with herself—he could hardly blame her. She was some unknown number of steps ahead of him and all he could do was react.

He could imagine two likely plays. Either she had already locked down flight and was planning to kill all three of them, or she was going to wait until Cas took Dean away before attacking. The first option sounded more appealing in terms of gains for her side. Dean, Cas, and Sam would all be dead. But they'd have to fight Cas, an angel who was known for hunting demons and angels alike. They'd lose Dean, but letting him be rescued would reduce their own losses.

"Where's Dean?" Sam asked. He was painfully aware that any moment Lilith could reveal the trap. Dean could already be dead. They could already be grounded from flight. There could be yet another horrible, unforeseen aspect to the ordeal.

Lilith shouted toward the barn. Six demons came out in pairs, each escorted a man. All three prisoners were Dean's build and complexion. They were all beaten and bound, wearing jumpsuits with large anti-scyring wards on their chests. Black cloth bags were over their heads. Sam used his powers, hoping that two would be demons, but no such luck; they were all human.

"You bring two, so I figured that I'd bring three." Lilith gestured at the prisoners. "How do you feel about your odds of trying anything cute?"

"Dean?" Cas said, causing all three of the men to murmur through gags and struggle against the demons holding them. Cas and Sam exchanged an unsure glance. Sam wasn't sure why Lilith was taking the extra precaution until she tossed something onto the ground between Sam and Cas. It was a pair of warded handcuffs.

"You're going to put those on," she instructed Sam.

"My word is binding," Sam said as he held up the fake warded handcuffs on his wrists.

"Then there's nothing wrong with being a little extra bound." Lilith smiled. "It's not that I don't trust the word of the king. It's just that you aren't the king. You're the thing standing between us and him."

Sam had been hoping that Lilith's demons were under the same misconception that permeated his own ranks. Rumor said that, like Crowley, Sam was oath-bound from lying. The reasoning was that surely the King of Hell's word carried at least as much accountability as the archdemons, Crowley included. They had passively nurtured the inaccuracy by having Sam stay as honest as possible, thereby disguising his rare lies. As Crowley liked to quote 'If you're going to lie about something, make it something worth dying for.' While trying to save Dean's life seemed to qualify, Lilith and her team hadn't been fooled.

"So, put on the cuffs or your brother will be dead before you can know who to save. Unless you're the gambling type." Lilith walked past the three men, dragging a knife in front of their throats.
"They say you've got some power, but how's your finesse? You think you can take out all of us and not hit the three of them? Think you're quick enough to stop me from finishing the job?"

Sam reluctantly crouched down and picked up the cuffs. He didn't know who to try to save or how to go about doing it. The only thing he knew with confidence was that if he stalled much longer the fight would start. Everyone was watching him—almost everyone. A few eyes flicked nervously at Cas, probably fearful that the angel would take advantage of the distraction. The fact that some of them were worried about Cas ever so slightly tipped the scales in Sam's mind. The lesser demons didn't want to fight Cas—it didn't seem to be something they were planning on—so maybe Dean and Cas could get out of this alive. The deal might be legitimate.

He clicked the cuffs onto his wrists, then held them up. As soon as the second cuff was closed he could feel his inhuman senses shut down. It was a little disorienting, but he didn't want to show his new weakness. Lilith nodded in satisfaction, then turned her head toward the house without taking her eyes off Sam.

"Bring him out!" Lilith yelled.

Dean was dragged out by two demons. He was conscious and had both arms and legs, but that was about the only good thing that could be said about his condition. He wore baggy clothing that allowed peeks at blood-soaked bandages below the surface. His left cheek and jaw were a large swollen bruise, hinting at possible fractures below the surface. Several deep cuts marked his face, but the flesh was too puffy to discern an image.

He was followed by a red-haired woman in black clothing, who moved with a telling confidence. Sam didn't need his powers to tell him that she was a heavyweight.

With one hand Lilith gestured for the two demons to hand off Dean to Cas while using the other to signal for Sam to walk over to her. After a moment's hesitation, Sam slowly started walking towards Lilith.

When Sam got within a few yards of him, Dean lifted his head slightly. Seeing his brother made Dean start to breathe harder. He reached out to Sam almost imperceptibly and tried to shake his head. Dean was trying to stop him—maybe warn him about the trap, but Sam already knew he was walking into one.

When the demons carrying Dean got close to Cas, they shoved him forward, but his arms dragged against them slowly and he collapsed to the ground. Sam stopped walking to watch his brother. He and Cas were both seething at Dean's state. Lilith and her demons seemed to be in a weird mixture of amusement and surprise that he'd ended up so injured. Everyone had expected him to be able to keep himself upright, but that appeared to be asking too much.

Cas cautiously stepped forward, then knelt down to check on him. He carefully picked Dean up, though for some reason Dean wasn't exactly cooperating. Cas struggled to hold him without pressing on any of the numerous injuries. When he was upright, Dean rested his head on Cas's shoulder. The urge to immediately heal Dean was overwhelming, but Cas had to reserve his power for getting Dean out of there if possible and hopefully immediately returning to help Sam.

"Cas, get him out of here," Sam shouted while eyeing Lilith.

"No, we can't leave," Dean whispered into Cas's shoulder.

"It's going to be okay," Cas assured Dean.
“You don’t understand.” Dean’s voice became very intent, which gave Cas pause. “Please trust me.”

“Cas, go,” Sam repeated the instruction. Everyone was watching the disorganized interaction. The plan had been for Cas to try to get Dean out of harm’s way then return to assist Sam. It was dangerous, but with a knight potentially in play they had no way of knowing to what extent Cas could even heal Dean.

“Babe, heal me,” Dean whispered. "The fight is happening. They need our help."

Cas turned his head to look at Dean and his eyes widened subtly. Dean had said ‘they,’ not ‘he.’ It wasn’t clear what Dean knew or who exactly he was talking about, but Dean was asking for his trust—something that had been earned countless times over the years.

"If you'd rather stay...." Lilith sounded surprised, yet positively delighted.

Eight of the demons circled around to flank Cas and Dean. Lilith took a few steps forward and began raising her hand toward the couple. Sam closed the distance in a single long stride, tackling her to the ground.

Abbadon drew a knife, then ran to attack Sam. The sound of a loud gunshot surprised everyone, especially the knight, who staggered backward a few feet in shock. The gunshot wound in her chest hissed and bubbled as a several-inch-diameter section was corroded away within moments. Blood began pouring from the wound before she fell to the ground. Her body shook as she tried to recover from the massive shock to her meatsuit.

Cas healed Dean as best he could, but Dean wasn’t really well enough to fight. He was more or less capable of standing on his own, so Cas released him in order to draw his blade and defend against the demons that had surrounded them.

There was a second loud gunshot, which was a headshot on one of the demons Cas was fighting. Dean and the dozen or so demons who weren’t yet actively engaged in combat looked around to see where the shots were coming from, but they were immediately distracted by Kaylee. She was gliding toward the brawl on her long black wings. Dean recognized her rigid posture as maintaining some sort of power. He realized she was using telekinesis when four of the demons drew guns and started firing at her. She managed to deflect most of the shots, but several bullets connected with her wings. A third shot from Tom’s rifle incapacitated one of the demon’s shooting at her.

Despite the minor damage to her wings, Kaylee reached the farm in almost no time. Rather than trying for a gentle landing, she ceased manifesting her wings when she was about ten feet off the ground. Her momentum carried her into a tumble. She rolled right into the middle of the fight, settling on her back in front of the demons who had just been shooting at her. Before they could get another shot off, she blasted them with the First Light.

Another demon made to attack her while she was trying to get upright, but Dean threw himself at the attacker. They wrestled for a moment before Kaylee grabbed the demon’s hair and slit the her throat with an angel blade. Kaylee offered Dean a hand up before giving him the blade, then turning to help her dad.

Sam was wrestling with Lilith. He was on top of her, but his hands were still bound by the cuffs. She kneed him in the groin, which made him fall forward. He pressed the handcuffs to her throat and leaned on her with all his weight. He could feel something in her neck pop, but it didn’t stop
her from clawing at his chest. Despite being unarmed, she was physically strong enough to tear at his skin. To stop her from doing anything more than surface damage, Sam tried to pin her arms with his knees. He managed to get her left arm pinned, but her right arm broke free just as an underlings slid an angel blade across the ground toward her. When he saw her reach for the blade, Sam moved his wrist along her neck and jaw to force her face away from the blade. Her hand desperately groped around trying to find the weapon.

"Somebody separate them!" Cas yelled as he was intercepted by three demons.

Kaylee reached out with her powers, but she couldn't grab Lilith. While she was distracted, Alastair rushed her from behind and stabbed Kaylee in the back. The four-inch knife went in to the hilt, but before he could begin slicing sideways to do more damage there was another loud gunshot. Tom had shot Alastair through the arm holding the knife, in one side of the ribcage, out the other side, and through the other arm. The rapid corrosion of the flesh threatened to cut his meatsuit in half, so he smoked out.

Kaylee fell into a kneeling position, but reached out to clutch the archdemon's smoke cloud. She'd only ever killed demons in Hell where it was much easier to use her powers, and she'd never tried to kill an archdemon. He fought her grip, but she kept squeezing him. She could feel her body tensing from the strain of using her powers, which caused blood to trickle from her wound faster. For a moment she thought she was going to break first, but Dean hurried to her side.

"I've got you," he said as he applied pressure to her back with a bandage on one of his forearms while using the other arm to hold her upright. Dean looked around the battlefield then spotted Cas finishing off another demon. "Cas! Need you!"

When Lilith realized that she couldn't reach the angel blade while pinned, she shoved Sam backwards. Once freed she grabbed the blade, then got to her feet. She made to attack Sam, but another rifle shot collided with her. It missed her head, but hit her left shoulder. The impact threw off her balance, causing her to spin and fall to the ground as the corrosion burnt her arm from its body.

After being shoved backward by Lilith, Sam landed hard on his back. He had barely hit the ground when he saw the ghostly-pale and bloody Abbadon swinging a knife down to stab him. He tried rolling to the side and only received a cut on his arm, though the knight's knife caught his jacket, pinning his arm to the ground. Taking advantage of his impaired mobility, she knelt down on his neck. Sam kicked and jerked, trying to fight against being choked unconscious. But just as his vision began to fade, Kit leapt onto Abbadon, knocking her off of him.

Kit managed to badly slash the knight three times before she landed a punch, snapping two of his ribs. A second punch connected with his face, fracturing his right cheekbone. She gripped his shirt and threw him off of her, then scrambled to her feet. The kitsune turned his tumble into a somersault, gracefully rebounding off of a lesser demon. Rather than attempting to pounce on the physically stronger foe again, he decided to use his dexterity to his advantage. He sprinted past her, taking slices at the tendons in her arms and legs in order to make her meatsuit even harder to manipulate. She swung at him several times in frustration before finally connecting with his upper body, breaking his collarbone. A forceful kick while he was stunned knocked him to the side of the barn, where he fell limply to the ground.

Cas heard Dean call out for help as he pulled his blade from the chest of his fifth demon. Another loud gunshot dropped the demon standing between him and Dean. As he ran to Dean he saw the blood dripping down Kaylee’s back. She was struggling to restrain Alastair in his cloud form. Cas laid his hands on the wound and healed her. The effort used up even more of his limited power
reserve, but without her injury Kaylee managed to crush Alastair to death.

Six demons rushed Kaylee, Dean, and Cas. Kaylee used the First Light on two of their attackers, but she had to stop short of hitting Cas and Dean. Cas positioned himself between the remaining four attackers and Dean. Kaylee tried to get to her dad, but the group of demons blocked her path. She was running low on energy, so she opted to try smiting the demons with her touch rather than a beam.

Sam was lying on the ground, not yet recovered from nearly being choked unconscious. His vision wasn’t focused and he was still pinned to the ground by Abbadon’s knife. A lesser demon approached him, but another shot from Tom’s rifle obliterated the demon’s upper torso and neck.

Lilith picked herself up despite only having one arm and significant blood loss. She staggered toward Sam, angel blade in hand. As she walked, her body swayed sporadically causing her to incidentally evade Tom’s last bullet. Sam tried to grab the knife pinning him to the ground, but with his hands bound he couldn’t quite reach it, so he yelled out for help.

Cas dodged two demons as he charged Lilith. She parried his strike, then counterattacked. He dodged three chaotic swings, but the two demons he had dodged moved to flank him. Unable to retreat, he tried to attack her again in hopes of finishing it. He managed to slice her wrist and disarm her, but before he could finish following through she held up her hand. She immobilized him, then focused, preparing to use the Light of Hell.

Kaylee threw as much force as she could towards Cas and Lilith. Her powers didn’t work on Lilith, but in theory she could throw Cas. The conflicting telekinetic forces stressed his vessel almost to the breaking point, though he ended up in better shape than he would’ve if she hadn’t thrown him. A moment after Cas was knocked out of the way, Lilith’s light weapon scorched the two demons that had been flanking him.

Kaylee ran to help her dad, but Abbadon intercepted her. Abbadon swung a knife, cutting a large gash along Kaylee’s right cheek. Kaylee raised her hand at the knight, but before she could create the scorching light Abbadon dodged and swung at Kaylee’s chest.

Dean tackled Abbadon, knocking her to the ground. The knife skidded out of reach. Despite the pain of his injuries, Dean climbed onto the knight and started pummeling her in a rage. He was screaming at her while he beat her meatsuit’s face bloody, but she only laughed.

She started to open her mouth, undoubtedly to make some sort of teasing jab, but he was beyond banter. He pulled the iron nail from his waistband and stabbed it into her left eye. She screamed as he hit the nail with his hand, breaking the thin layer of bone behind the eyeball and embedding it in the brain. To his surprise, her body flickered with orange light and went limp. The combat rush drained from him and he collapsed sideways next to the knight’s body.

Realizing that all of her allies were dead, Lilith picked up the angel blade, then swung down at Sam’s chest. But before she could connect, Kaylee grabbed her from behind and pulled her back. Kaylee’s right hand clutched Lilith’s wrist, burning off the hand holding the blade. Her left hand gripped Lilith’s neck, burning the archdemon from the inside out. Kaylee dropped the dead meatsuit before falling to her knees beside her dad. She pulled Abbadon’s knife from the ground, then offered him a hand up.

Their return to the bunker brought comfort, but it wasn’t the ideal homecoming. Dean still had significant injuries that weren’t treatable with angelic healing, so Cas took him to the AFE’s best hospital. Once Dean was recovering after several hours of surgery, Cas collected Dylaniel to visit
Kit declined an invitation to recuperate from his knight-inflicted broken bones at the bunker, instead opting to return to the Lexington base. As much as he was friends with Tom and Kaylee, he didn’t want to become overly intertwined in their family life. For years Dean had been his mentor and being invited into their home was dangerously close to blurring relationships. Instead, he merely accepted a few thank yous before returning home.

Sam took turns hugging Ruby and each of their kids before letting Tom stitch up the cut on his arm. Watching Tom suturing his arm, Sam marveled at how much his kids had grown up. It was the first time that he had really seen them in combat. He’d seen them training for years, but never in the field before. It wasn’t clear what would’ve happened if they hadn’t come to help him. What was clear though was that they had each saved his life at least once. They were daring and capable—beyond his love, they also had his professional respect.

After retreating to their bedroom for the night, Sam held Ruby in his arms for a long time. He wasn’t sure if he felt any regret over his decision to go. It was hard to say for certain that he made the wrong choice when they had all gotten out alive, but he knew just how painful the experience must’ve been for her. She was too relieved to chew him out, yet she wriggled out of his grip enough to look him in the eyes.

“You can be a huge pain in my ass sometimes, scaring me like that.” Ruby poked her index finger against his chest a few times in a mock display of discipling. “You aren’t allowed to make dumb decisions, mistakes, or take crazy risks. For fuck’s sake, I was the reasonable one and you were the emotional one. That’s never a good sign.”

“I’m sorry I broke our system. No more mistakes or risks,” Sam said, making a promise that they both knew he couldn’t guarantee.

Ruby smiled up at him, but she didn’t have the heart to play along. She pulled him down into a kiss before the charade of lightheartedness broke. They desperately stripped each other of their clothes and tried to find comfort and security in each other. Afterward, Ruby stayed in the bed, letting Sam fall asleep spooning her.

There was an oppressive darkness—a void, empty of life, time, and hope. Sam was waiting in it for something. There was no telling how long he’d been waiting, but it felt like multiple eternities.

Some time ago he’d spoken to a man…. It was a demon, but that was better than nothing. He’d given the demon a piece of himself in exchange for a glimmer of hope. It was nearly a literally glimmer. In his eagerness to see results his imagination got the better of him. He put his plan in motion and thought to the future anew. Then from nowhere he heard whispers.

Sam could hear his own voice. He could only hear his own side of a conversation, which gave him a strange feeling of deja vu. At first it was confusing, but eventually he recognized the conversation as when he had confronted Dean about selling his soul. His voice shifted to another interaction a few months later, then a few weeks after that. As time passed his voice became louder and clearer until it sounded like he was nearby.

“Can you hear me, Sam?” asked a voice that was so close it seemed to be coming from his own soul.

There was a rush of excitement. He’d made contact after being isolated for so long, but the other Sam panicked. He was being resisted—blocked somehow. The other Sam’s voice was distant and
it was difficult to pinpoint again. It stayed that way for a long while, then out of nowhere the darkness was broken by a sunrise.

The sun rose over some pathetic farm. There were over a dozen newly rotting bodies scattered in a clearing. They had been inhabited by demons. He could sense that his old creations Lilith and Abbadon had once possessed two of the bodies, but their deaths didn’t trigger any emotions in him.

He supposed it was a strangely common sight. This world had been littered with the dead... with imperfections. The world was infested with mortal creatures. It was practically made of corpses. It was some disgusting iteration of what it’d once been. He’d seen immortals die to save its purity, but now... now he could feel how few their ranks were—and for what? His brothers and sisters were so lost.

“The world isn’t how I’d expected it to be. We can make it right. The way it was—better even.”

Sam was caught between eagerness and horror. The voice speaking was painful to hear, yet strangely beautiful. “Sam, I know how you’ve enjoyed making so much from so little. Together we could create even more. We could save Earth.”

White light overtook the depressing scene. An intense cold grew inside Sam’s chest, spreading out through his body. It overwhelmed every one of his senses until he couldn’t perceive anything else. The cold light was going to consume his entire existence. The light was planning on it. The light was hunting him.

Sam sat up in bed. His body was trembling and a light sweat cooled on his skin. He touched his chest just over his heart. For some reason he expected it to feel cold, but its rhythmic pounding helped ground him in reality.

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked.

“I don’t know…. I had a nightmare, but it felt different.” He shook his head, but the echo of the voice rattled in his brain causing a slight migraine.

“Like a vision?”

“Not really, it was—” Sam was interrupted by the sound of Alex screaming down the hall.

They both ran to check on him. The boy was crying out in his sleep. Sam woke him up, but it took Alex a moment to stop shaking. When he tried to sit up in bed he nearly keeled over before Sam could catch him. A few drops of blood trickled from Alex’s nose as Kaylee walked into the bedroom clutching her head.

“What the fuck just happened?”

Chapter End Notes

This is one of the hardest things I’ve ever written for Sam. I’m used to him being pretty rational and to write him blowing that off- and trying to stand against the rational arguments was very strange. I was talking to my dad about the difficulty writing Sam in this chapter. He told me that people don’t act rationally all the time and that the identifier of a rational person is that maybe they know how irrational they’re
being. That’s potentially a source of guilt. I can’t really say where I come down on the question of whether Sam risking his life was right or not. All I can do is let the characters voice the competing views and let the story play on.

On a personal note:

This chapter took longer to post than the others because my mother-in-law passed away and more or less took 10 days off. In the days leading up to the loss I didn’t have the mental energy to write despite the appeal of the escape. In the three days after it happened I’d been entirely focused on my husband and making sure he’s okay. But on the third night my husband insisted that he wanted me to get back to writing because he knew how much of a sense of accomplishment it gives me. His encouragement and having a new start after two very long years had given me a bit of a second wind.
Aside from the unpleasant awakenings at the bunker, the morning after Dean's rescue was unsettlingly quiet. Not a single servant of Heaven attacked the AFE. Except for the occasional holy season's ceasefire there hadn't been a day globally free from attack in over a decade. It was alarming to not understand what Heaven was up to, but by mid-afternoon a rumor began circulating in the AFE.

The story was that angel radio had received a signal from someone claiming to be Lucifer. Zie had offered a simple warning: forgiveness would be given to zir brothers and sisters who wanted to restore Heaven and Earth to a state of purity. Everyone else would be killed.

Beyond a mere rumor there was something more, a change in the mood. Deep down every angel could feel the field shifting around them. If it wasn't actually Lucifer, then another powerplayer was entering the contest. Some angels insisted that Lucifer was really back, but many wondered how he could've gotten out and where he might be.

The AFE's command called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. Cas, Sam, Ruby, and Kaylee all attended. Cas and Ruby went in their normal functions as commanders and advisers. Dean's presence was requested, but Cas and his doctors wouldn’t allow anyone to interfere with his recovery. As unusual as it was for Dean to be absent from an emergency meeting, having Sam and Kaylee’s present was even rarer.

For the most part Sam tried to stay out of the way of the AFE. The intricacies of the war on Earth were only his concern to the extent they affected his family, Hell, or if there was a very low-risk way he could help. Kaylee may have periodically shadowed Dean to get a better understanding of the AFE's operations, but she primarily received training from her dad in ruling Hell. Only the most dire events could drag both Sam and Kaylee into a meeting like that. They weren't brought into the meeting as representatives of Hell. They were there as Lucifer’s vessels.

"Do you have any idea if the rumors about Lucifer are true? Is he free?" Bishop asked Sam.

"I think so," he answered grimly.

"He's contacted you." Anael wasn’t really asking; Sam’s concern was telling.

"I think—yes.” He nodded. “I know he has. He contacted the three of us this morning, but it was only for a few seconds."

“Three?” Anael's eyes quickly checked the room until she remembered that there was a lesser-known, younger child. "How old is your other child?"

"Thirteen."
"Are you telling me that we're relying on some thirteen-year-old de—" Marcus, the former hunter, began complaining.

"Marcus, shut up," snapped Bishop.

Of the twenty people in the meeting room, there were six demons. Every demon except for Sam blinked their eyes black and glared at Marcus, daring him to make this about species. Admittedly, it was taking a significant amount of self-control for Sam to not telekinetically knock the chair out from under Marcus.

"Contacting such a young vessel is dangerous, no matter the vessel," Anael said in an attempt to draw their attention back to the important matter.

"Is there a way of blocking the contact?" asked Tamara.

"The protections we have in place aren't strong enough now that he's on this plane," Ruby commented. "You can bet it's my top priority."

"Is there something we can do in the meantime? Can angels communicate with vessels who're unconscious?"

"Angels routinely contact vessels while they are asleep," Cas explained for the benefit of the humans in the room.

"Is there something more powerful than sleep we could try?" Marcus muttered.

"If anyone tries to touch my son," Ruby scowled at Marcus as she spoke, "I will kill them."

"I was—"

"Don't sell me on strategy; I'm not gonna hear it," Ruby continued her threat. "War. Politics. I don't give a fuck. You touch my son, my family—I'll kill you. Understood?"

Everyone except Ruby looked around the room at each other's reactions. Ruby didn't break her gaze away from Marcus until he nodded. Her eyes flicked to Sam, who gave her a subtle smile of admiration that went unnoticed by the others.

"How is Lucifer even free?" Tamara asked in an attempt to draw the meeting away from the tense subject.

"I killed Lilith," Sam said, cutting off Kaylee before she began.

He was absolutely forbidden from fighting Lilith, but the ban had cautiously been expanded to all Abyssal, including Kaylee. Despite the slim chance that it would be relevant that Kaylee had been the one to kill Lilith, he knew that releasing Lucifer would carry some stigma whether it was an accident or not.

"You knew the risks of killing Lilith. Her death was a known possible trigger for the release of Lucifer," Anael said in surprise. Despite her initial dislike of demons, Sam had won over her respect. The idea that he might've done something so devastating was almost a personal betrayal.

"She was going to kill me, so I figured that it was better to have me be the one to live," Sam countered.

"It was a no-win scenario," Cas added.
“You let yourselves get into that situation,” suggested Finch.

“If you think that I would let Dean die—” Cas raised his voice and started to move to stand up, but Hael and Ruby each grabbed one of his arms to calm him down.

“You two withheld information vital to our efforts, led a mission that endangered several of our assets, and you—” Bishop looked at Sam with slightly more disappointment than anger”—freed Lucifer. This is a serious matter.”

“I understand just how serious it is, but I don't know how you all want me to make penance,” Sam replied sincerely. “You can't arrest me; I have to command in Hell—now more than ever. I'm not happy about what's happened either, but I don't know how you want me to make it right.”

“There might not be a way to make this right.”

Sam called a meeting of Hell’s High Council to discuss the situation with Lucifer. He recounted Dean’s capture and the rescue. It was no secret that most of the archdemons disliked Dean, so he wasn’t surprised by the not-entirely-sympathetic audience. Crowley was particularly quiet during the explanation of the events he’d turned a blind eye to. When Sam got to the end of the story he had to take a second to fight off the urge to sugarcoat it.

“Kaylee killed Lilith.” The Council murmured, but he cut them off before anyone could express happiness at the news. “Heaven believes that Lucifer is free. I think they’re right.”

The Council was silent from shock. Crowley put down his glass of scotch without bothering to take a sip. Morrison and the other more liberal archdemons dimmed slightly below their shells. Deepra, the archdemon for the newly-created engineering caste, looked horrified. Hathai sat up in her seat and seemed to glow at the news.

“Lucifer—are you sure?” asked Crowley.

“He spoke to me and I’ve been having visions….” Sam took a deep breath. “I can feel it.”

“But you didn’t kill Lilith. You’re the one that needed to kill her in order to free Lucifer,” said Denerus.

“We don’t know that. He adopted the name, but we don’t know that he’s actually Lucian. His daughter could’ve been Lucian the entire time,” suggested Morrison.

“You have a lot to answer for—” Hathai began chewing Sam out, but he cut her off.

“Take a look around and tell me what I have to answer for. I’ve helped pull Hell from the edge of destruction and you’re going to flay me over a fucking name.”

“You stole a holy name!” Hathai shout in outrage at his indifference to the crime.

“I used—” Sam stopped and corrected himself. “We all used a popular name and rumor to rally support for our side.”

“I think we’ve lost the forest,” Crowley interrupted. “Lucifer—the Lucifer—is going to come down here eventually.”

“Good.” Hathai huffed as she straightened defiantly in her chair. “We can use all the help we can get.”
"Help? He would cut our alliance with the humans. It would be political suicide," countered Denerus.

"Not just political suicide," Sam added. "We can't let him into Hell. If we do, he'll destroy us."

"Lucifer created us. He wouldn't turn around and harm us," suggested Pizel.

"He created us to spite God. God isn't in the game anymore. We're pawns that he doesn't need."
Sam relayed what had been the consensus of the angels he'd consulted with.

"But why would he want to hurt us? It doesn't make sense to create, just to then destroy."

"He's from the school of thought that we're below even the humans; that was the joke. He didn't make us to be better. He was showing how easy it is to ruin them," Sam explained. "To him, our people are a blight. He's not going to save us. He's going to purge us."

"You lack faith," Hathai snarled.

"And you're blinded by it," Sam shot back at her. "I almost want to see the look on your face when he betrays you."

"You're his vessel, aren't you? If you're right you'll see the look on my face when you both betray us."

As King of Hell, Sam had seventeen Knights of Hell under his command. Fifteen had sided with Lilith and roamed Earth, leaving fourteen for Lucifer after Abaddon's death. Twenty remained dormant in their tombs, apparently waiting for something more interesting than the end of the apocalypse. Sam had never before managed to get all seventeen of his knights together at once, but it was an unusual time.

Sam sat on his throne and watched as his audience assembled. Most of his aides and the archdemons were in attendance, though Hathai and Mizaman were notably absent. After realizing that the two archdemons were loyal to Lucifer, Sam had them quietly confined in the Citadel's most secluded and secure dungeon. As much as he hated Hathai, he was disappointed to be taking such drastic measures. Once the knights were figured out they could begin increasing security, which was their top priority. Then he could meet with the most likely candidates to replace Hathai and Mizaman to see if he could find some allies within those castes.

When the last knight arrived Sam flicked his wrist, closing the doors. He didn't bother looking at the archdemons; they were all on his side. The knights were the ones he was trying to sell to. In some respects they were a more powerful asset than the archdemons in the coming political conflict. They didn't have the same tribalistic unity with members of a caste, like the archdemons, but they were among the elite group that could make judgments about Lucifer based on personal experience.

"We've worked together for a long time and I consider many of you my friends, so I'm not going to lie to you. Lucifer is free." Sam didn't need to look at the archdemons to know that they were scared of how the knights would react. As much as he was trying to exude confidence, he was also subtly feeling out his audience, looking for possible threats. "Lucifer will be looking for a vessel that can contain him for a while, but he'll eventually make a play for Hell. The current leadership of Hell has decided to resist his attempt to enter and retake Hell."

Sam waited a beat to see if any of the knights were going to attempt anything, but none of them made a move. He could feel their discomfort and silently hoped that it didn't turn to anger.
"Lucifer has spoken to me. I have felt his anger and disgust. He may have made Hell, but he will try to kill us just like the humans. He made us weak. He didn't design Hell to survive. Whole species of Abyssal have died off because he didn't care about making our plane sustainable. To him we are a means to an end—disposable. Our people are an experiment in satire to him and his audience is gone.

"While he may have given you power, he also cursed you to an eternity of servitude. I'm not asking you to be disloyal. I'm asking you to consider where your true loyalties lie. Are they with your people and your home or is it with the angel who only made you as an instrument of pain to be focused on others? Lucifer is not one of us. He is not better than us.

"I refuse to let an angel sit here and command the Abyss. We may have angelic allies on Earth, but we will not blindly bow to an angel—especially in our own domain. I will do everything in my power to stop him. I understand the difficult position this puts you all in. It is a lot to process, but we don't have much time before we need to act. I need to know whether each of you are with me... or not."

The conflict was very real. Each knight had sworn loyalty to Lucifer and Hell, but at the moment those two loyalties were arguably opposed. Under Sam's rule Hell had flourished beyond anyone’s expectations. But Lucifer had personally selected each of the knights and granted them profound power.

Many of the knights looked between each other trying to decide how respond. Mir stood at the front of the group and never turned to look at the reactions of another knight. He stepped forward until he was about five feet in front of Sam and slightly to his right. Silently, Mir turned to face the other knights. He stood at attention, guarding Sam.

It wasn’t a surprising gesture coming from Mir, but it was appreciated all the same. In the three years since Sa’dah's death, Mir had become even more fiercely protective of Sam and his family. Sam had wondered if the knight’s abnormally slow recovery from the injuries suffered in Los Angeles had been related to the despair that had taken hold below the knight’s silent surface. It had been a difficult time, but once he was able, Sam made a point of visiting the injured Mir to provide whatever forgiveness and reassurance he could. They had been close before, but their shared grief had cemented their friendship.

"Well, I'd be a fool to argue with Mir," Joseba said as he moved to stand in front of Sam, who could sense the crowd warming to his side.

"I stand with Hell." Tora looked around at the bizarre flowering vines that climbed the walls. "I stand with the monsters that make beauty, not the angel that made monsters."

Tora moved to stand beside Joseba and Mir. After her, the levee broke entirely. Every knight swore loyalty to Hell above Lucifer. There was something to be said for the power of patriotism and mob mentality.

03/11/2028

“Alex, are you even listening to me?”

Ruby stared across the table at her son. He was slowly dragging his spoon through his cereal without actually eating any of it. At the realization that she had said his name, he glanced up at her.
“What?” he asked softly.

“Let me see your eyes.” For the last few years Alex had kept his eyes solid black. He hesitated for a few seconds, then blinked them to normal. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

“I had trouble sleeping again,” Alex muttered.

“I'm getting Cas. You need to get some rest. I don't care if we have to knock you out cold.”

It had been a rough week. Sam, Kaylee, and Alex had suffered at least a dozen visions a day plus the nightmares. They caught glimpses of carnage, but it wasn't entirely clear what was happening in any given instance.

The ordeal had affected the three of them, but Alex was having a particularly difficult time. He was naturally more sensitive to all things Abyssal or magical. More than half of his visions had resulted in nosebleeds or migraines. As a result, Alex had to spend a significant amount of his time recovering at the bunker rather than visiting bases or training.

Ruby found Cas and Dean in their bedroom. She could tell that she'd walked in on some sort of tense moment. Dean was seated on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees and a particularly withdrawn expression on his face. Cas stood a few feet in front of him with his arms crossed in front of his chest. They both turned to look at her.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said while debating coming back later.

"It's fine," Dean assured her, grateful for the distraction. "What's up?"

"Alex hasn't been able to sleep. Cas, would you mind knocking him out and doing what you can for him."

"Of course," Cas replied, then looked pointedly at Dean as he added, "I'm always happy to help."

Dean sighed as Cas walked past Ruby and out the door. Ruby turned to follow the angel, but Dean stopped her.

"Hey, Rube." His voice was a bit quiet and uncertain. "Can you help me with something?"

She stepped back into the bedroom. "Sure thing."

"Can you shut the door?"

"Okay..." Ruby closed the door, then walked over to him. She wasn’t sure if she should sit down next to him or how much emotional support would be needed—God knew Dean was having a hard time.

"I've got this brand on my back—the doctors say it's a hex.” His eyes flicked down to the floor, avoiding hers. “I just... I wanted to get a second opinion on it."

He stood up, turned his back to her, then gingerly started to take off his shirt. Part way through he slowed down and she could see why. Large yellowing bruises covered his torso and numerous stitches held together long, jagged cuts.

"Fuck," she gasped. “Let me help you with the shirt before you hurt yourself."

"I'm fine."
"I've been hearing that a lot lately and I'm not buying it for a second." Ruby started gently sliding his arms through the sleeves. "You want my help? Well, you're getting it."

Once the shirt was removed she got a good look at the hex marking on his back. It was a circle slightly larger than a foot in diameter with a fair amount of detail work inside. Despite the rough line work, she was impressed.

"The design is quality. They must've had a high level witch or Maji helping them. It looks custom.... There are at least four different schools being tapped.... Interesting...." She blinked her eyes black to take a better look at it. "It's blocking magical communication—"

"Prayer," Dean muttered. The hex prevented him from praying and it'd been given to him by a knight. It was permanent.

"Yeah," she agreed bleakly, then her eyes widened at a new discovery. "Wow, you dodged a bullet. If they had been any vaguer with this script work it could've killed your ability to use any sort of assisted hearing."

"What?"

"It's the difference between unnatural communication and supernatural communication," she explained. His breathing became shorter and faster as he swayed slightly, but she caught him.

"Alright, you're sitting down. Neither of us wants you passing out on me."

"The docs told me it messed up communication—I didn't even think about my implant or anything," he said after sitting back down on the bed.

"Have you tested the limits of the hex at all?"

"No. Cas has been playing middle man for me with the AFE—actually...." Dean chewed his lip. "I think it's been causing some problems between Cas and me."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess he used to use some of his mojo to sense my moods and stuff like that. Now that he can't it's making things... difficult."

Ruby's eyebrows rose. She couldn't remember the last time Dean and Cas had a disagreement. "Wait, were you guys fighting?"

"It's not exactly like fighting. It's just sometimes things mess with me and he doesn't get it." Dean he covered his face with his hands. "The other day I yelled at him. He knows I don't mean it—he would've known. Now... I don't know. I just thought we had a better relationship than this."

"Okay, first thing you need to do is take a step back," she told him. "It's normal for couples to fight every once in awhile—especially when you're stressed out. You went through a ton physically and mentally. Cas was a wreck when you were missing. The world's completely fucked—a couple's fight sounds pretty normal."

"But we don't fight."

"Yeah, because apparently you two have been cheating for like two decades." Ruby shrugged a little. "Don't get me wrong, you've come a long way since I've known you, but you can still be hard to read at times. And Cas isn't great at reading people because he hasn't really had to learn that whole deal with you."
Ruby gently touched the branded flesh on Dean's back. He flinched from the contact, but there was still too much nerve damage to make it very painful.

"This hex isn't going anywhere. You two are gonna have to start talking through stuff more than you've been lately. Just think back to the old days when you used to explain everything to him." Ruby grinned at a thought. "I watched you explain the plot of Memento to him. If you can explain that you can explain what's going on with you."

"Memento is simple compared to our lives."

3/19/2028

Dean walked down the street of the Wenatchee base. Passersby whispered, but he wasn't sure if he should take it personally. Rumors about his capture had spread to nearly every base before he'd even been discharged from the hospital. Four days after returning to work he wasn't sure whether the rumors detailing his injuries had spread to the west coast or if they were still limited to the central United States. Though he supposed he couldn't be sure the whispers were even about him. It seemed like everyone was talking behind each other's backs.

It was unnerving to see how shaken everyone had become at the news of Lucifer's release. He understood the impulse to be cautious, but he'd hoped that their makeshift army had solid enough bonds to withstand the new threat. Maybe he'd been foolish to think that something as big as Lucifer wouldn't rattle them? He probably just hadn't considered the matter closely enough. It certainly felt like pessimism was the popular outlook nowadays.

As he was walking from the mess hall back to headquarters, he saw a group of four people being escorted into the brig. Two of them he recognized as angels, but the others weren't familiar to him. After consulting his watch, he took a detour to follow them.

"What's going on?" Dean asked one of the guards.

"They're part of the scead-scadun—" The guard fumbled the unfamiliar word.

"Sceadugenga," one of the angel prisoners corrected.

"Just call it the shadow choir," Dean instructed the guard while pinching the bridge of his nose in proximate embarrassment and annoyance.

"Commander Barbosa ordered that the choir be detained until the situation with…." The guard hesitated to even say Lucifer's name. "Until it's resolved."

"The choir?" Dean was stunned by such a broad order. "You're kidding—the situation with Lucifer isn't going to be resolved until the war is over. He's out there now and the only way we finish this is to kill him. Locking up every single person who knew him is going to cripple us."

"Sir, I don't know what to tell you. Barbosa—"

"Fine. I'm gonna go talk to him. In the meantime, they're your brothers and sisters in arms. If I find out that any of them were mistreated by anyone at all, I'm gonna take it out of every guard's ass." Dean turned to address the prisoners. "I'll send for Rachel. She'll make sure you're taken care of until I can get this straightened out."

Five minutes later Dean barged into Marcus Barbosa's office. They'd never liked each other, but for years their mutual animosity had at least been buried. Marcus had been part of the AFE since
their first meeting in San Francisco, brought in because of his position within the hunter community. While he’d signed on to save Earth, he’d managed to stay wary of its non-human residents. For the most part his biases didn't play out, but with a new wave of fear and distrust running through the ranks he’d gained a bit more initiative.

"Everyone except Marcus, out now," Dean ordered as he entered the small office.

The three assistants and junior officers looked anxiously between Dean and Marcus. After a moment, Marcus nodded, giving them permission to leave.

"You can't just order people around anymore," Marcus said while smugly leaning back in his chair.

For the last few years there had been talk about Dean stepping back from his role as leader of the AFE in North America in order to help pass the torch to the next generation. He would still be available to act as an adviser, yet the hierarchy wouldn't be crippled if something were to happen to him. It was supposed to be a gradual process, but his capture served as a reminder that he was in danger more often than another leader might be.

Despite having a designated regional leader, the AFE had always operated more as a meritorious republic, with all high ranking officers getting their word in. It wasn't the tightest military structure, but it provided voices to the minority parties of the alliance. Previously, as official leader, Dean's word carried the most weight, but the decision to transition him away from that role had been interpreted broadly.

It didn't help that he'd been forced to take ten days off to recover from his torture. In his absence, the truth and speculation had mixed into rumors that his demotion was related to his capture: either that he was too traumatized to handle command or that the whole incident involved his professional incompetence. Everyone who knew him understood that the rumors were false, but the fact that everyone else still whispered them drastically undercut his authority.

"I can still give orders to whoever I damn well please and if you have a problem with that you can blow me," Dean growled.

"Easier said than done," Marcus replied smugly.

Dean clenched his hands to stop himself from reaching for his pistol. The last thing he needed was to further undermine his credibility by shooting another officer. He took a calming breath before changing the subject to business.

"I'm here about the sceadugenga. You can't just arrest them for no reason."

"The whole choir sided with Lucifer in his Rebellion."

"That's not good enough. We don't know why they sided with him back then. Lucifer's Rebellion was the only game in town. Maybe they thought it was their only chance at freedom? Maybe they were tricked? The sceadugenga fell as a unified choir—maybe their loyalty is to each other, not him?" Dean gripped the back of the chair he was standing behind. He sighed, then pulled the chair out from in front of Marcus's desk and sat down. "I know that we haven't always gotten along, but you've gotta listen to me. We can't do blanket arrests. We're gonna start a witch hunt."

To his credit, Marcus seemed to consider what he’d said before saying, "We've had over a thousand troops defect to Lucifer's side already."

"And if you start throwing people in the brig without a trial you're gonna drive even more of them
off." Dean pursed his lips in frustration. "Do you have any fucking idea how it looks to be rounding up the sceadugenga?"

It was annoying that most humans knew so little about angel culture. Each choir had its own quirks and history. As easy as it might be to assume that nothing exciting had happened in Heaven between Lucifer's Rebellion and their current war, that kind of ignorance was dangerous.

"That's what Heaven did to them after the Rebellion." Dean couldn't stand the bored look on Marcus's face. "They've spent millennia in our enemy's prison and now you're throwing them in ours."

"It's a security decision, not a political one."

"They're the same fucking thing."

"We're going to be hit from the inside if we aren't careful," Marcus speculated. "We can't afford to lose more people."

"We already are! I just watched us lose four because you had them thrown in the brig for no reason."

"Better to have bodies in the brig than in the pyre."

05/02/2028

"I can't believe we're doing this."

Dean leaned against the doorjamb while he watched the tribunal. Three angels, four humans, and one demon were questioning an angel about his loyalty. The angel sat in a chair at the center of the meeting hall. The panel had been questioning him for almost an hour, which meant that there was at least another half hour to go in the best case scenario. Worst case scenario would involve him being cut off abruptly and thrown back in his cell, but that tended to happen within the first thirty minutes—actually, the worst case would be another prisoner trying to kill the panel.

"Most angels wouldn't find this as offensive as you do," Cas tried to reassure him.

"That's its own problem." Dean felt Cas's hand touch his shoulder, but it was cold comfort. "At the very least there should be more angels on the panel. Having four humans telling angels how they should feel is a fucking sham. The demons are getting better treatment than you guys and they worship Lucifer."

Dean knew that wasn't entirely true. Hell was barely holding itself together. Sam was pulling 72-hour shifts downstairs trying to keep morale up despite the drive to clear out Lucifer supporters. There was some sort of massive infrastructure project going on in Hell that Dean didn't quite understand, but apparently it was one of the biggest undertakings in the plane's history. All the changes in Hell were more significant than he'd given them credit for and even if he wasn't really sure of the details he could see the magnitude of their change written all over his brother.

The whole thing was made worse by the effect Lucifer was directly having on Sam. Dean knew that Sam had less of a need to sleep than a full human, but he was borderline on testing that necessity. Sam was eating less, to the point of visibly losing weight. He barely reacted to even the most grotesque visions anymore. He'd just quietly stare at nothing, then rejoin the conversation.

When he did come home, it was a struggle to get him to take care of himself. So much of his time
was spent trying to make sure the kids were okay. Tom was understandably worried like everyone else. Kaylee and Alex were both slowly being worn down by the limited sleep and stress. The entire unpleasant experience had left Sam a little more inclined to drastic measures, something that he tried to rein in, but at times he wasn’t successful.

"Is Sam killing the demons loyal to Lucifer?" Cas asked, not entirely sure how he felt by the prospect.

"I don’t know…. It wouldn't surprise me." Dean frowned at the thought while watching the tribunal. "It's different down there. The only way he can keep the highlights bright is to keep the shadows dark."

Earth was different than Hell. It had to be. Suffering and pain was intrinsic to Hell—he wasn’t sure if he was prepared to say that hopelessness was part of its domain. Sam had done a lot to change Hell, to make it a source of potential redemption, but he couldn't let it become weak. The institutional brutality of Hell endured... and maybe in Earth's desperation it had picked up a few dangerous habits.

Dean hated watching the change unfold. If there was one thing that Earth had always embodied it was the struggle for freedom. Now they were pulling back from that ideal, leaving the people who were most vulnerable exposed.

He was probably the first to admit that he felt for the fallen angels. Beyond the fact that he was literally part of the family, he found that he could relate to them on some personal level. They had been blindly loyal to a strict, absentee father. They were raised with black and white views of the world, only to find themselves caught in a sea of grey. They were trying to adapt to a new existence and identity by embracing what it meant to be themselves.

Many of the other humans didn't understand the fallen angels, which worried him. Since angels were generally considered the most powerful of the species and there were so few of them compared to humans or demons, there was a tendency for them to be treated with caution. Significant portions of the AFE’s human and demon population outright avoided interacting with angels.

Beyond his philosophical views, he had a selfish interest in the social status of angels. His husband was an angel. His son was half angel. It was unnerving to think that on some level the AFE might be condoning discrimination based on their species. He knew that there were moments of tension between the factions, which were brought out more during difficult times. In the past their leadership had always pressed for unity. This time though, it had institutionalized fear and distrust.

"I can't watch this," Dean muttered, then turned his back on the spectacle. He started walking through a small service hallway toward the back exit of the building.

Cas put his hand on Dean's arm, stopping him in a dimly lit corner. Dean looked back and they met each other's eyes for the first time during the entire conversation. Cas tilted his head as he studied Dean's expression in a gesture that was equal parts endearing and painful reminder that Cas was having trouble reading him. Cas moved a step closer, but Dean put a hand on Cas's chest to stop him.

"You're upset. I want to...." Cas glanced between Dean's face and hand. "I want to do whatever is right."

"I know…. Thank you. I just—" Dean felt too lost to even begin to know how to find comfort. "I
don't know what's right…. Everything is too wrong."

"Tell me what I can do."

"Cas, please don't—don't give me another problem to solve right now. I can't take it." Dean squeezed Cas's hand, but he couldn't manage a reassuring smile. "I need some air."

Dean walked out the side exit of the building into an alley. He went out onto the street and saw another group of three angel prisoners waiting for their hearings. He walked faster as he turned away from the depressing sight. Cas followed him out of the alley in concern.

"Dean, wait. I—" Cas called out to him.

A passerby lunged forward, stabbing Cas in the abdomen with an angel blade. He pulled the blade out of Cas, then made to stab him again but stopped short. One of the angel prisoners had sprinted forward and pulled the attacker off Cas. The attacker sliced at her, cutting across her neck from her right clavicle to her left ear.

Several other soldiers wrestled the attacker to the ground while a high enough choir angel was fetched to heal Cas and his rescuer. Dean scrambled to Cas's side and held him. He started crying despite Cas's pained whispers of reassurance.

Rationally Dean knew that Cas wasn't at risk of dying from the injury, but he was too upset about everything that was happening to hold back the tears. He'd been depressed, fearing for the world and his family, worrying about his relationship with Cas. He'd tried to get some distance so that he could clear his mind, but he'd almost gotten more distance than he could stand.

The attack shouldn't have been a complete surprise but for their personal distractions. It was one of over a dozen that had happened since Lucifer's return, following the same pattern. It wasn't because Cas was an officer and it wasn't random. From the beginning Lucifer's side had been targeting nephilim and their parents. The attacks weren't open like normal warfare; they were assassinations. A few weeks earlier two of Lucifer's agents had hit the AFE's daycare center that specialized in nephilim. Five nephilim children, two parents, and two caregivers had been killed in the attack.

It made sense that eventually one of Lucifer's followers would make an attempt on the couple that was most frequently associated with nephilim. The danger had been brushed aside too many times. There was so much to be done that the need for precautions were subordinated, but not anymore.

After the assassination attempt on Cas, both he and Dean were escorted by bodyguards whenever they weren't in the bunker. It was a cramp on their autonomy, but not as much as the restrictions placed on Dylaniel.

The boy was practically confined to the bunker or three other high-security facilities. Not only was he the most famous nephilim, but after Dean's capture, he was the only person who could carry on Michael's bloodline. Dylaniel being stuck at home was distressing to the whole family, but with the situation outside devolving so badly it was getting harder and harder to argue with the precaution.

11/21/2028

"Help! Somebody help!"

Ruby blinked to Tom's location in the bunker, one of the parlors that they used as a family room.
Alex was convulsing on the floor while Tom tried to clear objects and furniture out of his way. The couch was on fire and a side table moved in violent jerks across the room.

"Watch his hands!" Tom warned. "He lit the couch when it started."

A moment later, Cas appeared in the room. He carefully touched Alex's forehead, causing him to go limp. The angel's hand rested on Alex's head for a second while he assessed his health.

"He had a seizure," Cas observed. "There's an echo—I think it was from a vision."

Ruby rolled Alex onto his side and checked his mouth to make sure the airway was clear. She carefully rested his head on her lap, then began counting out his pulse. She looked up at Tom and Cas with a startled expression on her face.

"Sam and Kaylee—they might be in trouble too."

"Kay's was supposed to be shadowing Dean—" began Tom.

"I can check on her," Cas offered before disappearing.

"I'll comm down to dad," Tom said, then he ran out the room.

Ruby sat there on the floor, holding Alex for what seemed like a long time. She was too tired to even feel rage at that point. For months, her family had been slowly eaten away at and there wasn't anything she could do about it. Each day brought more visions, then each night brought panicked screams. They were losing the fight.

Since Lucifer had been freed they hadn't landed a single hit because there wasn't a single foe to fight. The archangel seemed to wear out his incompatible vessels in at most a day or so. There had been over a hundred sightings in different vessels. Every time the AFE had thought they found him, instead there'd be a charred corpse and he'd be on the other side of the world charming a new victim. They were always a step behind because Lucifer, by necessity, was attacking on the run.

Sam teleported into the parlor next to her. She noticed some smears of blood just below his nose as he knelt in front of her. He checked Alex's eyes. The boy's eyelids kept nearly closing, but he struggled to stay conscious.

"It's okay. Mom and I are here," Sam reassured Alex while patting his shoulder. "You can fall asleep."

A few seconds later Alex's eyes shut, then Sam and Ruby looked at each other. Sam cupped her face, caressing her cheek with his thumb. She turned her head to kiss his palm before closing her eyes to stop herself from tearing up.

"We're at the end of the world. All I can think about is how our family can manage to survive another week or day," Ruby whispered, then shook her head. "There used to be a difference, between surviving and living. I don't know if we'll ever live again."

Sam leaned forward to kiss her forehead, then he carefully picked up Alex and carried him to his bedroom. On the walk to his son's room, Sam saw Dyaniel watching quietly from his own bedroom's doorway. Sam offered his nephew a pitying smile, but the boy barely reacted before returning to what he'd been doing. When Sam passed Dyaniel's open bedroom door he saw that dozens of books had been taken from the library to be systematically worked through.

He didn't linger to examine the books that Dyaniel had hoarded. Instead Sam took Alex to his
bedroom. He tucked his son in bed, then scanned the room anxiously for possible dangers. With one seizure under his belt, Sam worried there was a chance that another could follow. Sam gently slid the mattress onto the floor so that there wasn’t any risk of Alex hurting himself in a fall. Then he looked around for anything that might detonate if accidentally hit with the First Light.

While looking around the room, Sam spotted a pile of spell components and other materials on Alex’s desk. For the last few weeks, Alex’s latest obsession had been the incorporeal creatures shades. Alex had had a slight fear of the dark when he was younger and discovering that there were creatures made of shadows had struck a morbid chord with him. Ruby had suggested researching shades to help demystify them. Of course, Alex had gone above and beyond.

Based on the contents of the desk, it looked like he was trying to design a trap to catch a shade. A candle rested in the middle of an 8” wide aluminum cylinder. The cylinder had been almost entirely carved away to just leave a few runes that appeared to be variants on a devil’s trap. Sam could imagine the lit candle casting shadows of the runes on all the walls. But with the candle unlit most of the shadows fell inside the trap’s mechanism itself. Wanting to fix the alignment of the shadows, Sam touched the candle’s wick, igniting it with the First Light. He stared at the flame sitting in the little rune covered cylinder for several seconds before sliding the candle and cylinder to be positioned on top of a drawing of the trap’s runes.

When Sam got back to the parlor, he found a meeting of sorts underway. Cas had not only brought back Kaylee, but Dean had returned home along with Hael and Gabriel. Tom sat next to Kaylee, catching her up on what had happened while Dean and the angels were updating Ruby on the global tactical situation. She had barely listened to any of Hael’s report from Eastern Europe before she held up her hand to silence everyone. She’d had more than enough of Lucifer, away and at home.

“I can’t fucking take this anymore. We need to find Lucifer and kill him,” Ruby said in frustration. “He’s torturing Sam and the kids. This—all of this—can’t keep going.”

“I wish I knew how to find him, but I don’t,” Gabriel replied. “Luci’s like the one guy in all existence more slippery than me. He’s where I learned all my best tricks.”

“Can we at least figure out his MO?” Ruby asked.

“Even if he wasn’t jumping all over the place and we could catch up to him, we’d still have to fight probably the most powerful being on earth,” Dean complained, painfully aware that he was on the short list of people qualified to kill archangels.

“If we knew where he was going to be, do we need to actually fight him? Is there a way we could trap him?” Sam asked softly. He didn’t want to get ahead of himself.

Gabriel nodded at a thought. “I might have a way lock him down. Think like a devil’s trap or holy oil, but heavier duty.”

“How’re we supposed to get him in the trap though?” Dean asked. “I’m guess that he isn’t gonna bite at a block of cheese.”

“What if the vessel is already in the trap when he enters it?” Sam avoided looking at Kaylee and Tom while broaching the subject of vessels, but he did notice Ruby’s eyebrow raise subtly at his question.

“He’s not gonna stroll into a trap just because some schmuck says yes,” Gabriel answered with a knowing look at Sam.
"What if his true vessel says yes?"

"Sam, you can't be serious," Dean said as he stood up from where he was leaning against the wall.

"He wouldn't go for it while you were in the trap." Gabriel shot down the idea. "He'd just wait until you left the trap and then he'd jump you."

"See, you shouldn't be thinking like that." Dean looked around the room for support.

"Actually, in theory it's possible that vessels can fight their angels for control," Hael speculated. "There's a chance you could say yes, then step into the trap."

"You're talking about Zephon?" Cas asked his sister. "She was one of the lower choirs and it was still a one-in-a-million chance. Lucifer would be inconceivably more difficult to overpower."

"Luci's an archangel, but we're also dealing with a more powerful vessel," Gabriel countered. "It's not the worst idea I've heard."

"Gabe, that's not funny," Dean said hoping that the conversation would collapse under its own absurdity.

"I'm not joking." Gabriel glanced at his siblings before turning back to Dean. "Luci's my brother. I love him, but this has gone too far. We have to stop him and we don't have decades to do it this time around. Neither of our families can take it."

Lucifer was focusing his attacks on both the pro-human and pro-Heaven angels, since he perceived them as the greatest threat. The overall population of angels had been reduced because of the war in general, but now their death toll was rising much faster. At last count the AFE only had around 2,000 angels left in their ranks and they were dying up to a dozen at a time with each hit. Every week that passed made them weaker.

Their army was suffering a death by a thousand cuts, but so were their families. Each time an AFE angel died, they were mourned by their siblings. Each time one of the nephilim was killed the hope for having some sort of a future backslid. And each time Dean saw Sam, Kaylee, or Alex clutch their head from a vision he worried what sort of damage might come from it. Minutes ago he'd watched Kaylee pass out from the same vision that had given Alex a seizure. Everything was escalating and although he didn't want to admit it, he was terrified of what would come next if they did nothing.

"We have to try something." When Sam saw that nobody was going to interrupt him with an objection he continued. "If this is all we've got, then I'm in."

"You're his true vessel. He's not going to want to let you go and we don't have any other real options except to hope he backs out," Gabriel explained. "If you say yes, that's it. At the very best you're going to be benched indefinitely—and that's immortal indefinitely."

"Sammy...." Dean didn't know what to say. He hated the idea of Sam sacrificing himself, but when it came down to it, he had nothing else to suggest and it wasn’t his call.

"You'd do the same if it was Michael tearing things up down here." Sam smiled weakly at his brother.

"I still don't like it."

"I don't like it and I'm the one that suggested it."
“Let’s not sign on the dotted line just yet,” Ruby interjected. “We’re gonna need a lot more than just some spitballing before we commit to such a terrible idea.”

11/28/2028

“The most powerful angel warding in the history of the universe and it’s being used to keep one in,” Sam said while he kicking the iron bars of the cell as a prospective buyer might kick a car’s tires.

They had stripped out most of the lower basement in order to convert it into a cell to hold Lucifer. About two-thirds had been magically reinforced on every surface and the open side was blocked off with two rows of iron bars. The two rows of bars were ten feet from each other, separated by a heavily-warded buffer zone. Beyond the warding in the buffer zone, the individual bars were engraved with enochian protection sigils, which were designed to be impervious to the First Light. Each set of bars had a door with five locking mechanisms of magical and non-magical varieties.

The actual cell portion was empty. They decided not to risk giving Lucifer anything from the beginning. It wasn’t obvious what kind of shape the archangel would be in or what he could do with even the most innocuous of objects. Once they had a sense of their prisoner they could figure out whether it made sense to provide anything in the way of accommodations. The conclusion had felt a little cruel towards Sam, until they all reminded themselves that Sam almost certainly wouldn’t be in control long enough to really utilize them.

“Yeah, well. Once you meet Luci you’ll appreciate all my hard work,” Gabriel said as he painted wards onto the floor of the buffer zone in his own blood.

“That’s reassuring,” Sam sighed. ”Are you sure it’s okay for me to be seeing this?”

“Luci isn’t dumb. He’ll know exactly how this trap was made as soon as he sees it. The trick is going to have to be that you can’t unlock it from the inside. Once you get inside, for you the work’ll be done.”

“Do I actually have to close the gates or just get in past the warding?” Sam asked as he swung the outer gate in order to test the hinges.

“Once you get inside the warding you’ll be knocked on your ass. Imagine being hit by a car that has all the physical characteristics of the planet Mercury. It’ll be like that for at least a day or two—but it’ll be worse for him,” Gabriel said as reassurance while finishing the last ward. “One of us will lock you in, but if not you should try to get the inner gate closed at least. Luci will be weakened, but it’s not a perfect cage until both gates are shut.”

“So, one of us is going to have to be in reserve to get the gate?” asked Kaylee from her perch on the basement staircase. “I guess we better go gather the team and draw straws.”

The family split up in order to go collect their inner circle. Prior to shuttling their closest allies to the bunker for the tactical meeting, Sam, Ruby, Dean, Castiel, and Kay all made their contacts submit to a secrecy spell, much like the one that Crowley had placed on Sam in Hell many years earlier. The only difference was that the erasure of their memories would not be contingent. Instead, select details of their memories that might compromise the looming mission would be eliminated while preserving the knowledge that a scheme exists and who to trust.

Gabriel, Anael, Hael, and Rachel were there representing the fallen angel contingent. Kali was brought in incidentally as Gabriel’s partner, but primarily as one of the most powerful people in Asia, a region that was better fortified against angels. Tamara, Bishop, Flo, and Kit were invited
to help provide some warning to the AFE in addition to the other officers in attendance.

Sam brought in Shola, Crowley, and Morrison as his key people from Hell. None of the demons were thrilled by the plan, though they didn’t have a strong counterargument to the gamble. Lucifer’s attention may have been turned to the angels, but they all knew that he would eventually turn his eyes to Hell.

“There exists a trap capable of holding Lucifer,” Sam began for the benefit of the non-human guests who were hearing the information for the first time.

“A trap? Capable of holding Lucifer?” Tamara asked in near disbelief.

“Handcrafted by yours truly,” Gabriel explained. “It’s real. It’s ready to roll.”

“So what’s the catch?”

“Lucifer needs to walk into the trap. We can’t bring it to him,” Dean answered.

“More accurately—” Sam briefly pursed his lips, hesitating to articulate the dire gamble. “—I need to walk Lucifer into the trap.”

The expressions of everyone in the room fell on a spectrum of stunned to defeated. The suggestion that he might say yes, risking all of their lives, in order to make a Hail Mary play to stop Lucifer, it was truly earth-shattering. It might very well be if pursued. But they were out of options and when it came right down to it, they all knew it. A painful silence stretched as everyone processed the idea and each others’ bleak reactions.

“Best case scenario,” Sam continued, attempting to move the conversation forward toward something productive. “I maneuver Lucifer into the trap. Kaylee takes over Hell with the full support of the Council and everyone goes on with their lives… but we’re not all here to talk about the best case scenario.”

“If Lucifer ends up calling the shots we need to be as ready as possible without having tipped our hand early,” added Dean, eagerly trying to find comfort in the familiarity of a mission briefing. “We’re all in vital positions within our respective structures. Find people you trust with your lives and get them ready for a possible attack. If this leaks and team Lucifer gets wind, he might pass on the invite until we aren’t ready or worse. I know it’s going to be tempting to warn everyone, but we can’t risk it.”

“We don’t have enough of the global command here. This is mutiny,” said Bishop, the only human with a military background there.

“It’s worse than just mutiny,” Ruby corrected him. “If this goes wrong there’ll be a lot of dead people. Everyone needs to be prepared for that. But if we don’t do anything, there will absolutely be a lot of dead people.”

There was a moment of silence while everyone considered the options. Short of killing Sam, no one was actually capable of stopping him from saying yes. Any of the others could refrain from participating in the scheme, but there was no real benefit to trying to sabotage it. The most that revealing the plot would do would be to compromise Sam’s success at controlling Lucifer. There wasn’t a good way to change the trajectory of events without significant consensus that necessarily required Sam. And beyond that, they were faced with a lethal status quo.

“We aren’t going to be able to warn officers in all our bases,” Bishop cautioned them. “I don’t think we’ll be able to tip off any of the bases along—”
“Don’t,” Sam interrupted. “Don’t talk exact logistics around me. Don’t let me know where any vulnerabilities or targets are.”

“We can divide up bases later,” Anael suggested.

“Speaking of targets,” Hael added. “Many of the nephilim are already in secure locations, but—”

“I know about the groups hiding outside Glasgow and Lages,” Sam said as he closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

His chest felt tight at the thought that in some ways he was already the enemy, a person that couldn’t be confided in. As much as he tried to remember the amount of trust they were putting in him, it hurt to realize that he was lining himself up to commit a betrayal. The fact that it was a planned betrayal hardly took away the sting.

“Don’t worry about them. We’ll move the kids,” Dean replied with a sad smile.

“You’re also going to be a prime target,” Gabriel told Dean. “It’s hard to say what Luci’s gameplan is, but it’ll probably involve going after you. If he thinks he can take Michael in a fight, he might try to serve you up to Michael just to try and kick his ass. If he doesn’t want to fight Michael, he still might risk handing you over as a peace offering. If he wants to keep Michael out of play, then he’ll try to destroy your soul. We aren’t gonna know until he’s here.”

Dean rolled his eyes at yet another looming threat. “It sounds like I’m fucked no matter how you slice it.”

“Pretty much.” The archangel gave a little apologetic shrug.

“Dylaniel will also be in danger,” added Cas.

“Yeah....” Gabriel’s face lost some of its liveliness. “Luci’s not going to spare him just because he’s a kid.”

“Dean and Dyl should go off the grid for sure,” suggested Ruby.

“He’ll probably be borderline homicidal toward Cas too,” said Gabriel. “Aside from the whole working-to-stop-his-return-for-years thing, Cas has helped thousands of angels fall for the exact opposite reason that he did. That’s definitely going to put you on Luci’s shit list—and let’s not forget the whole being-with-a-hum—”

“We get it, Gabe.” Dean cut him off. “The three of us will lay low.”

Dean crossed his arms in front of his chest and avoided everyone’s eyes. He hated the idea of not being around to help his brother, but there wasn’t anything he could do. His ace in the hole involved killing angels, but he wasn’t prepared to kill Sam. Deep down he’d known that him staying out of the potential fight was the way it had to work out, yet he’d avoided facing that realization head on. Now the reality of the situation was crushingly clear. He and Sam were unstable elements when an archangel was in the mix. There was no way around it. Cas placed his hand on Dean’s shoulder in a silent gesture of support, which Dean leaned into.

“Not to intrude on the family moment,” Crowley drew everyone’s attention to the demon-filled corner of the room. “But we need to discuss Hell’s preparations as well. We can’t have Lucifer showing up at our gates wearing Sam. It’ll look like an endorsement.”

“Finish sealing Hell. Lock it all down,” Sam instructed to the surprise of everyone there.
“We could—” Morrison began, but Sam raised his hand to silence the archdemon.

“Morrison, you know more about Hell’s defenses than I do. Leave it that way. As far as I’m concerned, lock the whole place down—destroy the Howling Gate to do it if you have to. Do whatever you need to do to make Hell not worth the effort of entry.”

“You’re suggesting we cut off our people on Earth?” Shola asked, shaken by the thought.

"If we don't, they won't have a plane to go back to," Sam explained.

"But sealing the gates could cause panic or fracture our ranks on Earth." "I'll stay on Earth," Kaylee suggested. "I can rally our people topside. I'll send what I can to help reinforce the gates on this end, but I don't know what we'll have to work with."

"We need to have a line of communication," Ruby pointed out.

"We can discuss it confidentially," replied Morrison. "Actually, if there's nothing else that I'm needed for, I'd like to speak with some of the angels in private. I need to start designing now if you still want to keep an eighteen-hour deadline."

Sam gestured, inviting Morrison to leave the room. Anael, Rachel, and Heal followed him to participate in the archdemon’s research. Bishop, Flo, and Tamara also left to discuss the plan for notifying various AFE bases.

“Tom, I need you to do something for me that you’re not going to like,” Sam said in a disciplined voice that didn’t quite cover his pain.

Tom's heart sank at Sam's words. He already knew what his dad wanted from him.

“Stay out of harm’s way until this is done.”

“I’ve proven myself,” Tom replied. “I can help—”

“I know how capable you are. I really do, but that’s not what this is about. If things go wrong then we have another archangel in play…. You’re my kid just as much as Kaylee and Alex, but you aren’t his vessel and he wouldn’t hesitate to kill you.” Sam’s mouth moved, but he struggled to speak at first. “Please don’t let that happen. I couldn’t take it if I hurt you.”

“Okay,” Tom exhaled the word before clearing his throat and continuing. “I’ll go.”

“I’m sorry it has to be like this,” Sam apologized.

Tom got up his chair and hugged his dad. “We all are.” He turned to Dean and Cas. “Maybe I could go and help protect you three.”

“If Lucifer gets the chance he’s gonna hunt us. You’d just be putting yourself into the line of fire further downstream,” Dean warned.

“If you keep your head down, I doubt Luci would bother trying to find you,” Gabriel speculated.

“Because I’m human—” Tom’s eyes flicked to Dean “—and I’m not a vessel.”

Ever since he was a kid, Tom had known that he was different than the rest of his family. With the exception of his siblings, every immediate family member had been a different creature. Dean and
Bobby had been his human role models, but Dean was a vessel. His dad, siblings, and Cas had powers that put them in another weight class, though Dean and his mom had proven that fighting smart could level the field. In theory Dean had an incredible power by being able to wield blessed weapons, but he hadn’t really been in combat since learning how to use it.

His mom was probably the biggest source of inspiration in his life. She may have been a demon, but she wasn’t an archdemon or anything. She didn’t use telekinesis or any of the higher-tier demonic powers. She worked hard to hold her own in the company of giants. If there was a chasm, she’d build a bridge. She knew how to exploit an enemy’s weakness because she knew she couldn’t win the fair fight.

Now though, he was being singled out as the one not capable of surviving Lucifer yet not being dangerous enough to be hunted down and killed. He knew his family loved him and were only doing this to protect him, but he was being asked to sit out of one of the most important events of their lives. More than that, if things did turn sour his whole family could be killed while he did nothing.

"We’ll get our chance," Dean reassured him. "Picking battles is half of winning them. I promise this won’t be the last brawl."

Tom nodded then sat down between Kit and Kaylee. The kitsune wrapped his arm around Tom’s neck in a half-hug while Kaylee rested her head on Tom’s shoulder. Sandwiched by his two best friends, it was hard for him to maintain his soft scowl.

"He probably won’t want to hurt Kay or Alex because he’ll be trying to preserve as much of his bloodline as possible." Gabriel continued working through the threat-analysis. "And he always liked me, so I doubt he’ll take a real shot at me unless push comes to shove. But everyone else is fair game—maybe not Ruby, since he knows you two can breed. He’ll try to keep his options open."

"Lovely," Ruby groaned at being referred to as potential breeding stock.

"Maybe Mom should stay in reserve to lock up?" suggested Alex from the doorway. He hadn’t been invited to the meeting, but instead had snuck away from babysitting Hael’s daughter and Dyaniel. “That’ll leave Gabe, Kay, and me free to fight.”

Alex was barely fourteen years old. His combat training had been reduced since they’d moved to the bunker due to the lack of open spaces. He occasionally had gotten to train outside with Tom, Jieshi, and Anael, but it wasn’t fair to say that he was skilled with either a blade or gun. The only good thing that could be said was that powers came naturally to him... but in the grand scheme of things it was hard to tell how much that counted for.

“You’re too young. This is an archangel—” Sam started, but Alex interrupted him.

“I know, but I have powers and he doesn’t want to instantly kill me. I’m one of the only people that can fight him. We might not have the luxury of me sitting this out."

"He’s giving you seizures,” Sam countered. “What do you think is going to happen if you try to fight him? You should hide out while this is happening."

"Maybe I’m not the first choice, but I’m something and most our other people don’t stand a chance,” Alex replied. “It’d be dumb to not have me available."

The adults all exchanged glances, but no one could argue with him as a last resort.

“He gets his stubbornness from you,” Sam told Ruby.
“He gets it from both of you,” Dean corrected.

Ruby opened the door to their bedroom and found Sam kneeling beside the bed. His hands were folded in front of him. She saw his lips finish some whisper, then he turned to look at her.

“I thought you'd given up praying?” Ruby asked as she walked over and sat down on the bed next to him.

He didn't bother to stand up, but instead took her hand. “I had, but I figured…." He rocked his head from side to side uncertainly. “This is either the best or worst time to start it up again."

"Who does the Devil even pray to these days?"

"Maybe God, probably no one... but asking for strength feels right. Maybe I'm just asking myself."

“You're the strongest person I've ever known.” She touched his chin, raising his face to look at hers. “There's never any question; my money's always on you."

Ruby leaned down to kiss him. He got up to meet her lips, then continued forward, to climb on top of her. She lay back on the bed as she pulled him closer. He waved their bedroom door closed before giving in to the moment.

Sam started kissing down her neck when he breathed in her scent and it shook him. It was such a silly detail, but he realized how comforting he found the smell of her flesh. He stopped kissing her and pulled back a few inches to get a better look at her. With only a few hours left alone together, he actually wasn't particularly interested in sex—he just wanted to appreciate her. He wanted to hold her, embrace her, be with her.

With a single delicate kiss on her forehead, Sam laid down and pulled her into his arms. Ruby wriggled backward until they were spooning, Sam’s favorite position when they would sleep together. He buried his nose in her hair and took a deep breath. His hand rested over her beating heart, then drifted down to the scar where he'd stitched her up years earlier. Her fingers traced his own, eventually settling on his silver not-quite-wedding-ring.

“I want to take you away—away from all this. Just the two of us,” he whispered into the hair behind her ear.

“We could definitely run away. Leave the war and the politics." Ruby played along. "Are you thinking of a beach somewhere or maybe the forest?"

"A beach or field," Sam explained. "Someplace away from civilization. Where we can lie under the stars—"

"Will you read me poetry?" Ruby grinned at the thought.

"Of course. You couldn't get me to shut up. I've had centuries to brush up on my classic lit."

When Ruby hummed with interest, he tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, causing her to turn her head to look at him. His fingers caressed her earlobe before he began.

“Thou fair-hair'd angel of the evening,
Now, whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light
Thy bright torch of love; thy radiant crown
Put on, and smile upon our evening bed.
Smile on our loves—"

Ruby silenced him with a kiss. She rolled to face him and he held the back of her head as they kissed. The kiss turned salty. She pulled back, then wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"What if this is it?" His voice cracked. "We'll never have another night together."

"Sammy, don't think like that. You've got to hold onto hope."

"My best case scenario is being...." He didn't want to finish saying 'trapped in a cell with Lucifer in me for eternity,' so he just pursed his lips. "Worst case...."

"Don't think about the worst case."

"If it changes me, makes me something I don't want to be...." He tried to evade her eyes, but she held his cheeks so that his eyes were only inches from her own.

"I'm not gonna kill you, if that's what you're asking."

"Ruby, I'm dangerous—even without Lucifer."

"I know exactly what you are." She kissed the tip of his nose. "You're the light in the darkness and I'm gonna find a way to save you."

He looked at her with all the faith he'd ever known. "If anyone can, it's you."

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Dean hugged Sam tightly for what felt like a whole minute. Neither of them wanted to admit it was goodbye, but the mood was unmistakable. There was almost no chance of seeing each other again, just as brothers. If they did meet again it would likely mean one or both of their deaths and they both knew it.

"I'm... sorry." Dean struggled to speak through the tightness in his throat.

"Don't. It's not your fault," Sam reassured his big brother. "Don't carry that weight.... Take care of each other."

"You're gonna get through it. I know you will." Dean clenched his eyes as a few tears escaped. "I love you, Sammy."

"I love you too, Dean."

Dean let go of Sam, stood beside Cas, then took Dylaniel’s hand. After a painful second, Dean nodded to Cas, and the three of them disappeared.

Tom stepped up to his dad and stared him in the eyes for a moment. Sam looked him over, then smiled. He touched one of the small pink bows that Tom wore in his hair. It had been a couple years since he’d seen Tom wear anything that might’ve been considered feminine.

“I figure if it’s the end of the world, I might as well go out in style—my own way,” Tom muttered sheepishly. “Who am I trying to impress anymore anyway?”

“You impress me. You don’t even need to try,” Sam said as he pulled Tom into a hug. “I’m so proud of you. I love you. Don’t ever doubt that.”
After Tom used a talisman to teleport away, the rest of the family went down into the basement. Sam hugged his kids, kissed Ruby one last time, then stood next to the open gate leading to the buffer zone of the cell. Gabriel stood within arm’s reach in case something went wrong. Kaylee waited five feet away, ready to spring forward if need be. Alex and Ruby stood further back, hoping to not be necessary. Sam took a moment to collect himself and take his last breath of free air.

"Yes."

There was a flash of light that surprised even Gabriel. When their eyes adjusted Sam was lying on the floor next to the gate.

"Quick! G—" Kaylee shouted, but everyone was knocked backward into the walls by a shock wave emanating from Sam. Gabriel was able to sit upright despite wobbling slightly. Kaylee turned her head from side to side, but she couldn’t will herself to get up. She spotted Alex and her mom both lying unconscious on the ground. Blood trickled from Ruby’s nose, tear ducts, and ears.

Sam stood up and looked around the basement. His eyes settled on the trap. He nodded to himself, then glanced at Gabriel with a small smile. Shaking his head, Lucifer flexed his hand. A five-foot-wide section of the outer bars tore free and dragged across the wards on the floor, scratching away the detailed pattern.

Lucifer was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Probably the thing I feel worst about is Tom being benched at the end of the chapter. I love his character so much and honestly a big part of it is the fact that he's willing to put up with indignities like this in order to take care of his family. He doesn't insist of being the star of the show, but he's competent as hell.
Kaylee rolled onto her side, then dragged herself across the floor to Alex. He wasn't moving except for the slight rise and fall of his chest. As usual, his eyes were solid black, so she couldn't tell how his pupils would react to light. His right horn's tip had broken off when he had been thrown into the basement wall. She realized that his habit of wearing his horns out had probably saved him from some greater injury.

Gabriel was kneeling next to Ruby. The archangel checked her vitals and looked her over thoughtfully. It wasn't clear whether the lack of frantic action on his part was comforting or terrifying.

"Are they gonna be okay?" Kaylee asked as she lifted herself into a crawling position before experimenting with standing.

"I think so," Gabriel said in a not-entirely-reassuring tone. "It'll take me at least a few hours to fix this, longer maybe."

"Hours?! He's gone—doing...." She didn't want to begin voicing all the unpleasant thoughts drifting into her head. "What am I supposed to do for hours?"

"Go put out some fires if you can. It shouldn't be hard to find 'em," Gabriel replied as he turned his attention back to the trap.

Kaylee ran to her room to grab some supplies, but she hesitated. She wasn't sure what to take because she wasn't sure what to do first. It had been easy to say that she'd stand up to Lucifer should the worst happen, but she'd been assuming that Gabriel and her mom would be on hand to help. Despite what he might lack in command experience, Gabriel had thousands of years of nearly every other kind of experience. Her mom was one of the most creative strategists she knew. But both of them were out of commission. Even Alex, the unexpected source of aid, wasn't available.

Lucifer was almost certainly causing trouble somewhere at that very moment. Her dad was gone. Dean, Cas, and Tom were off the board. Her mom was unconscious. Crowley was sealed off in Hell—

She grabbed the archdemon's talisman, dropped it into a silver goblet, then ran for the cold storage case in the medical room. After digging through the shelves, she found one of the IV bags of her own blood. Dragging a knife along one edge, she poured the blood into the goblet. Her hands warmed the goblet, raising the blood to around body temperature and hopefully tricking the spell into treating it as fresh.

"Crowley, please tell me you can hear me."

"I take it things didn't go well?"
She'd never been more grateful to hear the demon's voice, but she didn't have time for feelings like relief or happiness.

"Lucifer's in control. The trap is out of commission until Gabe can fix it. I don't know what's going on. Is he trying anything on your end?"

"He hasn't pressed any of our gates yet."

She buried her face in her hands. In some ways it was comforting to know that Lucifer wasn't making an immediate play for Hell. Lucifer probably had a different assessment of what assets were going to be powerful. He was an angel, and not just any angel; he was something of an old-fashioned one. In some ways he might've been ahead of his time back when he had rebelled, but he didn't have an appreciation for just how significant an impact demons, humans, and non-humans could make.

Unfortunately, since Lucifer wasn't attacking Hell, that meant that she still had to find him on Earth. In the very near future or possibly at that very moment he was inflicting some sort of damage on the world. They didn't know what his plan was—assuming he had a plan and wasn't just going to rain carnage down upon them randomly. He was supposed to be a smart guy who'd just spent a small eternity locked up and probably dwelling on all the things he'd like to do. Maybe the details had to be amended to fit the reality of the world he'd re-entered, but he'd had months to reassess the situation.

So the likely players were: Lucifer with a smattering of loyalists and the element of surprise. The AFE, which would be moderately well-positioned except for the fact that a significant amount of its leadership would not be expecting Lucifer to strike. Heaven, which had its strongest forces fortified but was completely unprepared for Lucifer. The neutral humans, who were so much more vulnerable both in lack of foresight and defenses. Then there was them... or more accurately her.

On occasion Kaylee had ruled in Hell under her dad's watchful eye. She had helped make policy decisions, but she'd never done anything like this. Her dad was the one that everyone believed in. He was the one who could deliver a speech or inspire loyalty. There were demons on Earth, partially under her authority and also under command of the AFE—but the AFE was about to get ambushed. That proud institution was about to get thrown into disarray. People with strong wills and leadership skills would need to pull them together. She didn't know how the demons could trust a nineteen-year-old to lead them, let alone have influence over anyone else.

Kaylee confessed her fears to Crowley. "They aren't going to follow me."

"You want to know how your dad got his following? He stood up for Hell—and he killed a lot of people." Kaylee rolled her eyes at Crowley's words. "Chaos is just uncontained power waiting to be seized and manipulated. Lucifer isn't going to hesitate to take it. Go beat him to the lion's share."

After ending the call, she threw on her long, black leather jacket with red accents in order to look the part of the leader of Hell. With a few quick adjustments, she donned one of Dean's old angel-blade hip holsters. She manifested her horns, fangs, and claws, then teleported out of the bunker.

The latest demographic report was four days old, but there shouldn't have been any major changes. The neutral natives population consisted of 950 million humans, 3,000-30,000 non-human natives, and less than 1,000 other blips on the radar that that AFE couldn't identify. The Heaven-aligned forces consisted of over 250,000 Templar, less than 1,000 angels on Earth, and 5,000 angels in Heaven. Lucifer’s followers consisted of 300 angels, 10,000-40,000 humans, 150,000-250,000...
demons. The AFE had 2,000 angels, 600,000 humans, 25,000 non-human natives… and about 900,000 Hell-aligned demons on Earth.

Demons made up more than half of the AFE’s forces, but they weren’t well integrated throughout the ranks. Despite a casual effort to include demons in command positions, they were underrepresented. A significant part of the discrepancy was the fact that many humans and angels had a lingering distrust of demons. For millennia demons had almost exclusively come to the other species’ attention because of their violence and treachery. There was an idea that demons were vicious or uncivilized because of the nature of Hell. The backlash over Sa’dah’s death just three years earlier hadn't helped that perception. As a result, they were often consolidated and assigned to remote locations rather than with the rest of the army’s population.

Kaylee knew that the majority of AFE demons were either clustered around specific bases or networked with those communities. It sounded like most of Lucifer’s strategic knowledge would be coming from what Sam knew. Luckily, Sam hadn’t been interested in the particulars of the AFE deployment plans. He probably knew the major bases thanks to random dinner table conversations over the years and Lucifer had undoubtedly collected significant intel over the last few months. But the most inner circle details were likely still a secret.

Her first step had to be taking command of the AFE’s demons on Earth. They were an underappreciated resource that in theory should have some loyalty to her. After rallying the demons, she could reinforce the AFE and try to contain the damage Lucifer was doing.

She teleported into the center of the Linares base. There were a few dozen demons casually going about their business. Her arrival only caught the attention of the handful of demons closest to her. Without wasting any time, she manifested her wings, then forced herself into the air with a burst of telekinesis. By the second flap of her wings she had every demon’s attention. She carefully settled herself on top of a van before addressing the crowd.

"I want every demon above the rank of captain or visdemon here, now!" she ordered in Abyssal.

About half of the demons blinked away and were replaced by even more higher ranking demons. She recognized many of the new arrivals as being of high enough rank within their castes to have warranted admission to the Citadel. A few of the demons watched with confused skepticism.

"A visit from the princess? What're they playing at?" muttered a Cruciare demon in the crowd.

She could sense his disrespect and his comments spread the sentiment like a poison. As much as she needed to ration her powers, she needed to command respect more. Kaylee squeezed him, then raised his meatsuit into the air several feet.

"No longer princess—queen," she said in as cool a tone as possible. With a slight twist of her hand, she began crushing his broken soul. She let him scream in agony for a few seconds before dropping him to the ground. "I am here on behalf of the High Council and by my own will as Queen of the Abyss."

She waited a beat to see if anyone would object to her claim. Small ripples of unease drifted through the crowd, but mostly she sensed concern, not doubt or anger. She hoped that her people were smart enough to be realizing what extreme circumstances must have taken place. The King of Hell was no more, and the Queen was making an announcement in person on Earth.

"The Council became aware of a plot by Lucifer to attack Hell," she lied. It barely even registered on her conscience. Both Hell and Earth needed her to have their loyalty. And with the Council stacked with her allies she had no doubt they’d corroborate any story she pitched.
"To protect our home, the gates have been sealed." She could feel the level of fear in the audience rise at the thought of having their retreat cut off. "We do not have a position to fall back to, because if we flee, Earth will fall... then Hell. This is how vital we are to not just the survival of our people, but all peoples on Earth. This army of Hell is the largest military force on the planet. For years we have served below humans and angels because we have let non-Abyssal continue to define us.

“What they don’t understand is that we’re a people unlike any other. Each and every one of you has fought to become the person you are today. In Hell, you begin with nothing but pain and you have to earn your dignity, your position, your friends, your families. No matter what the outsiders might say about us, we’ve forged ourselves in the harshest fires. Outsiders may question our nobility or morality, but every honorable deed you’ve ever done has been a testament to your tenacity. I’m proud to be Abyssal, to be a demon, because we are the people of resilience.

“We will not wait in Hell for our destruction. We will not let Earth die. We are going to save the humans, and the angels, and every other species on Earth—or we die proving that demons are a force to be reckoned with.”

Cheers spread throughout the crowd as they blinked their eyes black. She could feel their unease transform into pride. The scene took her aback for a moment. Her dad had been incredibly popular with his people, but he’d never been able to turn his eyes black. It was such a tiny gesture, yet looking out at the sea of now hundreds of demonic black eyes just like her own… she had a profound appreciation for her people. They believed in her because they wanted to believe in themselves. They gave her their faith, that power. Now she had to use it.

"My father sacrificed himself in an attempt to contain Lucifer. He has given us a target, a finite enemy. As I speak attempts are being made to capture Lucifer. Until he is contained or... killed...” She didn’t want to encourage them to kill Lucifer, but she didn’t want everyone to be pulling their punches either. Mundane demons almost certainly wouldn't be lethal against an archangel even under the most favorable conditions... and some risks were going to be necessary. "...Hell is in danger. Earth is in danger. We need our most powerful demons guarding the gates—one, 1,000 per gate.”

"1,000?" asked a Maji in the crowd.

On Earth, the gates ranged in size from a cupboard door to a two-car garage door. They were often guarded by at most fifty demons, but even that was a rare occurrence. She was assigning more demons than had ever guarded all of the gates at once to each individual gate. Beyond wanting a sufficient garrison for each potential target, she wanted to be clear about how seriously she was taking their enemy and how important it was to hold the gates.

"If Lucifer sends angels, we'll get chewed through twenty-to-one at best. We’re facing an enemy with fewer, stronger individual units. We have to win by our numbers. If it takes burying the gates in our corpses, that's what we're doing. We cannot allow a breach."

Several demons whispered, but she was pleased to hear them discussing who to send to protect the gates. There were nods of approval and understanding. The general mood that radiated from the crowd was determination and righteous anger.

"The rest of us are going to defend various strategic locations or comprise companies for assaults. Of those not guarding gates, I want 90% of them reinforcing the AFE bases and the highest population human territories." There was a murmur of confusion. "We need the humans, even the neutral ones. They might not think they need us, but in their time of weakness they will and we have to be ready to give them aid. Show them just how wrong they were to doubt our worth."
"The remaining 10% will be split into companies of a hundred. Get them ready to run action items —"

"Ma'am, what action items?" asked a Torquean visdemon.

"We're going to hit Lucifer and his side everywhere they turn. No matter where they go, we will move to flank them and apply pressure. The majority of our troops will be the anvil and the 10% the hammer. By the time you get the companies organized I promise we'll have quite the list of places to strike. Lucifer is already hard at work. We're playing catch up."

There were only about thirty people on the main street of the AFE's Wenatchee base. Nearly half of the bases had reinforced their security as part of some sort of surprise drill earlier in the day. Among bases running the drill, high value targets were moved into hiding and the warding was doubled. It had raised a few red flags among even the bases not participating. So despite the fact that their base wasn't having a drill, the nerve-wrecked lieutenant in charge of Wenatchee’s base-wide announcements was primed to sound the alarm the moment that Lucifer had touched down.

Lucifer didn't mind having his arrival announced. It was more efficient than him extending an invitation himself. He had a lot to do and didn't want to be bothered with knocking down every door. Those who dared to oppose him would eventually meet him on the battlefield, weapons drawn. Those who wished to aid him would come, too. He was counting on it.

Nearly all the bystanders were humans with a few angels and demons in the mix. He telekinetically crushed the humans' throats and the demons' clouds. He waited a moment to see how his siblings would react. To his disappointment the three angels charged him, blades in hand. They were dead in a flash of the First Light before they could reach melee range.

Rather than merely waiting in the open for more creatures to come to him, Lucifer decided to visit the headquarters. As much as he was planning to kill all the commanders of the AFE, Marcus Barbosa was at the top of his list. The human wasn't a threat; he was a subject of loathing. Sam had hated the man for over a decade and Lucifer hoped that providing a little vengeance would do something to quiet his vessel.

He was vaguely aware that in an emergency most of the bases' nerve centers would lockdown and be protected magically. Two years earlier, Dean and Ruby had discussed the practicality of different protection spells while making dinner. Ruby had been forced to explain the theory in such simple terms that it had caught Sam's attention for several minutes. Lucifer smiled as he started looking for the smaller unmarked building that should contain the source of all channeled spells on the base.

After a minute of searching and occasionally killing enemies, Kaylee appeared in front of him. She drew her angel blade and took up a fighting stance. At first glance it might've appeared that she was committed to defending the base, but he had his doubts. Sam could read Kaylee's expression and body language better than anyone—or at least that was true as of an hour ago. Sam could see her hesitation, so Lucifer could see it too.

"I don't want to fight you, but I will if you make me." Kaylee spoke with an air of authority that Lucifer appreciated.

"I'm not going to make you do anything," he replied. "You're free to walk away or join me. If you insist on trying to stop me.... Well, I'll be disappointed."

Lucifer took another step forward causing Kaylee to unconsciously start to step backward, but she
stopped herself. She raised her offhand to him, preparing to defend herself. He smiled at her.

"I like your conviction. Loyalty is an admirable quality, even when it is misplaced." He continued to walk forward while watching her with interest.

She tried to stop him with telekinesis. When he shrugged at her, she leaned in to force more energy into the push. He visibly fought against some resistance as he raised his hand. Lucifer made a flicking gesture, throwing Kaylee backward into the side of a building. At the last moment he stopped her head from making contact with the concrete wall, but he didn't bother preventing any other injuries. Her right foot connected with the ground before the wall, breaking her ankle and knee. The impact knocked the blade from her hand and it rolled out of reach.

Lucifer strolled over to stand in front of Kaylee, then stared down at her. She held her palms up to him, but the light that came from them didn't hurt him. He knelt down to be closer to eye level with her. She tried to blink away, but he shook his head subtly at her.

"I gave you those powers. You may be more than the rest of the vermin, but a vessel is just a shadow of their angel. Trying to fight me isn't going to work out well for you." Lucifer placed his finger to his chin thoughtfully before continuing. "I could show you how to harness your powers even more."

"Fuck you." Her eyes flicked to the dropped angel blade, but she knew that he could stop her from grabbing it with almost no effort.

He blatantly looked at the blade, then smiled anew at her. "I understand why you might not appreciate my offer right now, but the invitation stands," Lucifer explained. He collected the angel blade and looked it over thoughtfully. "Tagas, she didn't fall with me, but it was hard not to be fond of her."

One moment Lucifer was holding the blade, the next it was gone. She'd seen Gabriel pull some magical sleight of hand before, but it was a display of power that most angels couldn't pull off. Yet Lucifer hardly seemed to realize he'd done anything impressive. Instead he began examining the buildings around the intersection and his eyes settled on the small cream-colored building diagonally across from where Kaylee was sitting.

With his back turned, she struggled to get up, but her right leg was immobilized from the breaks. She watched him study the building for a moment before she thought to turn her eyes black. With her enhanced sight, she could see hundreds of tiny tendrils of spells radiating outward from inside the building.

"Magic is such a curious thing," Lucifer said, almost to himself.

He walked up to the small building, then placed his hand on the wall. The First Light burnt through the layers of stucco and hidden iron shielding before igniting every flammable object in its immediate area. Screams emanated from the building, but they quickly faded and were replaced by the smell of charred flesh. When he was done, the channeled spells were broken, but he didn't proceed toward the headquarters as she'd expected. He hesitated, then looked toward the sky, observing something that she couldn't understand. It was like he was waited for something.

She was about to try engaging him in conversation again when twenty angels teleported into the street. None of them were familiar to her. If she hadn't been injured she might've taken some initiative, but she just quietly watched. For all she knew Lucifer would back the angels over her if she tried anything. Kaylee tried to make herself as innocuous as possible.
"Hello, Zachariah," Lucifer greeted his brother.

"Lucifer," an angel in the middle of the group replied with a nod. "I'm here to negotiate a truce between you and Heaven."

The archangel huffed a laugh. "A truce?"

"We've been at war too long. You should come home."

Zachariah's entire demeanor reminded Kaylee of a Crossroads demon, but that might be an insult to Crossroads demons. Kaylee expected that as the apparent leader of the angels, Zachariah probably wasn’t dumb enough for his smile to be sincere.

"What home?" Lucifer asked. "You mean the shrine to our cruel father? Or the false paradise where we enslave ourselves to human cattle?" He waved his hands at their meager surroundings. "This may not be home, but I would rather fight in the filth than submit—especially to a sniveling viper like you."

"Cut the melodrama."

"You may be the First Light, but you're still just an angel. You don't have the army you had last time. You're one archangel and a smattering of fallen. We have—"

"Raphael, who has never beaten me in a fight even when I was going easy on him? Or Michael, who has failed for decades to take his vessel and is too cowardly to come to this plane? Or your army? Well, what's left of it after Michael and the rest of upper crust allowed our brothers and sisters to kill each other." Kaylee wasn't sure that she’d ever heard so much anger come from her dad’s mouth.

"You're one to talk—"

"I fought for our freedom and our dignity! You fight for our enslavement and they—" Lucifer gestured at the base "—fight for our disgrace."

"We fight to keep our family together," Zachariah countered.

"By slowly bleeding it to death? If you think peace can come from anything other than swift and brutal action, then you're a fool. And I have too much to do to waste time suffering fools." For a moment she expected Lucifer to disappear, but he took a step toward Zachariah.

"You may be an archangel, but you're outnumbered twenty-to-one," Zachariah pointed out at Lucifer's hostile gesture.

"You're right that I am an archangel. I am more powerful than any being on this plane. I am the most experienced field commander in the history of Heaven. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to raise our people from this plight. I am many things." Lucifer smiled again in a move that made Kaylee shiver. He walked closer to the group of angels and briefly assessed them. "But I would bet my life that one thing I am not, is outnumbered twenty-to-one."

Zachariah's brow furrowed at the statement. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a ray of light. One of the lesser angels pulled his blade from Zachariah's back as the body fell to the ground.

Kaylee watched as the nineteen angels broke into a fairly evenly matched fight. With all the movement, she couldn't quite count the sides or knew exactly which angel had what alignment. Bodies were thrown telekinetically and angels were blinking to land surprise strikes. All the while
Lucifer watched with professional interest, almost evaluating the other angels’ performances.

One of the lesser angels noticed her sitting on the ground. He drew his blade and charged at her. She held her hands up to try blasting him with the First Light, but she winced with doubt as to whether she would even be able to summon it. She recoiled backward, hitting the wall.

Suddenly, the wall was gone and she fell onto dew-covered grass. For a moment all she saw was the clear blue sky before she sat up to look around. She was in a field about five miles from the edge of the base. In the distance she could see the smoke rising from the carnage.

She didn’t understand how she had gotten there. Her powers had been exhausted or outright blocked by Lucifer and she hadn’t even had the presence of mind to try blinking away. It didn’t make sense... until she noticed that the pain in her leg was gone. An angel had healed her, then transported her away from the fight.

Kaylee had her suspicions as to her mysterious savior, but she pushed the unpleasant thought from her mind. At that moment she had to focus on saving as many people in the base as possible. When she stood up to return to the fight, an explosion of white light engulfed the entire base.

“Anael, Bishop, and Tamara reported in that they’ve got demon reinforcements helping them hold most of the northeastern quadrant of North America. Our Pacific bases are silent, but I think that might be part of their lockdown. Finch was updating their systems last month and I hadn’t looked over those reports,” Ruby updated Kaylee and Gabriel on her communications with the other AFE officers. “South America could use some more help, but who couldn’t? Eastern Europe is taking a beating.”

“Any word from Hael?” asked Alex, but she shook her head.

“Oh yeah, Gabe, Kali wanted me to tell you that she feels ‘a terrible and beautiful change.’ Whatever that means. She seemed strangely happy,” Ruby relayed the message, a little confused by its contents.

“That’s my girl, always something interesting.” Gabriel looked up from his repairwork on the trap, then added, “Not that our situation isn’t interesting.”

“You want interesting, I’ve got 870,000 demons doing a modified anvil-and-hammer maneuver.” Kaylee sighed as she began explaining her contribution to the war effort. "The modifications are that the anvils are demon-reinforced bases and cities. The hammers are strike teams that will pursue Lucifer's forces wherever we catch wind of them showing up. Orders are we don't ease up for a moment. If they defeat us we just turn around and hit them again. They're stronger, but we have the numbers. In theory we could win on that strategy, except...."

"Except they have the heaviest hitter around," Gabriel said, filling in the blank.

"I can't beat him in a fight. There's no way." Kaylee rubbed the back of her neck as she leaned against the basement wall. "Even with powers he can run circles around me and not break a sweat."

She’d returned to the bunker to briefly check on her mom and brother as well as talk strategy with Gabriel. Alex and Ruby had both been awake when she’d arrived, though Ruby was hunched slightly. Kaylee couldn’t tell if it was from pain or fatigue and her mom wasn’t likely to volunteer that sort of information. Gabriel had managed to get most of the repairs done, but he continued to work as the four of them spoke.
It was possible that Lucifer could return to the bunker. He knew exactly where it was, but it seemed unlikely for him to risk getting close to the trap for no real benefit. Even if he did come back, they were hunting him in theory, though based on Kaylee's account of her encounter it didn't really feel like Lucifer was the prey.

"He hurt you?" Ruby didn't need to ask. They all had expected Lucifer to potentially use violence to resist them, yet, even having been somewhat prepared for it, the reality of the situation made her stomach sink.

"Yeah, but he healed me—saved my life." Kaylee stared at nothing beyond the concrete floor. "He didn't have to."

Kaylee was the only one close to Sam who had tried to confront Lucifer. The thing she fought may have had her dad's eyes, but they didn't carry the same warmth that they had always held for her. When he had picked up her dropped angel blade she'd worried that he'd kill her—that the last thing she'd ever see would be her dad's face, the real man trapped or dead somewhere inside.

But Lucifer didn't kill her. He'd saved her, even fully healing her. Even if he'd wanted to keep her alive as a fallback plan, he could have left her leg broken. He could've kept her as a prisoner of war. Maybe there wasn't any point in locking her up. Where could she flee to? Then again he had to know that she'd keep working against him. Did he really think so little of her as to let her roam free or maybe there was something else? She couldn't help but wonder if maybe some part of her dad was still alive in the mix.

"Kaylee?"

She didn't look up at her mom's voice.

Ruby stood up from her seat on the stairs and hugged her daughter. "Starlight, he's not your dad anymore. You know that, right?"

Kaylee nodded. She didn't know if that was a lie.

"How are we going to get him in the trap once it's repaired?" Alex asked, trying to break some of the emotional tension. "Is it even possible to knock him out or do we have to get him here while he's awake?"

"It'll probably be nearly impossible for us to short notice lay a whammy on him that's big enough to knock him out," Gabriel speculated. "Our best bet is maybe we could temporarily trap him with holy oil and then we can take our time knocking him out for transport."

"You think he'd really fall for holy oil?" Ruby raised an eyebrow at the idea of using such a cheap trick.

"Maybe not, but unless you've got a better idea..." He gave everyone a moment to contribute any suggestions before continuing. "The real question is how do we know where he's going to be standing?"

"He'll talk to me," suggested Kaylee. "He wanted to recruit me. If I talk to him... I think I could lure him."

Ruby crossed her arms in front of her chest, but didn't say anything.

"Well, finding him shouldn't be too hard," Alex added hopefully. "If we blink into the periphery, then we could try laying the oil ring down before he turns the corner or whatever."
"I don’t think we should be sneaking up on him exactly. He blew up the whole fucking base in Wenatchee. If he doesn’t know we’re nearby he could accidentally fry us," Kaylee said with an anxious tilt of her head. "I could show up next to him, then retreat toward the oil ring?"

“Do you think retreating’ll be an option?” Ruby asked as her lips thinned.

“We could be breadcrumbs,” Alex suggested. “Kaylee pops in to lure him part of the way, then I’ll pop in a little further down the road to get him the rest of the way. Make a trail, like breadcrumbs.”

“I don’t like it,” Ruby said quietly, caught between using her kids as bait and practical resignation.

Kaylee tried to reassure her mom. “I don’t think he wants to kill us.”

“Yeah. I don’t think he wants to kill you two either,” Ruby only partially explained. “I don’t have to like the plan when it’s the only plan we’ve got, but if things go bad, you two leave immediately. Understood?”

“Okay,” Kaylee answered while Alex nodded solemnly.

“Gabe.” Ruby turned her attention back to their resident angel. “How much can we do to Lucifer without seriously damaging Sam?”

“Inhabited vessels are tough.” Gabriel looked up from his work on the warding. “For most vessels it’s gonna take killing the brain for at least 10 minutes, but for an archangel’s vessel… I just don’t know. Luci’s old vessel was alive when it went into the cage.”

"I don’t suppose the answer is going to be something as simple as quartering him?"

"Good luck getting close enough to him with a sword, let alone being able to use it," Gabriel replied. "Remember, he's got all his experience plus Sam's. He isn’t gonna be easy to touch.”

Lucifer teleported into the Grand Junction base. Dean had once tried to convince Sam to visit him at that base because of its proximity to the snowy slopes of Aspen. Sam had declined; he hadn’t been able to picture himself snowboarding. Dean had been stuck there for months trying to secure the base from the surprisingly large number of human territories along the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains. He’d joked that if it wasn’t for the skiing, he’d have let the humans take it.

After personally wiping the ten largest AFE bases off the face of the Earth, Lucifer wanted to make some progress against the humans. The land east of the Grand Junction base wasn’t as densely populated as a metropolis like New York City or Hong Kong, but there were significant clusters of human communities over a large area—exactly the kind of place he was looking for.

Lucifer was met with resistance in the form of several hundred humans, roughly a thousand demons, and a few dozen angels. He wasn’t surprised. That seemed to be about the normal opposition for an AFE base.

He was only grossly outnumbered for a few seconds, then several hundred of his demon supporters and twenty of his siblings joined him for the fight. While his underlings were getting down to work, Lucifer signaled for Samhain to join him.

Kaylee, Alex, and Ruby, stopped by Grand Junction's improvised command center, which was
established at a bottleneck in the base’s streets. Half a dozen officers were directing subordinates toward the main fight, which was taking place three blocks to the east.

“What’s the situation?” Ruby and Kaylee asked at the same time. They exchanged a look, then Ruby took half a step back.

“He’s getting ready to do something,” answered one of the officers. “He has an archdemon with him and they’re holding in the town center. We’re not sure what’s happening, but it has to be big.”

“Is he pressing for the southwest quadrant at all?” asked an officer who had just arrived from a side street. Blood dripped from a cut on her forehead, but she hardly seemed to notice. Some larger concern was riveting her attention.

“He seems focused on the east,” replied the first officer after checking a map.

“What’s in the southwest?” Kaylee was imagining nukes or something equally horrific.

“We converted some underground weapons caches into a detainment center... for fallen angels,” the injured woman said with a hint of shame.

Kaylee wondered if nukes might’ve been better. “You have a prison full of angels down there? How many?”

“212.”

Kaylee looked down the streets of what was a massive, web-like battlefield. Buildings laid in ruin, hundreds of bodies in the streets. The place was destined for destruction. That wasn’t the kind of treatment for a place that was meant to be captured.

“Does he even know that they’re there? He doesn’t know they’re there,” Kaylee muttered. “We have to let them out. He’s been destroying bases and they’re trapped in the one he’s hitting.”

“They might side with him,” suggested one of the officers. “We don’t know their loyalty.”

“Are you fucking serious? We’re not leaving them trapped,” Kaylee restated with determination, then she switched arguments. “That’s 10% of our angels—maybe even a whole choir. We are not going to let them die to protect against a few bad apples.”

“We can’t just—” objected the injured officer, but she was cut off.

“Fuck this. I’ll get the prisoners,” Alex told his mom and Kaylee, while signaling for ten demons to follow him.

“You can’t—” the officer began.

He looked at her and briefly flashed his fangs before saying, “Are you really gonna fight me right now?” When she backed down, he glanced back to his mom and sister. “You two figure out this oil thing before he blows the place up.”

Alex found the prison in no time thanks to the painfully obvious guards. He had four demons subdue the guards as the rest of his party ran inside. The facility was a large underground cargo bay that had been retrofitted with angel-proof cells. Each cell contained roughly ten angels. He hurried down the main aisle, assessing the situation, and drawing the attention of all the prisoners.

“What, by the graces?” one of the prisoners exclaimed, seeing the group of demons.
"We're getting you out of here," Alex explained.

"What's going on?" asked one of the senior angels.

"Lucifer has a vessel." Alex spoke while looking over the locking mechanisms on the cells. "He's killed fifteen of the AFE's senior commanders and he's going after bases. He's gonna destroy this one."

The angels started amassing near the gates to their cells in alarm. Each angel's wrists were bound in warded handcuffs and the more powerful angels had their handcuffs tethered to an anchor point in the centers of the cells. The lesser angels began working together trying to break the chains binding the ones to the cells' floor.

"As soon as the gates are open get their chains!" Alex instructed the demons.

"You're just freeing us... with Lucifer right outside?" one of the angels asked, while she watched the teenager in confusion. "Aren't you worried we'll join him?"

"If you can live with that kind of blood on your hands that's on you. But I'm not living with your blood on mine." Alex clasped one of the locks, melting it with the First Light. "If you want to prove your loyalty, now's the time."

Ruby and Kaylee both fought off the urge to go after Alex. They were worried about him, but they had a job to do and time was running out. At any moment Lucifer could light the match on the entire base. They needed to get his attention, to let him know there was something in the base he didn't want to destroy. Kaylee would act as the lure by herself as best she could while Ruby setup the holy-oil trap. With some luck Alex would be back in time to help.

Kaylee blinked into the same plaza that Lucifer was in. She was followed by a handful of higher ranking demons and four angels. It was a bizarre eye in the storm, fighting all around them, but no one had penetrated Lucifer's immediate area. He was letting her be there and based on his casual demeanor he probably didn't care that she had brought along some support. He had his own support.

At Lucifer's side was Samhain and a few angels. Samhain was backed up by about ten demons from his own caste, the weecnan. While Lilith or Alastair had been the big names of the rebel archdemons, Samhain had always been the individual variable that worried her dad and Crowley the most. Among his other talents, he could summon creatures to his side; specifically the undead and beings created from corruption. Lilith may have been the zealotry of evil. Alastair may have had the cruelty of evil. But Samhain was the self-perpetuation of evil.

She hesitated. The original plan had been to lure Lucifer backward over the holy oil circle, but he was clearly up to something significant if Samhain was there. Lucifer turned his head toward Samhain without taking his eyes off of Kaylee. He said something, which earned a nod from the archdemon.

"Samhain's the target," Kaylee instructed her support, who charged and teleported forward. The angels protecting Lucifer moved to intercept the attack, while Samhain relayed some direction to his underlings. During the flurry of new action, Lucifer didn’t bother looking around at the fighting. He was watching her.

Kaylee tried to blink to Samhain, but she was knocked out of the teleport only five feet ahead of where she’d started. Lucifer shook his head at her. She tried to run forward, but her throw her
backward. After rolling across the ground, scraping up her arms and back on the asphalt, she
looked up at her surroundings. He’d knocked her closer to the alley where her mom had laid down
the ring of holy oil. He’d chosen her priority for her. She got to her feet and started backing toward
the trap as he followed her.

“I’m not sure how to feel about your stubbornness,” Lucifer commented. “It could be an asset if
you put more forethought into your actions.”

“You’re giving me shit on strategy?” Kaylee nearly tripped on a curb, but caught herself and
started hobbling down the alley. “You’re the one with the head start and all we can do is react.”

“Please, we both know that you have some sort of plan. You aren’t a fool and the situation isn’t
dire enough to warrant you simply trying to fight me directly again. The question is whether
you’ve thought your plan through enough,” Lucifer said as he stepped into the ring of holy oil.
“Are you a decoy?”

Kaylee flicked her wrist, sparking the holy oil with the First Light. The ring of flames surrounded
Lucifer causing him to raise an eyebrow.

“I’m the bait.”

“Not a bad idea, but, like I was saying, it’s not the most sound plan.” Lucifer didn’t seem remotely
concerned about his predicament. “I have dozens of pawns within shouting distance who would
happily lie down upon the fire for me, but I don’t even need to waste their lives.”

Kaylee’s chest tightened at the realization that he was about to bust the trap somehow. She looked
around for backup, but she’d cornered herself. He waved his hands and the flames withered before
extinguishing.

“Lit by the First Light; taken away by it too.” He took a step toward her and she tried to blink
away, but he stopped her. “You’d know that if you’d take my instruction.”

“Stay back,” Kaylee said while raising her hands, unsure of exactly how to fight him.

“No, because then you won’t learn a lesson.” Lucifer walked toward her while lifting his hand to
do some sort of attack, but he abruptly stopped. He fought against some confinement, then looked
around for what was causing it.

At the entrance to the alleyway Alex was reaching out with his hands, struggling to contain the
archangel. His body was shaking and blood trickled from his nose. When Lucifer turned to face
him, Alex fell to his knees, but he didn’t let go of his hold.

Sensing her opportunity, Kaylee struck outward in a blast of telekinesis, cracking the walls of both
of the three-story buildings on either side of her. She pulled the crumbling walls inward at herself
and Lucifer before blinking away a moment before impact.

Ruby laid down the circle of holy oil in the alley, then teleported to the opposite side of the plaza.
They knew that there was a reasonable chance that her presence would pique Lucifer’s interest,
possibly to the point of alerting him that something was amiss. She was generally thought to be
fighting out of her weight class and Sam knew her well enough to realize that that was a red flag.
Hopefully, she’d just be another random demon on the radar until she needed to strike.

With Alex going to free the angels, Kaylee was on her own acting as the lure. Ruby watched as her
daughter was thrown to the ground. She thought about coming forward, but Kaylee got up and kept
working her way back to the alley. It was taking all of her willpower not to run after them, but she had to follow at a safe distance, then she could blink in closer to provide extra support if needed.

As emotionally difficult as the plan was, the steps were easy... on paper. In reality, it was all happening in the middle of a battle. She had to dodge an attack by one of Lucifer’s angels, somersaulting out of the way as two of the allied demons tackled him to the ground.

Three of the wæcnan began summoning ghosts, which added an extra level of chaos to the plaza. One ghost clawed at her left leg, not actually shredding the flesh, but she could feel it trying to fight for her meatsuit. It tripped her, then started creeping toward her heart. She tried to blink, but only made it a few feet when she realized it was still clinging to her. She rolled on the ground trying to shake it, searching with her hands for a piece of iron rebar in the rubble around her—something to get the damn thing off of her.

An angel blade sliced through the ghost just as its fingers started pressing into her breastbone. When the ghost disappeared, Ruby looked up to see an angel with a long scar across her neck offering her a hand up. She noted the broken handcuffs that her rescuer wore, then looked around. Dozens of previously imprisoned angels were pouring into the plaza from one end while a horde of ghosts approached from the other.

Beyond the newly arrived angels, she could see Alex on his knees at the opening to the alley. The buildings on both sides of the alley began collapsing onto where the trap had been. She scrambled toward her children in a panic, but saw Kaylee teleport out of the way of the debris. Kaylee was on her hands and knees beside Alex. For a moment it almost seemed that they were up one, then there was a blast.

Kaylee and Alex flew across the street along with several tons of bricks, concrete, and steel beams. Alex managed to deflect a particularly large piece of a wall from slamming into Kaylee, but a support beam pinned him to the ground, crushing his lower abdomen. Kaylee tried to use her telekinesis to push it off of him, but she was mostly tapped out. When several of the freed angels hurried to help Alex, they were dragged across the street toward where the alleyway had been, then were incinerated with the First Light.

Lucifer stepped out from the crater he’d made in the rubble. He’d healed himself, but hadn’t bothered to repair his clothing. Several bloody holes hinted at where the rebar had impaled him five times in the chest. Dust fell from him as he started walking toward Kaylee and Alex.

“If you two think that I’m—” he began scolding his young vessels.

“Hey, dickbag!” Ruby yelled at him as she ran into his view.

Despite his anger at Kaylee dropping two buildings on him, Lucifer's temper cooled somewhat. He even smiled at Ruby. He hadn’t expected to see her, and she was relatively unharmed aside from a cut on her hand. She moved to stand between him and his vessels. He appreciated her attempt to protect them, though he hadn’t been planning to kill them.

She weakly raised an angel blade at him, but he easily knocked it from her hand with telekinesis. He held her in place while he closed the distance to stand right in front of her. When she tried to punch him, he just caught her fist.

“Such a strange creature you are.” He took a moment to marvel at her, which caused her body to tense. “I should thank you. You’ve saved this vessel from death countless times, preserved my line, and given me such powerful vessels.”
“There’s no giving. I don’t care who you are; they don’t belong to you,” she growled at him. “They’re my kids and I’m not going to let some arrogant bast—”

He hit her across the face, breaking her nose and causing a tooth to fly free. With some effort she looked back at him. His hand was raised to strike her again, but he hesitated. For a split second his eyes softened ever so slightly, flickering across her blood-covered nose and mouth, then he caught himself.

She took the opportunity to spray a mouthful of blood into his face. He let go of her and started wiping the blood from his face. She staggered a few feet out of his immediate reach before standing up with conviction.

“Vorare.” Ruby snarled the activation word of her spell as she held her cut palm toward him.

Her blood, that covered Lucifer’s face and hands, began corroding away at his flesh. He stumbled backward while trying to wipe the acid-like blood off, but it only ended up spreading it more. Within moments it had eaten through his skin and made contact with his veins, spreading the spell into his entire circulatory system.

Regardless of the risks, she had to turn away. She couldn’t watch that happen to Sam’s body. In front of her she saw several angels pulling her children from the wreckage and begin healing them. On either side was a city consumed by an increasing surge of ghosts, fueled by the battle itself. When she looked back Lucifer was gone.

He had the right idea.

After overseeing the AFE’s retreat from Grand Junction, Ruby returned to the bunker with her kids to regroup. She decided to stop by her bedroom to change her blood-stained clothes. She’d seen too much blood that day. As she was slipping on her new shirt she saw a book lying on the floor. She picked it up, then looked at the bookcase where it had fallen from. The books had tipped over diagonally in the shelf. That didn’t make sense. Using bookends was one of the manifestations of Sam’s tidy nature. One or more books had been removed.

"He’s been here!” Ruby yelled down the hallway. "Check the trap!”

"What happened?” asked Alex from the hallway.

"He took some books. Go look for anything out of place.”

While Alex checked the basement, Ruby sat on the floor staring at the collection of books, trying to figure out what was missing. The books were definitely part of her spellcraft section. She started systematically trying to work through each type of magic she kept in that particular collection.

"The trap is fine. Gabe was down there the whole time and didn’t hear anything,” Alex assured her when he got back.

"Guess Luci doesn’t want to say hi to me,” said Gabriel as he followed Alex into the bedroom.

"I guess so, but he didn’t bother covering his tracks.” Ruby pointed at the messy bookshelf. "Either he doesn’t care that we know or he was in a hurry.”

"Is him being in a hurry a good or bad thing?” Alex mused, earning a shrug from Gabriel. “So what’d he take exactly?” 
“Definitely a spellbook or two,” muttered Ruby.

“Luci using a spellbook, now I’ve heard everything,” Gabriel joked halfheartedly, but his eyes widened at a thought. “They both kind of suck at magic, don’t they?”

In her first conversation with Cas, after fighting Uriel and Tamriel, Ruby had learned that angels weren’t naturally familiar with magics. It had taken a few months for Heaven to properly educate its angels about the arcane arts and technology. After that the playing field had revert to its previous imbalance for almost twenty years. But Lucifer hadn’t been around when that push to educate angels about magic had taken place. And while Sam was somewhat familiar with the basics of magic, he’d almost exclusively relied on his powers to get things done. Neither of them had appreciated the power of magic because neither of them directly used it.

“I figured he’d have studied up over the past few months.” Ruby regretted not thinking of it earlier, but the thought came back as part of her combat instincts. She’d been surprised when the burning blood spell had been so effective. “I guess he didn’t.”

“Ruby, you’ve gotta make us a binding spell or something—” Gabriel began.

“Trust me. The gears are already turning,” she said as she started looking for a few specific books.

Kaylee came running down the hall into Ruby’s bedroom. “Luci—he went through Dean and Cas’s room too! A couple of drawers were pulled out.”

“Oh god,” Ruby breathed as she double-checked the shelf that had been pilfered. “He took my divination books. He’s trying to go after them.”

Cas first took his husband and son to the small human village of Ocotal in Honduras. Dean and Dyaniel tried to stay hidden in their small hostel room. Cas fetched some food and other supplies for them rather than risking them being out in public. Neither Dean nor Cas wanted to let Dyaniel out of their sight. They both knew that at any moment their lives could be in danger.

They had arrived an hour before sunset, and Dean and Dyaniel were both exhausted from being uprooted from their home, so they called it an early night. They shared the lumpy, single bed while Cas watched over them. Around two in the morning Dean woke up, realized Dyaniel wasn’t in the bed, then sat up, heart pounding. He relaxed when he saw his son asleep in Cas’s arms, sitting next to the small window.

“He wanted to watch the sky,” Cas mouthed to Dean, who nodded in understanding.

It had been months since Dyaniel had seen the sky, confined to secure locations, all of which happened to be windowless. The thought that his son had been unable to enjoy the fresh air, let alone fly, made Dean’s heart lurch. The choice to keep him inside had been for his safety, but it had subordinated Dyaniel’s happiness. Dean wasn’t sure whether he regretted the decision—Dyaniel was still alive after all—but he wished there had been a better way.

Knowing Cas, he was probably carrying even greater pity if not guilt. They were both incidentally responsible for their son’s situation; they’d both flaunted their rebellion of having him. But seeing the way Cas watched the night sky, Dean couldn’t help wondering if the sky meant more to angels. He knew that angels could fly beyond just teleporting from point A to B. It was probably a sensation unlike anything he’d ever know. He hadn’t imagined what kind of effect taking the sky away might have on their son, but Cas may have known.
After treasuring a few minutes holding his sleeping son, Cas carefully returned him to the bed. Dean reached up to squeeze his husband’s arm in reassurance before making sure that Dylaniel was in a comfortable position.

An hour later, Cas heard the rustling of wings outside their warded hostel door. He didn’t risk waiting to see who it was. Kneeling down, Cas wrapped his arms around his sleeping family, then teleported them to the edge of Bunbury, Australia.

Dean and Cas agreed to stay outside of town this time. Dean snuck into a restaurant’s parking lot and hot-wired a beat-up SUV. They drove away from civilization, but stayed in range of the radio broadcasts. As it started getting dark, they parked in a small clearing down some overgrown path through a nearby forest.

They listened to the news on the radio. There had been a series of massive explosions throughout the Americas and Europe, primarily focused on AFE bases and human cities. Some sort of major battle had occurred in Grand Junction, Colorado, resulting in a cascading effect to the surrounding area. At least thirty-five human communities in the area had gone silent. The AFE had released a statement that they were working with the human city-states of Albuquerque and Billings to contain the situation. After listening to speculation on the death toll for twenty minutes, Dean turned off the radio and decided to join his son.

Dylaniel sat on the ground watching the night sky. Every once in awhile his eyes would follow some movement in the stars that Dean didn’t recognize. As the night grew later, Dylaniel began shivering slightly. Rather than telling him to go warm up in the car, Dean wrapped a blanket around his son and sat with him until the boy fell asleep. Then Dean delicately carried Dylaniel to the car, laid him down in the back seat, and joined Cas who was sitting on the hood.

"We need to find a better long-term solution than sleeping in a car," whispered Cas.

Dean sighed at the feeble expression of optimism. "Do you really think we stand a chance at having a long-term?"

Cas took Dean's hand in his own. "Always."

"I don’t know how the world can keep going...." Dean couldn't speak for a few seconds because of the tightness in his throat. "Sammy's gone."

Cas wrapped his arm around Dean, who embraced him back. A few tears fell from Dean's eyes. Cas wiped the tears away with his thumbs while caressing Dean’s cheek. They kissed, slowly at first, but then more desperately. Dean's hand slid down Cas's chest and stomach. He started unbuttoning Cas's pants, stopped and bit his lip in mild frustration.

After quickly looking around at their surroundings, Dean took Cas's hand. They climbed off the car as carefully as they could, so as not to wake their son, then they went to a large nearby tree. They stood just far enough around the tree so that Cas could see the car, but their bodies were obscured.

Dean started undoing Cas's pants, then dropped to his knees in the darkness. He’d spent months feeling inadequate and helpless, consumed by despair. He wanted to feel something else—anything else. Even if it was fleeting, in just this one thing, he wanted to feel like he was capable. He wanted to give Cas the best head of his life because it might be the last chance they'd ever get. Cas managed to keep himself from moaning, but he gripped the tree so hard that he broke off large parts of bark.
Dean stopped before Cas could finish. That might be their last intimate moment, he was sure as hell getting his. He stood up and started taking off his own pants. Dean barely got his belt around his thighs before Cas began prepping him.

When Cas finally did press into him, Dean had to bite his lip so he wouldn't cry out. He wanted to pin Cas to the ground, but then they wouldn't be able to see the car, so they kept their standing position by the tree. He stood, hands and chest against the tree, Cas's hands on his hips. With each thrust, he pushed back making it all the more powerful.

His fears and sadness faded to the background as he chased his high. He was with the angel who fell for him in every sense of the word. Someone who loved him, with whom he shared a life, a family, a death sentence, and a seat at the end of the world. He was with the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, however short that might be.

Dean lost his sense of time, direction, context, but somehow he knew they had to be quiet. At one point Cas started to groan, so Dean turned his upper body to face him. Dean grabbed Cas's hair and pulled him hard into a kiss. Cas enthusiastically pounded Dean into the side of the tree. Grinding against the tree produced stinging cool sensation on Dean's chest, which triggered some primal urge to bite Cas's lip so hard that they could taste blood. With a few more frantic thrusts, Dean muffled his own moans as he came. Cas finished with him, breathing heavily on the back of Dean's neck.

Cas healed his bleeding lip, then Dean's scratched-up chest and shirt before they hastily got their pants back on and returned to the car. Everything was falling apart, but that'd still been the best sex they'd had in almost a year. Thoroughly confused, Dean fell asleep on the hood of the car holding Cas in his arms.

Cas was contemplating the stars when he heard a prayer directed at him. He hesitated at first, fearful that opening himself up to a prayer might somehow give away their location. Since going off the grid he'd avoided tuning in to pirate radio for that same reason, but a personal prayer wasn't necessarily a two-way street. As soon as he let it in he was glad he did. The prayer was from Kaylee.

"Castiel, please hear this prayer. Lucifer is looking for you. He's going to try using divination magic. Mom says that you've got to get some blood wards up ASAP. Try to have Dyl pray to Gabe or Anael. We're putting together cloaking spells right now. We'll come help you. He's not good with magic. We're trying to figure out how to get him."

Cas woke up Dean and Dylaniel, then teleported them to Yibin, China. They decided to take cover inside an abandoned factory, where they could create multiple barriers of warding. Cas warded the exterior wall of the building while Dean worked on an interior set of walls. Inside that they found a storeroom that would provide another set of walls to ward. While his parents worked on warding the storeroom, Dylaniel sat inside and prayed to Gabriel and Anael. When the wards were up, Dean and Cas went into the storeroom to wait with their son.

They only had to wait a few minutes before Dylaniel's eyes flashed blue. The subtle fear on the boy's face left no doubt who had arrived first. Cas tried to teleport them away, but he could feel himself struggling against a much greater power. He looked at Dean with an expression of anguish.

For a moment Dean didn't understand what was happening, then his eyes widened. Cas ran out the storeroom door. Dean tried to stop him, but his husband telekinetically closed and sealed the metal door behind him.
"Cas, don't do it! Just go!" Dean yelled through the door. He could hear several heavy objects being stacked in front of the door. He leaned against the door for a moment to try regaining his composure, then he sat down on the floor next to his son.

Dylaniel climbed onto his dad's lap and hugged him. Dean held him tightly while trying not to cry.

"Castiel." Lucifer looked his brother over while entering the factory floor, then shook his head in disappointment. "You aren't just fallen; you're lost."

Cas stood in front of the barricaded storeroom door, angel blade drawn. "You don't deserve to pass judgment on me."

"Really? Without me, would you even know the word 'freedom'? You think that you've blazed the path of the righteous, but you've only failed to understand history."

"I understand that your rebellion failed."

"Did it?" Lucifer smiled. "Because I think that right now I am the one with the most power."

Lucifer stepped toward the door, but Cas stood his ground. The archangel hurled Cas across the room, then continued moving for the storeroom door. Cas got to his feet and charged Lucifer, who dodged the attack. With a quick swing, Lucifer telekinetically slammed Cas into the concrete floor, breaking a dozen bones. Cas could barely resist when Lucifer grabbed his angel blade and tossed it to the side.

"Just stay down," Lucifer ordered as he looked at the broken, lesser angel. "As much as you deserve to die for your crimes, you might serve some function. I could be convinced to spare your life."

"I won't let you hurt my family."

"I am your family. Those other things are your plight. That thing poisoned you and you're too blind to see it." Lucifer grabbed Cas's left hand and pulled off the gold wedding band. "Do you really think so little of yourself that you bind yourself to some animal?"

"The only one I think little of is you," Cas snarled.

Lucifer kicked Cas in the chest, sending him rolling across the floor. Cas settled on his back. Lucifer used telekinesis to rip open the angel's dress shirt, then stepped on his chest to hold him in place. He held the wedding ring above Cas's heart, then he began heating the metal.

"This obsession you have with Michael's vessels, it will only hurt you in the end." A few drops of molten gold landed on Cas's chest, burning the flesh. "Their only purpose is to give us form. They're vehicles. They weren't made for personal investment. They'll wither and die—the older one already is. The half-breed, he won't even survive long enough to grow old."

"You talk about freedom." Cas spoke through tears and bloody coughs. "Well, I love them. I accept that they're mortals. What about my freedom? What about my choice?"

"Your choice, it's soiled our family." Lucifer pressed on Cas's chest, cracking several ribs. "Your perversion—"

"Leave him alone," Gabriel said as he walked into the room, blade drawn.
On his belt hung a small bag that Sam would've noted as being a possible spell component.
Lucifer understood that Gabriel was going to try something deceptive or cute—they would almost certainly fight. The thought made Lucifer's mood darken.

"Gabriel, I understand you're fucking a false idol." Lucifer dropped the remained of the melted wedding ring onto Cas, then turned his attention to Gabriel. He tilted his head from side-to-side uncertainly. "You always did have your unusual hobbies."

"Luci, you've got to stop." Gabriel's voice was soft, but he kept his angel blade raised. "I don't want to fight you."

"Then don't," Lucifer pleaded with his brother. "You were always my favorite. I'm not unreasonable. We could make this right. With the two of us united, we could make our family whole again."

"If you want to make things right between us, you have to walk away, right now. You have your vessel. Just leave them alone. Walk away."

"I can't do that." Lucifer pointed toward the storeroom. "They are the Sword Of Heaven—"

"If you destroy their souls, Michael will just make another vessel."

"I won't leave any humans for him to possess." Lucifer spoke with a certainty that drew the line in the sand.

"I can't let you do that," Gabriel replied sadly.

Lucifer let loose a circular blast of the First Light at around waist height. The ring of light dissolved the illusion of Gabriel, which he had been talking to. When the light struck the real Gabriel, who had been standing to his left, it ignited the small bag on Gabriel's belt.

Gabriel put out the flame, then clutched the bag. He began reciting an incantation, but Lucifer charged him, forcing him to divide his attention. Lucifer swung his blade at Gabriel, who parried while holding the bag out of range of the attack. With a quick sweeping motion, Lucifer telekinetically knocked the legs out from under him, but the trickster disappeared before he hit the ground.

"I know you're here still," Lucifer goaded as he locked the exits.

Thanks to the warding on the building, he'd had to walk inside and he was slightly more powerful than Gabriel. Furthermore, he was actively trying to block others from teleporting. Gabriel probably couldn't teleport within 200 feet of the building and lesser angels would find it a no-fly zone for half a mile. Gabriel had merely hidden himself again.

In a way it wasn't so bad. If Gabriel wanted to stay hidden, he couldn't continue reciting the spell. It didn't seem likely that Gabriel would try to ambush him—his little brother always hesitated to take those decisive steps... unless provoked.

Lucifer approached the crumpled and bleeding Cas with his blade in hand. He held Cas firmly in place with telekinesis and could feel Gabriel trying to push the lesser angel out of the way.
Raising his blade, he heard the faint movement of clothing behind him. Swinging down, Lucifer quickly tucked his blade under his left arm and behind him, stabbing upward into Gabriel's chest.

Gabriel flickered into view and Lucifer caught him before he could hit the ground. Gabriel's eyes looked from his brother to the barricaded door. His lips moved, trying to continue the spell, but
only light came out. Lucifer gently laid his brother's body on the floor, then turned to the
storeroom door.

Dean could hear talking outside the storeroom, but he couldn't make out the words. His heart sank
when he heard the sound of blades colliding, then several crashes. He led Dylaniel to a far corner
that was mostly obscured by a large metal rack, then he drew his angel blade.

"Dylan, whatever happens I want you to stay here and don't make a sound," he instructed and
kissed his son's forehead.

Dean hurried back to the center of the room. He could hear the barricade that Cas had created
sliding away from the door. The handle jiggled, then stopped. For a moment he wondered if the
person on the other side had given up, but he was wrong. The steel hinges creaked as the door
was ripped from the wall.

When the dust from the shattered door frame and plaster cleared Lucifer walked into the
storeroom. His eyes looked Dean over with a casual interest, but his lips curled down in loathing.
He wasn't armed, though Dean understood that Lucifer didn't need a weapon to be dangerous.

"I'll kill you," Dean warned. He'd meant to make it a threat, but he realized that it also was an
attempt at self-encouragement.

"I guess we'll find out." Lucifer was seething with a personal anger that Dean didn't understand.

He braced himself for some catastrophic use of powers, to have his neck snapped with telekinesis
or to be incinerated with the First Light. But it didn't come. Lucifer started moving toward him. He
had a startling thought that the archangel wanted to actually fight him.

He could take Sam without his powers in a fight, hands down. His little brother was almost two
decades out of practice. Lucifer was an entirely different variable. He'd been imprisoned for
millennia, which probably left him rusty too, though there was no telling how much of that was
made up for with angelic skill and strength. Also, that was assuming it would stay a powers-free
fight. Lucifer was unarmed, after all.

Dean feigned an attack, then quickly switched to a real strike from a low angle to try hitting the
angel's temporarily-exposed abdomen. It probably would've connected if he'd been fighting
anyone else, but Lucifer telekinetically stopped the blade mid-stab. With a gesture, Dean's fingers
were pried back from the blade's handle, then it was knocked to the side, discarded. So, it was
going to be a fistfight.

Lucifer kicked Dean in the chest, breaking several ribs and slamming him into the wall. He
cradled his torso for a moment while looking up at Lucifer. It was taking all his willpower to not
look to his left to check on Dylaniel, but he didn't want to bring any attention to him. Dean dodged
a punch, which dented the sheet metal wall behind him, then dove forward.

He collided with Lucifer's chest, knocking him back several feet. The archangel brought his elbow
down on the middle of his back. Stabbing pain spread down his lower back, into his legs, and he
fell to his knees. Before he could experiment with holding himself upright, Lucifer kneed him in the
chest, shattering his left clavicle. Lucifer stood over Dean's trembling body and raised his hand to
make a final blow.

Dylaniel ran out of the corner, picked up the angel blade, then lunged at Lucifer. Lucifer barely
dodged the surprise attack, suffering a cut on his forearm. He grabbed the boy by his left wrist and
held him up. The boy dangled, but managed to take another swing with the blade. Lucifer grabbed
the sharp edge of the blade with his left hand, then began heating it. Dyaniel held onto the
weapon until it started burning his skin, then reluctantly released it.

"So... this is the filth that's worth the life of an archangel?" Lucifer asked as he looked Dyaniel
over.

"I swear to God, if you—" Dean started to hiss.

"Swear all you like. God isn't listening." Lucifer's free hand gripped Dyaniel's neck, forcibly
turning the boy's head to inspect it.

Dean was shaking, waiting to hear a snap, but Lucifer released the neck.

"But what were you going to threaten?" Lucifer asked. "To kill me? We all saw how that turned
out. Anyway, that would be killing your brother. He's still in here you know, fighting away,
screaming at me to stop—because he knows. He knows what I'm going to do to you, your
accomplice, and your son."

Lucifer squeezed Dyaniel's wrist, producing three loud cracks. The boy cringed, but didn't cry
out. Lucifer examined his stoic reaction before turning his attention back to Dean and commenting,
"He's such a pathetic little thing."

Dyaniel wriggled despite the pain in his left wrist. His right hand slipped into his pants pocket,
through a hidden fold. In single fluid motion, he withdrew the flat knife that he wore strapped to
his thigh and swung the blade at Lucifer. The blade pierced Lucifer's flesh between two ribs near
the heart, but stopped while only an inch deep. The metal shattered in Dyaniel's hand.

Lucifer gripped the boy's right shoulder, breaking several more bones, then threw him against the
wall. His head impacted the concrete floor with an alarming thwack when he hit the ground. Dean
dragged himself to Dyaniel, while Lucifer slowly walked toward them.

"It's okay. You're fine," Dean whispered through his tears, while trying to shield his son.
"Daddy's here."

Lucifer staggered, then touched his temple. His whole body convulsed. The lights behind him
exploded and one of the metal racks flew across the room. The archangel fell to his knees while
clutching his head. He screamed in something that sounded like a mixture of Enochian and
Abyssal before collapsing forward onto the ground. After a few seconds, Sam looked up at Dean
in horror, then vanished.
"Possessed?" Dean echoed in confusion. "By Lucifer?"

They had mentioned that Sam and Kaylee were vessels for Lucifer, but it hadn't occurred to him that something may have come of it. It was Lucifer, after all. He knew almost nothing about that angel stuff and even he thought that sounded like a bad idea.

"Yeah. It happened about eleven years ago," Tom explained. "They’ve both been more or less out of commission since."

"How the fuck does that even happen?"

That was the kind of thing he was in the future to learn how to prevent. Maybe he couldn’t have foreseen such an extreme scenario when he’d left 2009, but that certainly fell within the realm of horrible outcomes. In this timeline, they’d managed to escape their confinement in the little New Orleans apartment at the cost of Sam’s professional life. Even that had seemed bad, but now… now he knew that another unacceptable sacrifice had been made, again by Sam.

He couldn’t understand how they’d ended up there. Sacrificing himself seemed like a classic Sam move, but he couldn't begin to imagine how the other Dean could let his little brother do that to himself. His entire life had been dedicated to protecting Sammy and he’d ended up failing spectacularly. Proximate guilt began to flicker in the back of Dean's mind.

"Luci was locked up in his cage until I killed Lilith." Kaylee spoke with a more solemn tone than he was used to hearing from her. "The rumor was that if either Lilith or another hot-shit demon kill each other, Lucifer would go free. Everybody was thinking Dad was the other demon—"

"You mean that Lucian guy?" Dean recalled that Crossroads archdemon mentioning it back at Bobby’s.

"Name's right, but the gender is wrong," Kaylee corrected. "I killed Lilith and accidentally freed Lucifer."

"Sam wasn't him? You're Lucian?"

Kaylee shrugged in response to his question.

In some ways it was reassuring that Sam probably wasn't Lucian. They'd said that Sam had ruled Hell and had powers, but it was nice to think that maybe he wasn't some foretold demonic second-coming. He had to admit that the powers were still an issue since his Sam already had them, but his Sam didn't necessarily have to get caught up with Hell, either as an archdemon, king, or some other prophesied entity.

At the same time though, it was unsettling to think that Kaylee was some next generation demon—
though he completely believed it after seeing her with horns and fangs. He'd been scared about that sort of thing when he first found out that Sam and Ruby were expecting a kid, but when his human-looking niece was born some of his concerns had been quelled. Meeting this Kaylee had also given him some perspective on the matter, yet he couldn't help wondering what implications of her being Lucian would still remain in his timeline even if he avoided the whole Sam-King-of-Hell thing.

"You shouldn't assume that Dad wouldn't have freed Lucifer if he'd been the one to kill Lilith," interjected Tom. "That Lucian prophecy also fits him depending on how you read it."

Kaylee made a disconcerting noise of acknowledgement. So much for having that issue cleared up. It was like he couldn't get a straight answer out of that place.

"Anyway," Kaylee continued her explanation, "Luci got out and was trying to cause trouble, but he didn't have a true vessel."

"Angels can potentially possess humans who don't carry their grace, but then there's an incompatibility that results in harm to both angel and vessel," Dylaniel added as a reminder for Dean's benefit. "More powerful angels require more powerful vessels to contain them."

"Yeah, without one of us, Luci was burning through a vessel a day at best," Kaylee said. "So he wasn't as whole, but we could never really nail him down as a target because half the time he didn't have a body and half the time he could've been anywhere in nearly anyone."

"Dad said yes with the idea being that once he was in a long-term body, we could get Lucifer into a trap that would at least hold him," Tom summed up.

"A trap?"

Dean was picturing his brother trapped in a cage with the Devil, but he realized that wasn't the whole story. Sam kind of was the Devil—Lucifer, physically at least. That's how it worked with angels based on what he'd seen. It was gonna be like Ruby with her Jane Doe or Cas with whoever-the-fuck he was wearing. Even Salviel's vessel Paloma hadn't interacted with him at all.

"Think of it as a prison cell."

"He's been in a cell with Lucifer for eleven years." Dean experimented with the statement. It didn’t make it any easier to accept.

"All things considered, it's not the scenario he hates most," Kaylee said as an attempt at reassurance, but Dean didn't understand. It was hard to imagine anything worse than being trapped in a cell with Lucifer making you a meat puppet.

"What do you mean?"

"After he said yes, it took him about two days to take control enough to get them into the trap."

For whatever reason, Kaylee reflexively glanced at Dylaniel while she spoke. “During those two days he was sitting shotgun to a whole lot of violence."

Dean thought back to his time in Hell, being coerced into hurting others. It was its own form of torture, but for Sam it'd be so much worse. Sam was gentler—his Sam was gentler... maybe. His brother had changed so much back in his own time. He had no idea what to expect from this Sam.

Kaylee, Tom, and Dylaniel led Dean to the heavy basement door. It was the one that he'd seen
Kaylee locking up before Tom and Dylaniel had arrived. She withdrew the key from her jacket pocket and began opening the door. Dean internally sighed with relief that he hadn't attempted lift the key off her earlier.

"You keep Sam with your weapons?" Dean asked, a little confused.

"Lucifer is a weapon," Dylaniel answered coldly.

They descended a flight of stairs to a hallway with three small rooms coming off of it. At the far end of the hall there was another locked door. The first two rooms off the hall were storage, but the third looked more like a guard station.

There were four monitors showing different angles of a large, windowless room. Two-thirds of the basement had been separated from the remaining third and staircase out by two sets of bars and an incredibly complicated series of wards.

Inside the cell were several normal pieces of furniture including a single bed, desk, and comfortable chair. The place looked a little disorganized, but not dirty. A few books were strewn about on the desk and floor. Loose papers formed piles that threatened to fall over at a strong breeze. A clock on the desk had been carefully dismantled and apparently salvaged for parts.

In the back left corner was a 5x8' planter box, which contained two rose bushes and four flowering bushes that Dean didn't recognize. Dozens of brilliant flowers were in bloom in that strangely gloomy place.

"What's with the plants?" Dean asked, pointing to one of the monitors.

"Lucifer likes plants. Giving him the bushes helps reduce the drama," Tom explained. "The two rose bushes are Dad's pick and the four others are imports of Luci's choice."

"It also gives us a threat to hold over him if we need to," added Kaylee.

"Wait, threatening to take away his toy is really an effective approach against the Devil?" Dean raised an eyebrow at the thought.

"He was trapped in his own isolated Hell for an unfathomable amount of time and after getting out he gets locked up in a little cell for over a decade now. He's still got a strong enough will that it doesn't always work, but yeah, sometimes his toys make a little difference."

"Also, they're a better distraction than the alternative," Tom commented flatly.

Dean didn't like the sound of that. "Alternative?"

"They've been able to tolerate each other okay for the last few years, but for years the two of them would fight constantly." Kaylee's voice wavered slightly at what was undoubtedly bad memories. "Often enough, Luci would work over Dad for entertainment."

"They share the same body, how could he work over Sam?"

"Luci won't let him die from any injuries, but a vessel can take a lot of damage before it's lethal—especially an archangel's vessel."

"He's been burned, stabbed, bled, partially fla—" Dylaniel began explaining, but Dean raised his hand to interrupt him.
"You can stop. I get the picture."

The Sam in the cell looked just like his brother—maybe a few years older, but nowhere near his mid-fifties. The unexpectedly strong physical resemblance was startling, but so was his behavior. Sam was just lying on the bed reading a somewhat thick hardback book, just like his Sam might do to pass the time. Dean watched Kaylee squint and lean in close to one of the screen for a second, then check a sheet of paper next to the monitor bank.

"It looks like he's reading Modern Theories of Sin," Kaylee guessed.

"That could be either one of them," said Tom. "I'm not placing a bet."

"What?" Dean asked.

"They trade off controlling the body," Tom explained. "Sometimes you can tell which one of them is dominant by seeing what he's doing, but no such luck."

"I don't know what I was expecting... something more dramatic or unusual," Dean confessed.

"Don't let appearances fool you. It's pretty fucking unusual." Kaylee tapped on the screen emphatically. "There are two people in there."

"Can I talk to him?"

At first no one even acknowledged Dean's question, but Tom eventually looked at him with a grim expression and said, "You don't want to go talk to him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Luci doesn't like most people," Kaylee elaborated. "Uncle Dean hasn't been down since the first year. Tommy and Dyl can't go down without getting harassed either."

"How often do you two go down?" Dean asked Tom and Dylaniel.

"I went down once when I was eleven," Dylaniel replied with relative indifference.

Tom didn't answer, but instead shot Dean a bleak sideways glance. Their reactions weren't exactly what he'd been hoping for, but he wasn't dissuaded.

"Please, I need to see Sam," Dean pleaded with them. "This place is so confusing. I know he's not all there or whatever, but I need something. He's the only thing I have that's even remotely familiar."

"It's a bad idea." He could hear the apology in Kaylee's voice. "He's not your brother."

"But he's your dad," he countered, causing Kaylee and Tom to exchange an uncertain look. "Part of him is your dad. There's some overlap there. Please. I just want to talk to him for a minute."

"Are you really ready to find out how thick your skin is?" Tom asked. "Because Lucifer doesn't play around."

"My dad used to chew me out a lot. I swear I can take it," Dean assured him.

Tom stared at Dean with a profound sympathy that took Dean slightly aback. "That kind of background might not work in your favor as much as you'd think."
The brother and sister looked at each other, then at Dyaniel. The nephilim gave a small shrug, but
didn't say anything. Tom sighed in resignation and nodded. Dean stared at Kaylee, watching with
bated breath. She straightened up, adopting a more commanding presence, before starting her
protocol explanation.

"I don't care if it seems like Dad; Luci is going to want to mess with you as much as possible," she
warned him. "Don't take anything he's saying to heart, unless we tell you to. We can spot the
difference between them, but you might not be able to.

"Don't put any part of your body through the bars. Each set of bars acts as a buffer. He can't get
past both, but if your arm is in the middle and he reaches into the middle he might be able to do
something. I'm not sure what, beyond hurting your arm, but it's best not to find out what novel new
solutions he's come up with.

"And this probably goes without saying: don't touch the gate. His biggest priority is getting out.
He's tried nearly everything to break the cage and he can be pretty creative."

"How does he even get that stuff, like the books and furniture, if you can't open the cage?"

"We open it sometimes, but only one set of bars at a time. The wards between the bars knock
angels on their ass, so Dad can pretty easily stop him if he tries something," Kaylee explained.
"We also have at least one person on duty to just watch him for any tricks."

"And we only send in Kaylee or Mom in to him," Tom added. "Lucifer wouldn't risk hurting either
of them."

Dean's brow furrowed. "Lucifer's got a soft spot?"

"More like he hasn't figured out a good risk-benefit weighted plan for using one of us as a hostage
or whatever," Kaylee said with a small eyeroll. "Dad would fight him if he really tried anything,
and he doesn't want to burn those few bridges. He does like me. That's probably just because I'm
his vessel—angels tend to be protective of their vessels."

"Not all of them," Dyaniel corrected.

Kaylee and Dean descended the stairs into the second level of the basement. The air temperature
dropped noticeably between the top and the bottom of the staircase. Dean couldn't tell if he was
shaking from the chill or nerves. Either way he felt incredibly self-conscious.

"Hello, Kaylee." Sam or Lucifer—Dean couldn't tell which one was in control—put down the
book, then sat up on the bed. When he spotted Dean, he smiled and stood up. "Oh my, this is a
treat. How long has it been since—but you're not from here…. This really is a treat."

He looked Dean over thoughtfully. It was eerie seeing Sam move, but the mannerisms were all
wrong somehow. A thin smile lingered on his lips in an almost menacing way. Dean worried that
his skin had lost a little color at the realization that it was Lucifer talking…. It probably didn't
matter if he'd turned pale. It felt like Lucifer was looking through any semblance of composure he
was trying to muster.

Kaylee seemed calm as ever. "I want to talk to my dad."

"As much as I'd like to do that for you, my dear, I really would like to have a little chat with Dean
—" Lucifer abruptly glanced to a place several feet to his left. There was nothing there, but his
attention was riveted. He began carrying on one side of a conversation with the empty space. "No.
This is a rare opportunity and I'm not passing it up…. Let's not turn this into a fight…. You know exactly what…. Fifteen minutes for ten hours…. Ten minutes for eight hours…. Fine, but I will speak first.” Lucifer looked back at Kaylee and Dean. "Sam will have control in ten minutes, but in the meantime I get that chat with Dean.”

Dean was dumbstruck by the spectacle. His brother had been talking to himself—or Lucifer had been talking to Sam, but Sam wasn't there exactly. To an outside observer it looked like Sam had schizophrenia and that impression was hard to fight. If Dean hadn't seen Sam possessed by Meg a few years back, he might've had an even harder time accepting the situation. That was Lucifer in there, the Lucifer... and the archangel wanted to talk with him.

"I don't have anything to say to some angel fuckwad like you." Dean tried to put on a cool exterior, but he suspected that he wasn't fooling the angel for a second.

"Really? Because I have so much to say to you." Lucifer gripped the iron bars and leaned his forehead against them. He glared at Dean with predatory amusement.

"Luci, don't be a douche," Kaylee requested, but Lucifer didn't react to her in the slightest.

"Dean, are you too young and sensitive for this place? You seem young. It's the way you look at me. You've never met me before." Lucifer chewed his lip briefly. "You barely know I'm real, don't you? But you must know an angel if you're here…. You're from, what, 2009 or 2010?"

Kaylee and Dean looked at each other, both a little surprised by the accuracy of the guess. Neither of them answered, but Lucifer's grin broadened knowingly. This was a game to the archangel, probably the first one he'd played in a long time. The idea made Dean want to leave out of spite, but he stood his ground. Enthused by his success, Lucifer continued to probe.

"Did Castiel send you here? They have told you about Castiel, right? My brother that you defile. I thought that serving humans was offensive, but loving them is just pathetic.” Lucifer's mouth curled in a wicked grin. “They told you, about how he fucks you.”

Dean knew that he was trying to upset him, but it didn’t make the experience any less uncomfortable. Not only was the subject unpleasant, but it was Sam's face and voice even if the sentiment wasn't his.

"It scares you, doesn't it?” Lucifer continued. “Knowing what you'll become. What did your dad call it—"

"Stop it," Dean said, despite trying not to react.

He could feel how out of his depth he was. It was like Lucifer knew every single button to push—of course he did. Sam knew him better than anyone. Part of him wanted to leave, to get away from this horrible interaction, but if he could tolerate it a little longer he'd be able to see the real Sam.

"Why should I stop? Would me being quiet really change anything? I mean, take your brother for example. What could I say here and now that will prevent him from saying yes to me eventually? This Sam already knew full well what I was capable of when he said yes. So, why should I care if you go home and tell your brother that I hurt your feelings? Is that really what will tip the scales in his mind? Because I think that your feelings will be insignificant compared to the ruin I will bring down upon your world." His tone turned venomous and he paused for a moment to let his prediction sink in. "Did they tell you the things I've done? The things I've made Sam do? I am the First Light. It takes so little effort to melt the flesh from bone. The two of us, we've killed tens of millions in minutes, and you think that your tears would even register compared to the blood that
I’ve put on his hands?"

Dean felt faint at the thought of what Sam had been forced to participate in. He knew there had been violence, but he hadn’t considered the magnitude of what had happened. There had been two days of mass murder—millions dead. He couldn’t imagine a million lives, let alone tens of millions, maybe hundreds of millions, dead because of one person—the person he was talking to, the person with his brother’s gentle face. Lucifer smiled, making Dean take half a step back.

"If you think I'm bad, wait until you get to know Michael. He'll get inside you eventually and he will punish you in ways you can't even imagine. It's not going to be like this, what Sam and I have." Lucifer walked over to one of the rose bushes and cupped a dark red rose in his hand. He caresses the petals with his thumb, then the flower burst into flames. Clenching his fist around the fire, ash fell to the floor. "Yes, I had to teach him a lesson for bringing me here, to this cell, but the truth is that I could never really hurt him—not the way Michael wants to hurt you. Just ask the other you. He knows. I'm sure he's felt it, the burning hatred closing in on him. You didn't like your time in Hell; well Heaven is going to be a thousand times worse."

"This isn't gonna happen," Dean responded weakly. He was feeling too mortified from the entire experience to speak with significant conviction.

"Why? Because you're going to go back to your time and stop it? You're going to stop me?" Lucifer's eyes widened subtly at a thought.

The dismantled clock on the desk flew across the cell and slammed into the concrete wall, shattering. Lucifer didn't even look at it, he was too busy looking at Dean.

"I'll find a way. You're not doing this again," Dean said.

The desk began shaking, knocking over a stack of papers. Kaylee side-stepped closer to Dean, but didn't take her eyes off Lucifer.

"You know, I think I might have to agree with you." Lucifer smiled at Dean, then strolled back toward him. "Doing all this again, it's such a waste. Decades lost, seven billion dead, the world a poisoned and charred corpse…. I think I could do it better the second time around. I'd wager that I could kill all eight billion before anyone could even drop the first nuke on this masterpiece."

"What?" Dean asked. He was completely thrown by the turn.

"This world, as it is, it's so pathetic that incineration might be considered mercy. It's barely even worth fighting over at this point." The corner of Lucifer's lip curled up and his eyes narrowed. "But your world…. It's probably still in fairly good condition. And, if I'm not mistaken, their only Sword of Heaven is here."

Dean shivered. It didn't make sense for him to be scared. Lucifer was imprisoned. He couldn't tell if the look of unease on Kaylee's face was comforting or disconcerting.

"So what do you think? I know you would stand against—well, try to stand against me, but would you bet against me?" Lucifer asked as the desk jerked a few inches.

Kaylee tapped on his arm. For some reason she was watching the desk.

"You're insane," Dean said.

"Actually, I'm forward-thinking," countered Lucifer. "Clinically speaking, Sam's the one that's insane."
Suddenly, the desk lurched several feet toward Lucifer. He swiped his hand at it, instantly catching it on fire. The archangel opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak he was knocked back and hit the concrete wall with a loud crack. He fell to the ground limply and didn’t move for several seconds. Dean took a step forward, but Kaylee grabbed his arm and shook her head.

"It’s close enough—we'll fight about it later," Sam said as he clutched his head. His eyes were clenched and he was trembling. “I swear I’ll start a fucking loop."

“Dad, you’re fine.” Kaylee spoke in a soft reassuring voice as she moved forward to the bars. “We can hear you.”

Sam opened his eyes, then cautiously stood up. His fingertips had blood on them, probably from an injury sustained when his head hit the wall. He looked at Kaylee with exhausted admiration, but when he looked to Dean his worn face became even more distressed.

“You shouldn’t have come.” When Sam spoke he looked defeated and gaunt, whereas moments ago Lucifer wore the exact same body with a terrifying lightheartedness.

"I heard what happened. I wanted to see you... so that I'd know." Dean tried to explain, though he wasn’t sure that he’d done the right thing. He’d managed to endure interacting with Lucifer in order to see Sam. Now that he truly saw him, he wasn’t sure which part was more painful.

“You needed to know,” Sam parroted as he gingerly sat down on the edge of his bed. “Now that you know, do you feel any more ready?”

“No,” Dean admitted. His voice faltered. It was taking all his willpower to not tear up. He might have been talking to Sam, but he knew that Lucifer was watching.

"You're going to try to stop this....” Sam stared at the floor in silence for a moment. “He said it wouldn't work, and he believes that.”

“Do you believe that?” Dean asked, unsure what the answer ‘yes’ would do to him.

“I think....” Sam looked around his cell, then at his bloody hands. In a flash, his hand were engulfed in flame, but when the flame went out the blood was gone. He looked up at Dean, studying him thoughtfully for a long while. “I think that there’s always reason to hope. I wouldn’t be in here if I was a pessimist.”

“Right,” Dean exhaled the word in a pained, humorless laugh. He nodded and closed his eyes, trying to collect himself.

"You’ll do better than us. That’s guaranteed,” Sam suggested, but it wasn’t clear that that meant the outcome would be good. “Keep me and Kaylee away from Lilith. Kill her as fast as you can. Don't let this happen.”

"We'll find a way to stop it." Dean didn’t have the confidence to back up his words. “I’m sorry I couldn’t——”

“Don’t.” Sam cut him off. “Don’t start carrying regrets that aren’t even yours.... There are so many regrets in this world. They’ll drown you if you start letting them in.”

“Do you....” Dean hesitated. “Do you regret saying yes?”

"Even with all this.” Sam gestured at the cell around him, then shook his head. “Aside from those
first two days, my biggest regret from saying yes is not being able to visit my son's grave."

There was a long, painful silence after Sam mentioned Alex. Dean couldn't begin to imagine how to respond to that kind of confession. He didn't know what it was like to have a child, let alone to lose them and to not even be able to fully mourn them. The closest thing he had was his brother and he'd been able to escape that loss. When Sam asked him to give him some time alone with Kaylee, Dean quietly nodded and went back up the stairs to wait with Tom and Dylaniel.

Sam smiled at his daughter. "Hey, Starlight."

"Heya, Dad. Sorry about bringing him down and winding up Luci."

"It's okay. We'll have another fight or two and then settle back into the routine." Sam could feel Lucifer's anger that he hadn't had more time with Dean, but while Kaylee was still there neither of them would waste precious time fighting. They had all eternity to hurt each other. "How is everyone?"

"Mom should be around in a little bit. She's been running errands downstairs, but she's supposed to get back tonight." Kaylee gave him the good news of another impending visitor. "I feel like she'll probably want to find out what's up with this whole situation before she comes down though."

"That makes sense. Are your uncles around?"

"Not yet. It's ceasefire, so they're on a conversion mission up top."

Sam nodded in acknowledgement before he asked, "How's Tom?" His eyes flicked hopefully to the security cameras outside his cell, but he had no way of knowing for sure if his son was watching. His posture unconsciously turned in slightly.

"He's been good. The coven's trying to get him to come back full-time, but I think he likes being in the field too much. Mom tried to convince him to go back too, but not much. She even suggested he try working with the Maji, spending a little time downstairs." Kaylee leaned against the bars, somewhat brought down by the minor family drama. Compared to everything else it wasn't important, but it was still on her mind. "She's just trying to keep him safe, or at least out of combat. I think she forgets he's human sometimes."

"He's tough. With a little exposure, Hell might not be a problem for him. But I definitely don't blame him for wanting to be in the fight." Sam looked away from the cameras and Kaylee's eyes. "Is Dylan okay?"

"I think he's a bit spooked by the whole double-dad thing, but he's trying to not let it show." She exhaled slowly as she shook her head. "I swear he's going to break some glass if he doesn't relax soon."

"How're you?"

"I'm fine," she lied.

"I'm serious. Things are normally stressful and with the drop-in—talk to me. How are you?" he asked in as comforting a voice as he could manage under the strange circumstances.

"It's weird explaining everything," she admitted. "At first it was kind of funny. You should have seen his face when he figured out who I was, but... it's strange to realize just how far off our lives are from where things were 30 years ago. It made me feel a little old—you know, he's only a year
"Oh! That reminds me; I made something for you," Sam told her. "I'm pretty sure it's the week of your birthday."

She smiled at him for remembering despite everything he was going through. "It was a few days ago."

"When I took the metal out of the clock I'd forgotten how bad my sense of time is nowadays," he said as he reached behind his bed to pull out a small ball of paper. He knelt down and rolled it along the floor through both sets of bars. Kaylee picked up the bundle and peeled it open. Inside was an iron pendant roughly sculpted into the shape of a rose with slender wings and horns.

"Happy birthday."

Their visit had upset the equilibrium between Sam and Lucifer. The pair had managed to keep some level of composure while Kaylee was in the room, but the mood turned as soon as she returned upstairs. Dean watched the monitor bank as Sam yelled at thin air. A small table flew across the cell and broke against the bars. Books skittered across the floor before catching fire. After a few minutes, Sam fell to the ground and started convulsing. Dean looked at the others, frantic to do something, but none of them were particularly worried looking.

"That's fairly normal," Tom tried to reassure Dean. Despite the normalcy of the sight, Tom did look away from the screens with a pained expression.

"You guys aren't going to do anything?" Dean asked.

"There isn't anything we can do," Kaylee explained. "Short of dying, he can't be hurt in a way that Luci can't heal. They're just sort of at each other's mercy and sometimes it ends up in a fit."

"So you just leave him there like that, alone?" Dean raised his voice in concern and mild outrage. He couldn't believe that they'd just abandon Sam to that fate.

"Listen, you haven't been here ten days, so I don't expect you to be able to imagine ten fucking years. We can't save him or protect him—Tommy and Dyl can't even keep him company." Kaylee had started to raise her voice too, but she took a calming breath before continuing. "If you go back down there it'll just rile them up even more. The best thing we can do for him is to let them cool down and to make sure we keep ourselves in decent shape. At this point, more than anything he doesn't want to be a burden."

The way they talked about Sam, it reminded him of someone who was terminally ill. But Sam wasn't dying. He'd never die. Sam was suffering every day and they couldn't do anything about it. It had been that way for a decade. He wanted to ask why they didn't just kill Sam, that seemed like the sort of harsh action their world evoked, but he hesitated. Asking why they didn't kill their dad wasn't want to be a faux pas.

"You all should go back upstairs," Dylaniel suggested. "I'm going to keep watch for a little while."

"What's the point of watching if you can't do anything to help?" Dean asked.

"Sometimes they verbally talk to each other when they're upset like this," the nephilim explained while looking at the screens, but he spared a glance up at Dean. "Another rule of war: study your enemies whenever you can."
“He’s Sa—he’s locked up,” Dean pointed out.

Dylaniel shrugged, then turned back to the monitors before responding, “If you think that means he’s harmless, then you’ve got a lot to learn.”

Dean retreated back to the library where the others had been relaxing before he’d started asking about the dead siblings and Sam’s fate. He sat down at one of the tables and buried his face in his arms. A million confused emotions welled up in him, breaking free in a few silent tears.

He wanted to rewind the last hour or so. He wanted to rewind the last few days… or maybe the last thirty years depending on which timeline he was thinking about. This place and time was some horrible nightmare that he wanted to wake up from.

It wasn’t like his dreams or memories of Hell, where he was tortured physically and mentally. In his dreams there was no hope. He was abandoned and alone. Honestly, it was strangely less painful than this reality. Here, there were people he liked—even cared about, and they were stuck in this bleak existence. He didn’t understand how they could have any hope, least of all Sam. They were caught in some war that had consumed an entire generation and had no end in sight. Maybe they didn’t give up because they didn’t remember a better life—some of them had never known a better life.

Deep down he knew he would break in this world. He’d broken in Hell, where the burden had merely been pain. In this environment, the burden was the weight of the world, the survival of the entire human race. He would break under that burden…. It was hard to imagine what that pressure had done to the other Dean. How far gone must the other Dean be if this timeline drove Sam to do that to himself?

“You okay?” Kaylee asked from the doorway.

He rubbed his face on his sleeves and shook his head for a moment without making eye contact. Instead of leaving him alone, she sat down in the chair next to him.

"I can't let that happen to my brother.” Dean looked up at her. His voice broke and he knew that his eyes were still damp, but he was too exhausted for embarrassment. "Where did it go wrong? When did it start? How am I supposed to stop a war?"

"I don’t know,” she confided. “To be honest, I haven’t really thought much about it. A long time ago I decided to never ask the question 'What if I had just done...' and it's treated me pretty well.”

"You don't wish things had been different?"

"It’s not for lack of regret.” She sighed, then mused, “When every choice you make leads to the deaths of good people, you learn to not look behind yourself too closely—otherwise you start to see the trail of ghosts. Wishing… wishing is just getting tapped by a djinn.”

She seemed older when she spoke about death and the futility of wishing. Her eyes reminded him of Sam, making the pain radiating off of her even more poignant. He wanted to say something to comfort her, but he couldn’t begin to understand what she must be remembering in that moment. It made him sick to see her like that. He was trying to pull himself together when he noticed her eyes soften and her dad’s smile flickered on her face.

“What is it?” he asked cautiously.

"Maybe it’s not a dream or a wish—maybe things aren’t completely fucked after all, since you're
here. I don't really get to make wishes for this time. We're already so far down the drain it's amazing we still bother fighting. But I don't know, the idea that maybe you could make it work in your time... that's something incredible.” Her voice was torn between pained and wistful.

"No pressure," Dean huffed.

"Hey, at least you'll be pretty damn motivated." Kaylee smiled at him and raised an eyebrow playfully. He rolled his eyes, though he couldn’t help but smile back at her. She stood up, patted him on the shoulder, and walked over to a small cabinet. After a moment of searching, she withdrew a bottle of amber liquid and a small pipe, then held them both up in offering to Dean. "Choose your poison. Probably the most important rule of enduring the apocalypse: avoid wasting safety by being sober."

"I still can't believe you have wings," Dean told Kaylee as he poured himself a second glass of scotch. "Can you fly?"

"Not as well as you'd think," she admitted with a sheepish shrug. “I don’t practice enough”

“It’s like watching a raven trying to carry a ferret,” Tom added as he walked into the library. He picked up the pipe from in front of Kaylee and took a hit before sitting down at their table.

“It’s harder than it looks. I have to supplement with a little telekinesis since my bones aren't hollow like a bird’s.”

“That’s where the ferret comes into the analogy.” Tom mimed some awkward wriggling, which earned a playful shove from Kaylee.

“I still don’t get it though, how do you even have wings?” Dean asked, breaking up any further sibling teasing.

“They're a physical manifestation of my grace,” Kaylee explained. "The nephilim have them too, since they have grace and are part supernatural creature."

Dean only knew of one nephilim to envision. "Dyl has wings?"

"Does he ever." Tom chuckled. "Dyl's are huge—those things were never meant to go on a kid. And of course he had to get them when he was only a year old. He couldn't even talk and 'poof' he'd have these wings. Each one was almost twice as big as him, so he'd just fall over. It took him like a year and a half before he was even strong enough to hold them up. We used to help him practice lifting the wings by grabbing them and holding them up for him."

“It was kinda adorable in a pitiful sort of way,“ Kaylee said with a hint of guilt in her voice.

Dean was trying to picture a toddler being buried under a pair of big fluffy wings. It was weird to think of Dylandiel as a child, even though he’d seen a few of the photos of him as a boy. The photograph of the other Dean lying on the couch with the infant Dylandiel came to his mind. The other Dean had raised a kid with wings. The reminder that their conversation was bordering on personal made his stomach knot slightly.

Talking about Dylandiel as an adult was one thing, but talking about him as an infant suddenly brought in his parents. Talking about the other Dean or Cas individually was okay, but Dean didn't want to risk talking about Dylandiel's parents as a couple. He didn't want to acknowledge that Dylandiel was a living reminder of how different the other Dean was. He didn't want to continue the conversation, but he didn't know how to abruptly change the subject without highlighting the sore
They were stuck in the bunker together for a while and he didn't have the emotional energy for another fight, so he let Kaylee and Tom continue with their stories, oblivious to his discomfort.

"Cas was actually pretty upset about it. Dyl’s wing size and shape were inherited from him," Kaylee continued in a voice that lowered to a whisper while she glanced around, watching for her cousin. "For a long time Cas was worried that he was the reason things were harder on Dyl."

“Harder?” Dean asked, helpless to his own curiosity. As much as he wanted to avoid the conversation entirely, the lure of the gossip was too much.

“Dyl was a pretty reserved kid. He's not great at making friends,” Tom elaborated. “He was late to start talking and he had trouble learning to walk, probably because of the wings. Cas thought that to the extent Dyl wasn't like Dean, it must’ve been because of him.”

"No one had experience with a nephilim, so it was hard to tell if that's how young half-angels develop or if he was just a little different," Kaylee added.

"Is that how half-angels develop?” Dean asked, wary of just how much he wanted to get into the other Dean’s personal life.

"Not as far as we can tell," Tom said before adding, “but Dyl has an unusual situation because he’s a doubleheader.”

“He inherited two different graces,” Kaylee explained. “He’s not your basic model nephilim, which is just an angel and human. I think there are only a handful of other two-grace nephilim. Dyl would know how many, but he’s the oldest by far. He’s been the guinea pig on a lot of this stuff, like the whole wings thing. His wings actually reflect both graces, the shape is Cas's and the coloration is Michael's.”

“Coloration?” Dean had imagined angel wings as white, but the idea of coloration conjured images of different exotic birds.

“His wings are gold. It’s all very gaudy if you ask me,” Kaylee critiqued.

“Jealous,” Tom muttered.

“Please, I can blind people with my wings’ true color.” Kaylee gave a little hand waving gesture before taking another hit from the pipe. “He can have that whole chapel’s-gilded-ceiling look.”

“Do you think he’d show me?” Dean asked.

“Maybe,” she replied with a shrug. “Dyl doesn’t like to bust them out. He gets a lot of requests to see them. It pisses him off to no end, but for you he might be talked into it.”

It felt important for him to see them. Maybe there was something about bringing it into the tangible world instead of just staying some abstract thing… but there was something else. Dean felt like he was missing something… something important. The image of elegant golden wings tickled the back of his mind, but he wasn’t sure why. He’d found the gold feather, presumably Dylaniel’s feather, in the other Dean’s bedroom, though that didn’t quite hit the same sensation of déjà vu. It was something about the wings themselves.

Chapter End Notes
I know there's an episode named "My Brother's Keeper" but it was way too apt to pass up.
"What's this shit I heard about you all going AWOL?"

Dean recognized Ruby's voice before she'd even gotten into the room. In some strange way it was comforting. She might not have been his favorite person in the world, but she wasn't possessed by some big bad. She was the little bad. He could deal with a little bad as long as it also brought familiarity.

When she entered the room, her eyes briefly passed over him before turning back for a double-take. She circled around to look at the right side of his face for some reason, then blinked her eyes black for a more in-depth investigation.

"What the fuck is happening?" she managed to ask after a moment. Her hands opened and closed as she shifted her weight, unsure of what she wanted to do.

"He's from 2009," replied Tom.

"Yeah. I'm gonna need a little more than that." Ruby returned her eyes to normal and lowered her arms to her sides, but she didn't seem to relax at all.

"My—" Dean stopped himself from saying 'my Cas.' With this crowd it would have had unpleasant implications. "The Cas in my time sent me ahead to find out how we could get out of our current jam."

"Current jam?" Ruby asked, drawn in by the prospect of a new puzzle.

"We're holed up in an apartment in New Orleans—" Dean began, but she interrupted him.

"You mean where Kaylee was born?"

"Yes!"

He felt some tiny measure of relief for the first time in a day or two—possibly the most since he'd arrived. There was finally common ground with another person and he didn't seem to have to delicately pry discussion from her like he did with Sam. This was Ruby; delicate wasn't even in her vocabulary.

"So I take it that Kaylee was born before you left," Ruby confirmed.

"Yeah, she's like a day or two old." It was a bit strange talking about Kaylee being a day or two old, while Kaylee the thirty-year-old was sitting right next to him. That was gonna be something else for him to watch out for. In his mind Kaylee was an adult, but when he got back home she'd be a newborn. He thought most of these people were decent, but they weren't his people, his priority. He had to keep his focus on the family he left in 2009. "Listen, they told me how Sam got hooked up with Hell to get you guys out. I need to find another way for us to get out of that apartment. I
need another plan."

"It's not just getting out of the apartment," she said. "You've got Heaven on your ass and Hell is going to hell."

"I'm fine with just dodging Heaven for now and I couldn't care less about Hell." Her brow furrowed a bit at his words, but she didn't say anything. "I'm not trying to fix everybody's messes. Just tell me how to stop this clusterfuck."

"This clusterfuck' is a really complicated interplanar political climate. You're not getting a ten-word answer." Ruby looked at him like he was an idiot and he suddenly regretted talking about the subject in such a dismissive way.

"I get it. I've been through over two days of politics and the history of this war with these guys." Dean pointed at Tom and Kaylee. "But I can't go back with only theory. I need a game plan. I need allies. I need weapons."

"Well, Dean is gonna be your guy for allies. He worked the alliances from the beginning. Either he or Dyl could probably help with the blessing weapons thing. I can give you a crash course in the rest of it."

"You…." Dean wasn't exactly feeling like getting a magic lesson. "I'm not really sure I'm the right guy to be showing tricks to."

"It's not tricks." Ruby stared at him in minor confusion, then shook the thought from her head. "Tell you what—I'm gonna go check on Sam. Afterward I'll show you everything I've got to offer and you can pick my brain on whatever. Deal?"

"Okay," Dean agreed, unsure of what he was getting himself into.

He'd never actually worked directly with Ruby before. She was Sam's sidekick. To the extent that they'd ever helped each other, it was a matter of necessity or as a courtesy to Sam. Now Sam was out of the picture and for whatever reason she was still here.

"Can you let me into the cell?" Ruby asked her daughter.

"Sure." The women started chatting as they walked out of the room. As they left, Dean was struck by their physical resemblance and behavior. "Dad and Luci were having a fight earlier. I think Dyl's still down watching the monitors."

"It'll be good for him to take a break. Let me guess; he's been hiding out?" Ruby predicted.

"He was playing chess…." Kaylee's voice faded away down the hall.

After they had turned the corner, Tom started to refill Dean's glass, but Dean waved off the hospitality.

"If I'm gonna have to deal with Ruby, then I should probably stop drinking."

Tom raised an eyebrows at Dean's comment. "She'll probably be down there for a few hours," he said, jiggling the bottle to renew his offer.

"Hours?" Dean couldn't understand how someone could spend a few minutes with Sam in that condition. He pushed the glass toward Tom, who began pouring.
"She usually goes down for 6-12 hours at a time, but with you here she'll probably cut it short." Tom restopped the bottle, then started carefully repacking his pipe.

"What do they even do for that long?"

"We turn off the monitors while she's down there." Tom didn't look up from his work when he spoke.

Dean nearly choked on his scotch. "That's a conjugal visit?"

It was hard to think of Sam being physically capable of much of anything, let alone sex. Beyond that it just seemed wrong—even more wrong.

He didn't like the idea of this Sam and Ruby still being together. It didn't bode well for the Ruby in his timeline getting out of their lives. Apparently in this timeline she and Sam had had two other kids, so that had inevitably worked to keep her there—though the pair had needed to be having sex for the two other kids to come about in the first place.

When Ruby and Dean had been stuck together taking care of their wounded, she'd expressed some level of concern for Sam. She'd seemed to care about him in a way that was surprising, but it was hard to picture a demon in a long-term relationship. There was some aspect of their relationship that he wasn't grasping.

"That's whatever they feel like doing." Tom gave a little shrug, then leaned back in his chair. He lit the contents of the pipe, took a hit and watched Dean thoughtfully for a minute before speaking. "You've really got to get over this magic hang-up you have."

That was a pretty abrupt turn in the conversation. He knew that Tom was a witch, but so far he'd been pretty relaxed with the whole craft thing. Suddenly it was gonna be an issue.

"I don't do magic," Dean explained. "I'm just an old-fashioned kind of guy that way."

"Magic is pretty old fashioned," Tom joked.

Dean knew he'd walked right into that one. "That's not what I meant."

"You mean you're an old-fashioned kind of hunter." Dean noticed the corners of Tom's mouth lose their lighthearted curls.

"You're what we get to look forward to for the new generation? One foot in the hunter camp, one in the witch camp?" He was trying to picture a bunch of spell-casting hunters. They'd be like Sam, but with the magic dialed up just a bit.

"It's still not as common as you'd think. Almost everyone has their specialty: pistols or potions. The important thing is to not let any of it faze you, the good or the bad." Tom touched a book on the table, said a few words in a language Dean didn't recognize, and it was immediately replaced by a pistol. He stripped it, then reassembled it like a professional. He tossed one of the bullets to Dean, who looked at the unremarkable .38 round, then tossed it back. Tom held it in his hand while whispering something that Dean couldn't hear. After loading the bullet, Tom shot at the wall. For a moment, Dean flinched at the unexpected gunshot, then looked at the wall to assess the damage. The shot hit dead center on an intersection of six decorative tiles framing a bookcase. But instead of a bullet hole, it looked like the wall had been shot with a fucking paintball.

"Jesus. That's a good trick," Dean commented.
"It's not a trick. I just don't fire live rounds in here." Tom held up another bullet. "With a few different words, these could be silver, armor piercing, or incendiary. The summon was actually a quick-draw spell. I have three weapons queued up. All I have to do is trade a man-made object of comparable mass."

"That sounds great," Dean admitted. "I mean, say a few words and you get your gun from wherever."

"It took me about three months of work to establish the foundational spell for each weapon. During each spell, I had to lose about six pints of blood and I killed 13 chickens—and that was just the blood cost." Tom smiled sadly at Dean, who'd lost some of his enthusiasm for learning the spell. "I'm not saying it isn't messy, but it is powerful…. It's taken a while for the craft to lose its stigma, especially with the hunter crowd."

"You grew up with Sam and Ruby. It's hard to picture you being hassled for doing magic," Dean replied.

"They were great, but it's not like I dodged the whole witch-hunter animosity. I've taken shit from both sides."

"You said Sam didn't want you hunting." Dean invited Tom to elaborate.

"Yeah. I was upset at the time, but honestly I don't blame him for being scared. Either that I'd venture too far into the life of a hunter or, worse, that I'd dabble in it and slip up around the wrong people."

Tom undid the clasp on one of his necklaces, then took it off. It was the silver locket that he seemed to wear all the time. He handed it over to Dean and nodded encouragement for him to open it. The first pair of photos were of Sam and Ruby. The other pair were a photo of a black man who strongly resembled Tom and a sketch of a beautiful black woman.

"Are these…." Dean didn't know how to refer to the other couple.

"My biological parents, yeah. Their names were Gabin and Grace; both witches. Grace was killed by hunters when I was about a year old. My dad—Sam—he once told me that people fear what they don't understand. The hunters didn't understand Grace…. I suppose they also didn't understand my dad—either of my dads." Tom was lost in thought for a moment before meeting Dean's eyes. "If you don't start opening yourself up more, you're gonna fear a lot of awesome people and things."

"God, you're so young," Ruby observed from the doorway before entering Dean's guest room.

He was reading some old operations reports that Kaylee and Dylaniel had scrounged up for him. None of the reports were more than ten years old. The pre-Lucifer ones had been stored separately and were curated by the other Dean. Some of the reports proved to be a pretty engrossing read depending on the author. The pile included two lengthy page-turners by Tom and an incredibly concise report by Dylaniel that could've been considered snarky.

Ruby walked into the room without asking permission, then sat down on the edge of the bed. She held two open beers and extended one to him. He slowly accepted it, but stared at the bottle warily. The brewery was unfamiliar to him.

"What the fuck is a pluot?" He wasn't sure he was ready to risk it.
"It's a type of fruit," she explained. "Don't be so fucking stubborn. The other you likes it; I raided his stash."

Dean took a sip and his eyes widened in surprise. It was a sour. It was good, just not what he'd been expecting.

"That's a Bay Area brewery. One of Tommy's friends is the contraband merchant for whole west coast," she continued. "He always includes a few bottles for Dean when he does business with the Bay Area."

"Contraband?" He was having a hard time picturing an existence where beers were forbidden.

"Nobody really cares as long as people report for duty sober, but way back in the day we all pretended to have discipline," Ruby explained as she took a sip of her beer.

The situation made him a little uncomfortable. He was a guest there, but she was in his room, sitting on his bed, having a drink. It wouldn't have been so bad if someone else was there to help shoulder the social burden. What made it worse was that she didn't seem particularly eager to fill the awkward silence. She was continuing to study him, so he looked her over too.

She was basically the same old Ruby. Leather pants, leather jacket, dark brown hair, and dangerous eyes. To his surprise she was wearing a silver ring on her left ring finger. He stared at it in minor confusion. It reminded him of the one he'd found in Sam's wallet back at Bobby's house, but he didn't remember seeing this Sam wearing a ring.

She noticed him staring at it and wanted to encourage some sort of conversation, so she explained, "Sam and I didn't actually get married." She played with the ring as she spoke. "He wanted to, years ago, before Lucifer got out. I resisted—it wasn't really my thing. Sam was fine with it, but now it's like I wish I could give him anything to make him happy…. I think he appreciates the gesture."

"I've gotta ask…." Dean started, then hesitated.

"Shoot," Ruby told him.

"It's just... he's possessed by Lucifer and you two are still having sex, right?" His cheeks felt warm with embarrassment.

She didn't tease him. Instead she smiled almost bashfully behind her beer bottle and nodded. "Luci actually doesn't interfere when we fuck. It's basically the only time he'll leave Sam completely alone. I think he's uncomfortable with the act, but he's completely in favor of us doing it."

Dean couldn't imagine Lucifer trying to play wingman to Sam. "Why?"

"He wants us to have more kids. Angels like having long bloodlines, lots of vessels." She took another sip of her beer. "Personally, I think the way things are going with the world, maybe two vessels is one more than any angel can really ask for. Not that a lot of our angels are even willing to possess some of their vessels."

"I don't follow," Dean admitted. The angel and vessel stuff was still too new. He'd have to figure it out before heading back home. It seemed like understanding those mechanics would be important with Sam being a vessel—with him and Sam being vessels.

"Look at Cas. He's got his current vessel, but his only other option is possessing his son. Jimmy,
his current vessel—all of his blood relatives died a while back when the shit hit the fan. There's no way Cas is gonna possess Dyl and he's not having any other kids—not that he'd be up for possessing them either. Maybe like if Dyl was about to die Cas could step in and Dyl's soul could slip out, but that's tough to count on."

"And it's a little fucked up." The idea of stealing your dead kid's body felt like it was crossing a line, even for this crowd.

"Yeah. It's pretty fucked up," Ruby agreed.

"Why is everything about war and sex in this time?" Dean shook his head at the thought. It was like he couldn't escape the topics.

"You're asking why the life and death of multiple species is a big deal?" She tilted her head to underscore how obvious she thought the answer was.

"Death, maybe even war—I get that. I was raised for that." Dean felt strangely vulnerable having a substantive conversation with her, but it wasn't as bad as he'd expected. Someone was really listening to him rather than just talking at him. It almost didn't matter that it was Ruby. "A life and a family—that's what I just.... I'm not the person who does that kind of stuff and I come here to find a world where maybe the biggest contribution I can make is having a fucking brood?"

"Trust me that you'll have more to show than putting more smartass in the gene pool. The responsibilities of this place and time.... It sucks. I completely get that, but as you get older, kids are frequently part of the whole legacy thing."

"Says the immortal, who—" Dean cut himself off before he could say 'has a lot of kids.' She'd had a lot of kids, but now she had two, and only one that was— He actually didn't know if Kaylee counted as Ruby's biological child since Ruby's body wasn't exactly her own. By some counts Kaylee's biological mother was Jane Doe.

"I'm not really sure what I care about legacy anymore." Ruby finished her beer and turned inward slightly, then offered a small confession. "I've ended six pregnancies since Sam's been down there. If any of the archdemons found out they'd riot."

Dean stared at her in shock. He wasn't upset over the whole abortion thing. As far as he was concerned it wasn't his place to tell a woman what to do with her body, even if the body came secondhand. It was the fact that everyone was making such a big deal about having kids and she was doing her own thing. Kaylee was fielding suitors in order to eventually have a kid and her mom passed up several opportunities to check that political box.

"They would've been nephilim; Lucifer's nephilim." Ruby answered the question he was too uncomfortable to ask. "I know that Kaylee has his grace, but being a vessel is different. I don't want Lucifer to have any more claim to my kids. As a vessel, she can deny him, but the angel-nephilim relationship... it feels more like a parent even if I'd be having it with Sam."

"Do they know? Kaylee and everyone," Dean asked, worried that he'd become her sole confidant.

"The family knows that it's happened at least once—Sam too. The two of us have talked about it." Ruby looked at her now empty beer bottle instead of Dean. "We don't want to keep watching our kids die."

He didn't know what to say. He'd met dozens of grieving parents in his time hunting, but this was far beyond that. She'd lost two kids, in some weird alternate-timeline-way, his niece and nephew.
It was too personal a thing to just volunteer; she apparently had even kept some of this information from her actual family. Not to mention this was Ruby, laying herself out there for him. He didn't understand why she was telling him all this, but she continued.

"Heaven has my daughter's soul." Her voice was tired, exhausted by many years of pain. "She's being held up there somewhere. Sa'dah was only five years old."

He had a strange impulse to comfort her, but he didn't know how.

"And Alex, he's just gone—destroyed." Ruby briefly pursed her lips before continuing. "Someday they'll take away Tom and Kaylee, and I won't be able to stop it. I'll be alive. Sam will be alive. And all our kids will be dead.... Sam can't get into Heaven and with Lucifer's claws in him who knows if he'll make it into Hell. I'll just cease to exist when I die. There isn't a future for our family."

"If Kaylee or Tom have kids...." Dean wasn't sure how appropriate his attempt at spinning optimism was, so his suggestion fizzled out.

"I had a family before—not by blood. They were my friends from when I was human. They were the founders of my coven. At first I spent a lot of time with them, but it’s hard to watch everyone you care about grow old and die."

"I don't get it. Why are you doing this?" Dean asked Ruby.

Her brow furrowed at his question. "Doing what?" She placed her empty bottle on the nightstand, then leaned back slightly on his bed. Despite the heavy conversation she had a matter-of-factness about her that would’ve seemed like innocence if he hadn’t known her.

"Talking to me like this." He gestured between them to indicate the painfully intimate moment.

"Because we're friends...." Her confused expression relaxed at a realization, then turned a little sad. "We're not friends yet, are we?"

"We... we aren't." He felt bad telling her that and he wasn't entirely sure why. It was bizarre having to explain to someone that they weren't as close as the other person thought.

"Why don’t you like me?"

The directness of her question caught him off guard. It was alarming as hell for them to be talking like that. At most he was expecting for them to be keeping things professional with a begrudging leave of cooperation, but she wanted to talk about his feelings and their relationship—not hers and the other Dean's relationship, but his and the other Ruby's.

"We’ve just never gotten along," he responded flatly.

"I seem to recall saving your life more than a few times."

"We can work together and not get along without it being... something." He was losing some sort of footing; he just wasn’t sure if it was the moral high ground or what.

"For the first year I’m pretty sure you thought my name was ‘bitch’ and I kinda got the impression you wanted to kill me, even when I was pregnant with Kaylee."

Dean shifted. It felt like a low blow, but it was essentially true. "Well when you put it like that,
even I think I sound like a dick,” he huffed, partially from guilt and partially defensively.

"I'm not saying I didn't hit back occasionally." Ruby smiled at some apparently fond memories, then turned pensive. "But I'm not a threat to you. I'm not gonna steal your brother, you know. You aren't losing your family; you're gaining some more. Sam always wanted us to get along. He never wanted to choose. Don't make him."

“You’re a demon.” He was doing it, talking about the elephant in the room. If she was going all candid on him, he was going to give it back. "Maybe that doesn’t mean anything here, but back there…. It's all new. I'd just got roped into the Crossroads deal and Sam started running around with a demon. Then I get back from Hell and you're right back in my face.”

“Does it still bother you? That I’m a demon.”

His instinct was to lie. That was a bad sign.

"Yeah,” he admitted. “Not as much as it used to, but yeah.”

"You don't trust me.” Ruby nodded to herself. "Like, professionally, or in general?"

"I don't know…. I guess that means in general.” He shrugged, a bit disappointed by his own conclusion. “It's just hard to imagine trusting demons."

4/10/2015

The plane flight to Wiarton Airport was unnerving to say the least. Independent of Dean’s lifelong fear of flying, there was a certain amount of inherent danger involved in flying through an area that had been covered with an anti-flight aura. Granted, the aura was meant to only interfere with magical forms of flight, such as angelic or demonic, but a lot of things hadn’t been going to plan with this little project.

Ruby had uncharacteristically called Dean while he was at work setting up the AFE’s sixth base. Getting all the wards and facilities in place was obviously important, but some things still took precedence. This excursion was definitely one of them.

There had been some sort of accident in Hell. Nobody that Dean knew had been killed, but some bad mojo had slipped out of a Devil’s Gate or something and Ruby was putting together a team to go clean up the mess. The escaped magic didn’t seem particularly harmful to humans by itself, though it could prove a major complication for any demons or angels in the area. Also, the magics at work were still in the development stage, making the entire situation that much more unpredictable.

Per her request, Dean and Cas picked half a dozen humans to assist her team of demons in their mission to the gate. Dean tried to pick the more open-minded hunters, who might not have such a stick up their ass about fighting alongside demons. Tamara was an easy choice. Her feelings on Heaven and Hell had changed fairly quickly after having demons rescue her from angels. The others had all run at least one mission with a demon, making them better candidates than 99% of the other human troops.

After touching down in the small Ontario town, they met the demon half of their team in a cheap motel room. Ruby had already laid out the motel room for the mission briefing. One of the queen beds was covered in maps of various scales, some with glowing dots, others with sections where the text slowly pulsed between English and Abyssal. The second bed was covered with weapons, tools, and body armor. Cas looked from the body armor to Dean, who shrugged apologetically.
Aside from Ruby, there were eight demons. They stayed to the far side of the room, giving the humans, who were mostly ex-hunters, their space. Four of the demons whispered to each other and snickered. Two were preoccupied cleaning weapons, barely sparing a glance at the new arrivals. Ruby was indicating something on a map for Joseba, a Knight of Hell.

"Welcome to our shitty little HQ." Ruby greeted them.

"Thanks. You want to give them the rundown now or do we have some time to kill?" Dean asked as he dropped his duffel of supplies on the floor. He doubted they'd have much time to kill, but a surprising number of ritual-related ops involved the instruction to 'hurry up and wait.'

"Let's get rolling. Time’s not our friend," Ruby began while gesturing everyone to give her their attention. "Our objective is to locate and hold the gate long enough for me to repair this side of it. Once it’s sealed properly, we will activate a coordinated purging spell to clean up the mess."

“This gate that’s open, it’s a real Devil’s Gate?” asked Garrett, one of the younger ex-hunters.

“Yeah, it was busted from the inside. We repaired as much as we could downstairs, but if we don’t get it fixed up here then a whole lot of nasty shit’s gonna keep coming out and we run the risk of stuff coming down." Ruby cringed at the thought of her next point. "Which brings me to one of the parts that you’re all gonna love to hear: Heaven probably knows we busted the gate and they’re almost certainly trying to figure out a way to take it, too.”

“Heaven—we’re throwing humans and demons up against angels?” Tamara's voice was more wary than scared.

“It’s unlikely that there will be angels near the gate," Cas speculated. "The magic that is leaking from the gate impairs some of our powers, including flight. It would be almost recklessly dangerous to send angels into that sort of environment for a relatively small reward.”

“The damage on this side shouldn’t be enough for Heaven to really get through, but there’s still a little exposure. It’s a potential vulnerability, but with the negative effects on angels too it doesn’t make much sense for a high value target at this point. Heaven hasn’t even pressed our gates in two years. There’ll likely be a token-to-moderate effort to take the gate, but it’ll probably just be Templars on the ground.”

“How’s the magic affecting your powers?” Dean asked, nodding to the group of demons.

“We can’t blink, smoke out, and Gusion can’t use his telekinesis, but otherwise the pain is just like home," replied Faymon, one of the demons that had been cleaning weapons. Several of the other demons chuckled at his comment, but the joke was lost on the humans.

“Also, for the humans’ benefit,” Ruby continued, “the Devil’s Gate we’re going after is affectionately called the Howling Gate, known for its location in an acoustic phenomenon. Think the wailing of the dead, full on banshee screams if you get too close to it.”

Dean scowled recalling the sound of tens of thousands of screaming souls. He made a mental note to stay away from the gate itself, then turned his attention back to Ruby’s explanation.

“The gate is located in the foundation of an industrial building about ten miles from here. We should be prepared to run into Templars at any turn, so we’ll treat it as a proper assault, then fortify covering our exits, and cautiously retreat.”

“What’s the ROE?” asked Hicks, a ten-year army veteran, who had joined the AFE for the angelic healthcare, among other things.
“Technically, we’re gonna be headed into a populated area, but scrying doesn’t show much in the way of activity.” Ruby pointed to a map displaying glowing dots. “Let’s try not to go trigger-happy on a bunch of civilians. Weapons at the ready, but don’t take the initiative. If the shit hits the fan, then call it out and everyone gets greenlit on minimum force necessary that’s proportional to the threat.”

“You brought a knight,” Cas observed with a small nod to Joseba, silently questioning her sense of proportionality.

“Knight... like Knight of Hell knight?” Garrett’s visible discomfort embodied the feelings many of the more experienced ex-hunters were better at hiding.

“I serve Hell,” Joseba addressed the humans and angel. “If you don’t make Hell your enemy, then I don’t have to kill you.”

“If we’d had more knights free to help out they be joining us, but Joseba was the only one able to lend a hand,” Ruby said, attempting to frame his presence as an asset rather than a potential danger. She patted his shoulder in a gesture of reassurance to the humans. “He’s a tank and a heavy-hitter. You’ll all love him by the end of the day.”

There was a strained silence. Joseba didn’t bother trying to act warmly toward the humans. Every knight Dean had ever met seemed indifferent to the approval of everyone outside of Hell’s inner circle. It was nearly pointless to dwell on any diplomatic efforts, so Dean decided to keep the briefing going.

“Unless there are any other urgent questions, I want Q to give us the rundown on our goodies.” Dean pointed to a set of strange objects on the bed full of supplies.

Ruby smiled at the nickname. He’d given it to her two years back after bringing home a few projects consisting of magical weapons. She always did come up with the most delightful birthday presents for him.

“These are basically magic stun grenades,” Ruby said while picking up a device similar in appearance to a flash grenade. “They will produce a thirty-foot-radius blast of light. If you see the light it will knock you out for twenty seconds. Within the area of effect, the flash has standard properties of light. It can be blocked or reflected, but it cannot be perceived beyond the thirty-foot initial blast radius. If you throw one, call it out, and look away, preferably with your eyes closed so you don’t catch a reflection.”

Ruby put down the stun grenade, then picked up a vial of opaque green liquid.

“This is something we like to call ‘slice.’ Five seconds after the liquid makes contact with a horizontal surface it will burn in a fifty-foot vertical plane along the path of the liquid. This stuff will cut through nearly anything that isn’t warded out the ass, so be careful when using it indoors or over gas lines.”

“Mind the gas lines, but we’re going to be fight in and around buildings?” Garrett asked nervously.

“Make your cuts small,” Ruby suggested. “I’m not saying it’s a safe option, just that it’s an option.”

“What are we even supposed to use something like that for?”

“Us demons like it for busting traps. Pour a line leading away from the trapped demon. As long as the slice crosses the trap it’ll break. It doesn’t work as well when we try to bust our own traps with it.” Ruby mimed throwing the liquid away from herself. “It’s hard to make a straight, solid line
and half the time a meatsuit loses part of a foot."

"When you say horizontal—" Cas started to ask, but Ruby anticipated his concern.

"Plus or minus ten degrees," Ruby explained with a minorly frustrated tilt of her head. "That's the best we could manage while maintaining its reliability."

She put down the vial of slice, then picked up a canister-style grenade. Dean noted that she was very careful to avoid the pin.

"Lastly, we have some Hellcloud grenades—smoke bombs with incredibly refined brimstone. You humans should avoid breathing this stuff."

"Depending on how much smoke you take in the effects could range from tear gas to catastrophically fucking your respiratory system. The damage is high enough that it'll take a seraphim to heal and with all magical flights in or out grounded, you should all consider this potentially lethal to humans."

"Does it affect angels?" Dean asked, then glanced compulsively at Cas.

"Depending on the choir and if the vessel is still packing a soul," she replied. "Cas, your lack of a soul is gonna help you, but still try to avoid this stuff."

Cas eyed the canister uncertainly. "What would it do to me?"

"It's straight from the Abyss. You'll have basically the supernatural equivalent of an autoimmune response. Pain, mixed signals, weakness—if you still had the soul it'd be a lot more intense."

"You've weaponized Hell's natural toxicity?" Cas's eyebrows rose slightly at the thought.

"This is still a prototype. It's actually part of the cocktail that blew the gate in the first place. It's gonna be a tool of last resort."

"We're not having friendly fire, okay? Humans need to be clear or wearing masks before one of these even gets pulled from a pack."

After the mission briefing, Dean pulled Ruby off to the side to speak with her privately.

"Rube, this sounds like it could get dicey, are you sure you should be going in there?"
"I'm the best person we've got to seal the gate—" she started, but he cut her off.

"That's not what I meant." Dean scratched the back of his head anxiously. "You have kids. Alex is barely six months old."

"With any luck I'm gonna have kids the rest of my life. I'm not just gonna let the planes bleed into each other because I have kids." She patted his chest. "We'll be fine. It's just a little game of King of the Hill."

"Yeah, with automatic weapons and holy water," Dean muttered.

He joined the other humans who were putting on some of the available body armor, then positioned himself to covertly hold Cas's hand while they waited. Ruby didn't bother with more than a vest and helmet for armor, but she had a small armored backpack of spell components and tools. While the last few hunters were gearing up, five of the demons stepped outside.

"Where are they going?" asked Garrett.

"Out of your ears," Gusion answered. "They pray for our fortune."

"Gusion, you gonna make your peace with God?" Ruby asked the soft-spoken demon as she double-checked her loadout. "Leave him something to remember you by?"

"That is all we do." Gusion smiled at Garrett, then blinked his eyes black. "Even shadows."

The junior hunter stared at the demon, thoroughly rattled by the sight of his eyes combined with the oddly philosophical banter. Dean patted his shoulder in reassurance, shaking him from the stupor. That sort nuanced behavior from demons had a way of throwing most humans the first few times they witnessed it. He had seen that dumbfounded expression many times before.

"Come on," Dean told his young subordinate. "Grab your stuff. We're moving out."

While the others were piling into their four cars, to take them to the town in question, Ruby waved over Dean.

"You're gonna take South and I'll take North." He raised an eyebrow at her instructions, but didn’t question it. "That way if things go bad on one side Sam doesn't have a worse day than he needs to."

He nodded in profound understanding. "Fair enough."

There was a reason that, aside from Dean and Cas, the family rarely worked missions together. Occasionally, there were operations involving the death of everyone assigned to it. So far the family had managed to avoid its close calls, but as time passed and the world got nastier there was a growing sense that it wouldn't last forever.

Since Ruby’s survival was critical to the mission, she was positioned to be third in her group of four. Joseba and a hunter named Karen took point while Garrett covered their rear. Their group approached from the north, which consisted of a few quiet streets that were fortunately littered with the occasional empty vehicle.

The place looked like a ghost town. It had been abandoned... but not particularly long ago. Ruby noted that the plants outside residential and a few retail buildings weren't completely overgrown. Whatever had driven them out had occurred a week or two earlier, before the gate had been
"What do you want to bet, if I say a cliché line from a horror movie we'll get attacked?" Dean asked over their personal radios.

Tamara humored him. "What were you thinking of saying?"

"Don't say it!" interrupted Garrett.

"You really that superstitious?"

"It's not about being superstitious. I mean look at our lives; there are frigging tricksters. It's being cautious," Garrett defended himself, but he earned a quick skeptical look from Karen.

"The odds of there being a trickster around are like nothing. Coincidences happen," Dean explained, trying to lessen all the ambient worrying that was floating through the group. "It's not like tricksters just came into existence when you heard about them—"

"Light of fucking Hell, can you all shut up?" muttered Faymon.

"Yeah. Let's try to have some level of professionalism," said Tamara.

"I think the bigger concern is not being overheard," Hicks corrected.

"But we were just saying that tricksters—" Garrett began.

"I meant the fucking Templars."

"Tactical geniuses we have here," Joseba told Ruby without bothering to transmit the insult to the rest of the team.

A demon spoke in Abyssal over the radio.

"Fuck! Don't do that!" said one of the hunters Ruby didn't recognize.

Ruby cut off any further bickering with the threat of violence, one of her go-to command techniques. "The next person who breaks radio silence better be dodging Templar bullets or I swear you will be dodging mine when we get back to the motel."

The radios were thankfully quiet for a whole minute during the end of their approach. Ruby's group could actually see the four-story building and hopefully the other groups were making similar progress.

"Possible contact," said Hicks with the west group. The sound of automatic gunfire broke out in the distance. "Contact."

"No shit. How many?" asked Faymon.

"Maybe six Temps."

"Weapons free everybody," Dean instructed over the radio. Ruby could almost hear the regret and fatigue in his voice.

A few seconds later, three people started firing on Ruby's group from a nearby building. Karen, Ruby, and Garrett immediately took cover behind two cars. Joseba instead ran toward the three attackers, returning fire, before lunging into an adjacent building. Karen gestured to Garrett and
Ruby, silently asking for some suppressing fire. Garrett shot over the hood of the car he and Ruby were crouching behind, while Karen ran to take a position behind a covered bus stop that was on the opposite side of the street from where Joseba had disappeared.

“Hey Knight, I’ve got their attention split for you,” Karen whispered over the radio, then began shooting at the Templars.

There was the loud crashing sound of glass breaking and wood bursting from the general direction Joseba had gone, but Ruby couldn’t see exactly what was happening. There was a moment of gunfire coming from the building with the three—at least three—Templars. Ruby took the opportunity to run to the next covered position en route to their target.

“West, I thought I just saw adds heading your way. Watch your north,” Garrett advised over the radio as he followed Ruby.

“We see them.”

The gunfire from the Templar-occupied building stopped, then Joseba came out the front door. His left arm was bleeding considerably, but he didn’t seem particularly fazed by the injury. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a loud explosion in the distance.

“Every team check in,” Ruby instructed.

“South is fine.”

“West’s okay.”

“That was East. We’ll live.”

“Don’t count chickens,” muttered one of the hunters.

Ruby’s squad continued slowly but steadily toward the target. As they moved they could hear the fighting of the others. Occasionally small instructions or cues were relayed over the radio. Through some small miracle there hadn’t been any miscommunications due to the fact that they were all using the same channel. It’d been a calculated risk that they’d taken in order to ensure that the teams were able to call out to each other at a moment’s notice.

The industrial building took up half of a city block. It appeared to be brick and concrete construction, which meant that all their entrance points were fixed. No blowing holes through drywall at their convenience. Based on the fact that every team had faced some sort of fortified opposition, the building was almost certainly held too. Ruby’s group studied the north side of building from behind the burnt shell of a van.

“Is anyone inside yet?” Ruby asked the other groups. She would’ve hoped that the other teams would call out before attempting to enter, but mistakes and improvisations happened in the field.

“East is nearly there, but not in.”

“West is stuck about a block out.” There was an explosion to the west of the building. “Eliah’s getting a quick patch up, but the rest of us should be in position in a minute.”

“South is not inside, but we’re ready,” added Dean. “Everybody be sure to leave one or two outside to cover our exits.”

“I’m good to provide cover alone,” Garrett informed his team as he flicked down the bipod on his
rifle while moving into a more protected position.

Ruby had to go into the building and Joseba was best at close quarters combat, but both of them were demons and thus susceptible to the same vulnerabilities. Karen was their natural compliment heading into the unknown.

"Joseba, Karen, and I are ready to roll," Ruby informed the other groups. "Let's lob in some grenades before heading in. Call out before you actually breach."

"West, you guys better get ready. Grenades might send them running your way," warned Tamara.

"My money's that they'll run to the explosions," Faymon guessed. "Fucking zealots."

"Whatever. Everyone watch your asses regardless," Dean cautioned.

Ruby, Joseba and Karen ran for the side of the building while Garrett provided some generalized suppressing fire. Ruby shot out a short window leading into the basement while they ran, then Karen threw a grenade into the basement. The three of them stood clear of the window until the grenade exploded. Ruby signaled for them to wait a moment, then threw in a second grenade for anyone coming to check on the first explosion.

"Ready for breach," Ruby whispered into the radio.

"Ready on East."

"Ready South."

"Going in." Ruby nodded to Joseba, who started entering. Ruby followed, then Karen.

"We've got people inside now," Karen warned over the radio. "If anybody starts throwing grenades in randomly, us humans will haunt your ass."

"North team is on basement level one, looking for the stairs down to basement level two," Ruby informed the other teams of their location in the hopes of not spooking each other.

"East team on the ground floor."

"South team on basement one. North, do you guys want to look toward the east side of this floor and we'll look toward the west?"

"Sure."

Joseba took point and Karen stayed on Ruby's other side, providing protection from the rear. Dean and his group were working their way through the same floor looking for access to the lower basement, which should be the foundation of the building. Above them, the East team, probably led by Gusion, was making their way through the ground floor, hopefully clearing it of whatever Templar garrison might exist. The West team would probably be sending in one or two people shortly, either to assist East on the ground floor or to begin the descent with North and South.

The third door they tried opened onto a hallway containing two Templars taking position to fire on a different door. Ruby smiled at their luck while Joseba cut them down with a few well-placed shots. It seemed like the fact they’d used multiple entry points had brought a good amount of confusion on the Templars. For a few seconds it felt like the op might be another smash and grab followed by a quick beer—then the first panicked call came over the radio.
“Angels! We’ve got angels!” Garrett spoke quickly, but his words were unmistakable. “At least two on the first floor, northeast corner.”

“You sure?” asked Tamara.

“Bullets are no good,” Garrett explained. “I had to relocate. North, your breach point is no good. I don’t have a safe vantage on it.”

"Are they coming down for us?" Ruby asked as they found the staircase down to the lower basement.

"I lost track of one, the other is defending the entrance on that side."

"Awesome," sighed Karen. “We’re cornered in a fucking basement.”

“We aren’t just cornered.” Ruby looked down the stairwell. The angels had been waiting here and it would be foolish to think that they hadn’t actually gone down to the gate itself. “We’re flanked, aren’t we?”

"Technically so are they," Cas pointed out, referring to any angels that might be on the ground floor.

“You think that they’re in the bottom level too?” asked Faymon.

“We have to assume so,” suggested Hicks.

“North is at the stairs to the lower basement,” Ruby told the others and waited a beat.

“Are we entering the trap or pulling back?” asked Gusion.

“Why are they even here?” Dean voiced Ruby’s concern.

It didn’t make sense for angels to be there, risking their lives when they could’ve just thrown more Templar bodies at it.

“We’re going down.”
"Three more Templars were prodding at our West breach point. I got two of them, one made it in," warned Eliah.

As Ruby’s team rounded a corner, the lights on their weapons dimmed slightly, then flickered. Karen stumbled, but caught herself.

"You okay?" Ruby whispered.

"Yeah. Just missed my footing."

"Something’s up—r light—one else?" Dean’s voice was staticky as it cut in and out. The interference was worse than it should’ve been even considering their location in a basement.

"We’re getting interference," Ruby said over the radio, but Joseba and Karen shook their heads to indicate that the signal was bad. “Do you copy?”

When only static came back, she realized that they were faced with a dilemma. Tactically they were in a terrible situation and everybody knew it. They were walking into a trap with basically no ability to call for backup. Under normal circumstances they would pull back. Repairing the gate was important, but they could regroup and make a stronger assault later. But something was happening then and it was important enough to justify at least two angels and the rest of Heaven’s established defenses.

For all she knew the important thing justifying Heaven’s excessive force was actually just killing Hell's repair workers. It wouldn't be the first time in history an army put effort into whittling away the enemy's technicians.

But, even if that was Heaven's sole purpose for being there, Dean and Cas were already in the lower basement. Knowing it was a trap, the pair could either retreat or continue in the hopes of find her. Similarly, she had to decide whether to gamble on looking for them or assuming they'd pull back on their own. It was a prisoner's dilemma. Despite all the big talk of sparing Sam the loss of multiple family members, she knew that they would risk their lives to try to save her.

"Dean and Cas are still down here," Ruby told Joseba and Karen. "We keep going until we find them."

Ruby’s group made it another forty feet before their lights dimmed again, then went out entirely. For a moment the basement was pitch black. Then distant gunfire echoed through the halls accompanied by the flickering of muzzle flashes. They ran toward the gunfire, but were intercepted. The scene unfolded like a piece of stop-motion animation. The flashes of light from the gunshots illuminated only snapshots of the movement.

A man rushed through a nearby doorway, charging at Ruby. She started firing at him, but the bullets did nothing against the angel. Joseba intercepted him, tackling him to the ground. The pair wrestled for a few seconds before the knight impaled the angel with his own blade.

Their group continued down the hallway toward the fighting, but Karen collapsed and began shaking. Ruby saw her lying on the ground in the flickering light and went back for her. There weren’t any obvious injuries, but it was difficult to see.

Ruby blinked her eyes black and almost regretted her decision. The entire basement was a thick fog of different types of magical energy. It was so overwhelming she could barely make out the walls and people around her. A stringent aura was radiating from a point about fifty feet away, in the direction that the fight was occurring. She could see the effects of the aura accumulating in
Karen’s body.

Despite the sensory overload from the various magical energies, Ruby crawled down the hall. She could see the distinct pulsing of a damping spell coming from a clay totem in the room where the fight was still ongoing. She dodged Cas, who was sparring with another angel, then climbed over the corpse of an enemy. For a moment she was distracted by Dean nearly getting stabbed by an angel, but Joseba grabbed the angel from behind.

Ruby hastily smashed the totem on the floor, returning power to their flashlights and signal to their radios. The enemy angels were dead, but she still didn’t like what she saw. Dean was sweating and swayed slightly, before Cas caught him. The two humans in the lower basement were sick and Ruby knew where to look for answers. It was right behind her.

The gate appeared to be a 5x5’ iron hatch embedded in the ground, but it was so much more than that. With her eyes black she could see multiple layers of magic penetrating down into the ground, despite the fact that technically speaking there was nothing below the ground’s surface but dirt. It was a portal to Hell, wherever that might be located—she wasn’t an expert on interplanar physics. She was their expert at magical troubleshooting and repair in the field, and boy did they need that expertise.

There were four dead bodies, one positioned on each side of the gate. The bodies were naked with their throats slit. Based on the arrangement of the bodies and the presence of frankincense, gold dust, and rock rose petal, she guessed that the bodies were virgins. Heaven had tried to do a spell... but something had gone wrong.

The angels were trying to force open the gate even more and make the surrounding area inhospitable to demons, but somewhere in their calculations they messed up. They had bit off more than they could chew and probably hadn’t factored in the magics leaking from the gate itself. How could they know just how many spells had been active in the lab that had blown, creating the whole fucking fiasco in the first place? They wanted to create an aura that would be inhospitable to Abyssal, but with the arcane cocktail coming from the gate, the entire area reeked of the Abyss and more.

“They’ve been tampering with the gate. It’s no good,” Ruby said over the radio. “Humans, put on your masks and get out of the building now. The whole fucking place is toxic.”

Cas helped put the respirator on Dean, then draped him over his shoulder. He was about ready to start making his way out when he looked back at Ruby.

“It’s not just affecting humans,” Cas said as Ruby tasted the blood trickling from her nose.

“Joseba, grab Karen from the hall and start leading them out.” Ruby ordered while wiping the blood off her face.

“Rube, you can’t—” Dean started, but she interrupted him.

“I’m not dying here, but I can’t leave it like this,” she said as she started pulling reagents from her pack. “I’ll be two seconds and it’s a fucking order.”

Joseba immediately fetched Karen and began working his way in the direction Dean and Cas had come from. Cas hesitated, torn between staying with the slightly ill Ruby or evacuating the more severely ill Dean. When he started dragging Dean toward the exit, Dean weakly fought with him before passing out.
The gate was open and the danger was worse than she'd expected. It was probably a combination of the initial explosion and the prying of Heaven's forces. She didn't have the materials to wholly repair or even seal the gate, but at the very least she could mitigate the damage. A very simple suppression spell could reduce the future contamination, hopefully preventing the toxic effects from spreading as far as the anti-flight aura had. Then they'd just need a way to make it less accessible to the enemy until Hell could send a better-equipped repair team.

"We're dropping the building," Ruby informed her troops over the radio as she pulled a can of spray paint from her pack and started drawing sigils on the ground. As she approached the gate, the howling of many tortured souls began pressing on her senses, but she kept working.

"What?!" yelped Garrett.

"We're burying the gate in a thousand tons of concrete, brick, Hellcloud gas, and this poison cloud." She tossed the paint can to the side, cut her hand, then started marking the gate itself. The iron surface burnt her hand, but she didn't have time to worry about it. It took all of her concentration to get the sigils down despite the pain and screaming. Between bloody sigils, she managed to radio to the others. "I'm capping the gate... as best we can for now. Hell will come back for the permanent repairs... but we can't leave it easily exposed where Heaven can fuck it up even worse."

"We don't have nearly enough explosives to take down the building," Hicks advised. "The building is weak, but not that weak."

"I need four volunteers, one to each corner of the building and get ready to use your slice all around the biggest support pillar you can find," Ruby said as she finished the last sigil. "Everyone else get at least one block clear."

"Cutting a support pillar that's next to you," Eliah said in disbelief. "That's suic—"

The rest of his words were drowned out by four of the demons immediately volunteering. With the anti-flight aura in place, even the demons wouldn't be able to make it out of the building before it collapsed. They couldn't smoke out after being crushed and in all probability risked being slowly killed by the toxic mixture of magics. Despite all that, Ruby knew she'd have at least four volunteers among the demons. That was part of why she'd picked them. They would die for Hell or Earth, and gladly for both.

"We've got three angels incoming," Garrett warned.

"I need thirty seconds," Ruby replied as she finished her spell. "Everyone but the slicers clear out."

"No one's... dropping the building... with Ruby inside," Dean said over the radio.

She pulled the pin on her Hellcloud grenades, dropped them on the gate, then started running for the exit. Her heart was pounding, which made blood pour from her nose. She stumbled on the stairs, but scrambled with her hands to reach the first landing. Gunfire broke out on the ground floor above her, though she didn't slow down for a moment.

“Xil is down!” called Tamara over the radio, referring to one of the demons that had volunteered to destroy a support pillar.

Ruby was running so quickly that she couldn’t turn a corner sharp enough and slammed into the concrete wall. She barely noticed that her arm broke on impact. She was too busy climbing the
stairs to the ground floor.

“I’ve got slice,” Hicks said, his voice was winded as he ran. “I got Xil’s pillar.”

“Angels!” shouted another volunteer. “We gotta do it.”

“Almost there!” yelled Hicks.

As she ran through the warehouse’s main floor, Ruby could see a blur of motion behind her and one to her left. An angel was chasing her out of the building, but at the same time Hicks was running into it. She didn’t bother with finding the door Hicks had used, she jumped through a large window and tried to tumble. Barely a moment after hitting the ground, Joseba was at her side.

The building didn’t explode outward. Instead it collapsed in on itself, crushing everything in its footprint and sending a blast of dust and lesser debris outward at its base. Joseba positioned himself to protect Ruby from the bulk of the blast, but she still had minor injuries and inhaled enough dust to choke a human.

The survivors of their mission were collected and made their way back to the motel. They only needed two cars to transport what had been the ten of them. Except from Ruby, Gusion and Joseba all the demons were crushed along with Hicks. Eliah, Karen, Dean, and Tamara were injured or ill. Ruby didn’t even want to start thinking about her own injuries.

Instead she looked at the other survivors in her car and wondered if their trust in her had been well placed. To her knowledge there hadn’t been a single devil’s trap in the building. Maybe the humans never should’ve come on the mission at all? They’d been endangered, and for what? The theoretical benefits of cooperation?

"Hicks... he had a sister I’m gonna have to notify." Dean sighed as he covered his face with his hands and allowed Cas to wrap an arm around him.

“He died well,” Gusion said as a small comfort.

The compliment made Dean look up in surprise. He couldn’t remember when he’d last heard a non-Crossroads demon other than Ruby say something nice about a human.

“What were their names?” Garrett asked in a dazed voice after a few minutes of silence. "The demons—I just... I didn’t even know their names."
"I don't know how to make you trust me," Ruby told Dean, then thought better of her statement. "I mean, I don't know how to make someone trust anybody. I guess you've got Sam—and Bobby's still alive in your time."

It felt strange for her to be reassuring him that he had Bobby as a source of confidence. It meant something special to her, a thing he'd frequently taken for granted. In this time Bobby had been dead for over a decade. For most of his and Sam's lives Bobby had played their father figure with rarely even a thank you, but faced with his death Dean considered the relationship with more reverence.

Her suggestion that he trusted Sam was oddly upsetting. If anyone had asked him who he could believe in, he'd have instinctively said Sam… yet that almost felt like a lie. There were things that he trusted Sam to be capable of accomplishing, but real trust — that feeling that Sam would always have his back — that just wasn't really there anymore. The thought made Dean's heart hurt.

"I don't need to be doing trust falls with everyone. As long as we can fight together that's good enough." Dean tried to shut down the conversation for fear that she would probe too closely to his confused feelings on Sam.

"You fight side-by-side long enough, it'll be better than a trust fall." Ruby gently kicked his right boot in a gesture that was a little too friendly. "C'mon. I've got a ton of cool shit that you'll want to see."

She guided him into the bedroom that lacked a bed. He realized that it must've been her room. Demons didn't sleep, after all. The selection of photos on the wall near her desk suddenly made a little more sense. Almost all of them were focused on her and Sam or their kids. It was a passive display of sentimentality that he wasn't expecting from her. In a way he could understand. She'd invested a lot into Sam and their kids; it'd be hard not to be fond of them. Then Dean spotted the photograph of the other him and the baby Dylaniel lying on the couch. She didn't need to have that photograph.

"I think Dyl was a few weeks old," Ruby explained, having seen him staring at it. "Cas was playing with Tom's camera—"

Dean abruptly looked away from the photo. "What did you want to show me?" His voice was harsher than he'd intended, but she chose to give him the benefit of the doubt.

For several hours she explained all sorts of stuff about magical weapons. It turned out that she was in charge of more than half of the AFE's research and development when it came to weapons and munitions. Ruby also had a significant role in their defensive strategy, but her real passion was for
the offensive and magical tools. In a way her melding of mystic and combat reminded him of Tom, but minus the hunterly inclinations.

It was interesting even if he didn't understand half of what she was saying. Through thirty years of trial and error by some of the foremost experts on Earth, the most useful tools were available to him. She volunteered to make recipes or instructions for each item before he returned home, along with a few samples. It didn't solve all his problems. He still wasn't sure how to deal with the Heaven situation or Lilith, but at least the fight would be a little fairer.

"You're trying to save Sam?" Dean eventually asked, suddenly having better insight into the schematics for the angel killing grenade on her workbench.

Back when he was exploring the bunker on his own, it had been before he had known about Sam's situation. He hadn't understood why so much effort had been put into finding a way to kill an angel without affecting the vessel. Everyone in this time was so casual about killing. Enemy vessels almost certainly weren't shown particular mercy. They had consented after all; they were collaborators…. That's what he'd figured, before he knew about Sam.

"All the time," she replied quietly.

"You've been at this for eleven years?"

"Closer to nine." Ruby tidied up some of the papers on her desk. "He wasn't reliably lucid for the first year or two, which made it nearly impossible to study them. So much of understanding what's happening to them is measured subjectively. I have to gather my data through talking with Sam. Lucifer wouldn't cooperate with any real testing. He knows it'd only be used for trying to split them."

"Do you think you can do it?" Dean could feel himself looking for some kind of hope, even if this wasn't his time and his Sam.

"Maybe... maybe eventually." Her eyes dimmed. "They're really interwoven at this point. That's what makes trying to separate them so dangerous. I have to keep trying, but I don't even know if it's practical now."

"What do you mean?"

"Say I can snap my fingers and Lucifer is dead and gone without damaging Sam. They've shared a brain for eleven years. What's that do to a person? He'll literally lose three senses that angels possess, eons worth of memories—he'll lose his tormentor, but also his shadow."

The way she spoke about Sam and Lucifer's relationship actually made him think of Alastair. The dynamic was somewhat different, yet he and this Sam had both been prisoner to a sadist for years. Dean knew the kinds of bizarre dependency issues it could create even without sharing a body... well, in a way Alastair had had control over his body. The real battle had been for his mind, a battle that he'd proved too weak for.

"In some ways it's better than the first year," Ruby continued, unaware of Dean's dark musings. "Sam has more ability to take full control, but it's because they don't fight each other all the time. They don't care about the boundaries as much. It gives Sam more power, but when they do fight they basically become nonfunctional: screaming, shit flying around and catching fire. They can bounce back and forth so fast that they can't communicate."

As she described the numerous unpleasant scenarios that had somehow become his brother’s daily
life, Dean helplessly tried to turn his mind from those mental images. A few quick drifts of his attention all-too-easily turned into an almost uncontrollable level of distraction. To his surprise, he realized he'd only been half-listening to what she was saying and actually missed her changing topics to some other spells she'd been working on.

Normally, his stamina was pretty high and he’d be able to endure dry lectures on nearly no sleep; he’d listened to Sam recount research findings in the early hours of the morning for years. This was understandably different though. He felt off, maybe restless. It'd been a long few days that were very different than his normal routine. If he had to guess it was being cooped up for so long and cramming on an unreasonable amount of information. He wasn't exactly tired or hungry, but he needed something.

"I need a break," he interrupted her with an apologetic shrug. "Any chance I can run outside from some fresh air?"

She stared at him for a moment, surprised that he might not have been paying attention to her explanation of third-grade anti-possession charms. Luckily, three decades of raising children had taught her not to bother trying to cram a lesson into a distracted mind. Instead she shrugged off the unintentional slight. "It's probably not the safest idea," she replied. "Any chance you'd settle for staying inside? Tom set up a gym with ultraviolet lighting. That kid wasn't made for the indoors."

He found it amusing that she referred to Tom as a kid despite him being in his mid-thirties.

"Does it have a sound system?"

Even though Dean's hour-long jog was on a treadmill, it was better than nothing. He'd lost nearly fifteen minutes browsing the bunker's media library for something to listen to while running. As much as he was inclined to queue up some classics, he ended up taking a chance on a playlist entitled 'Tom's workout.' It was an eclectic mix that leaned a bit more toward remixes of jazz. He'd tried something new, like Tom had encouraged. Maybe he still would've preferred Metallica, but the effort was made and some intangible quota of personal growth met.

The exercise made him feel a little more alive, though it didn't really resolve that odd sensation. Something was quietly gnawing at him. It could've been countless things; he was buried in triggers of stress. The whole world was shit, he didn't have a single good and simple relationship with the people here, and he had a huge amount of information to bring back with him. He didn't even know exactly how to utilize most of what he was learning. There was so much floating in his head that he was starting to feel a tension headache coming on.

Dean decided to hunt up someone to ask about some painkillers. He found Kaylee and Tom in the library whispering to each other while looking through the doorway into bunker’s entry and tactical room. When he got closer, he saw that they were watching their mom and Dylaniel.

Ruby had her hand on the nephilim's shoulder and was speaking quietly to him. Dylaniel nodded at something she said, but he didn’t make eye contact with her. She kissed his forehead, then walked back to Kaylee and Tom.

“I'm gonna hit the usual suspects, see if Miro knows anything. I'll be right back,” Ruby told her kids before disappearing.

“What’s going on?” Dean asked in a hushed voice.

Dylaniel was actually pacing slightly.
“His parents should be back by now,” Kaylee explained.

Dean's brain hiccuped at the realization that the other him might be arriving at any moment—he should have arrived already. Based on Dyaniel's visible distress, their absence was a very bad sign.

“Back from where?” he asked.

“Heaven.”

“What?! Are you kidding me?” Dean struggled to keep his voice down. "You guys are at war with them and I'm just walking past the pearly gates?"

It was insane. The other him was clearly insane. They'd made such a big deal about keeping him from wandering off base, but the whole time the other Dean was putting his head into the tiger's maw. Beyond its recklessness, the whole hypocrisy was pretty fucking insulting. He couldn't even go outside for some fresh air.

“During the High Holy Season the ceasefire extends to all planes and the borders are open,” Kaylee explained. “The angels get to visit their siblings, demons get to return home or escape the pit for a bit. A lot of diplomatic missions happen during that time. Dean and Cas can usually shake a lot of conversions out of these three days.”

"Isn't it pretty fucking suicidal for me to walk straight into Heaven?” he asked. “I thought I was at the top of their shit list.”

"Our uncles worked their way up to it over a decade or so. It's seemed pretty safe. For the high choirs of Heaven to willfully violate the High Holy Season would probably cause a huge number of their remaining angels to fall in outrage. The cost-benefit isn't quite there for Heaven.”

Dean hated the way Kaylee sounded like an economist half the time.

"But they'd have Michael's vessel," he countered, still thoroughly confused by the logic.

"They'd have our uncle, who'd be a stubborn asshole—no offense.” Kaylee shrugged. "There hasn't been any urgent reason to make such a dangerous play for the Sword Of Heaven yet.”

"I thought they wanted to have Michael kill Lucifer or something? You guys literally have him locked in a cage."　

"Heaven doesn't know that," Tom said with a reflexive grin. "They know Lucifer disappeared and went radio silent. Our intel says that Heaven thinks he was sealed away in his original prison." 　

"The Sword Of Heaven is just another heavy-hitter as far as Heaven is concerned, not the last piece to finishing the apocalypse," Kaylee added. "Hence, they're not willing to lose a shitload of angels for one vessel, even if it is Michael's vessel... or at least that's how it's been for years.”

“But they’re running late.” Dean didn’t know if he was asking a question or just reaching the same concerned understanding as them.

“Ceasefire ended twenty minutes ago,” Tom clarified.

Dean watched Dyaniel. He wanted to be helpful, but didn't know how. In some ways he felt like he was the last person Dyaniel should be around in that moment. He was a physical reminder of the kid’s missing father. That thought spawned all sorts of troublesome feelings.
“Who’s Miro?” Dean asked in an attempt to fill the uncomfortable silence that seemed to only worsen his headache.

“Dean and Cas's goddaughter. She’s pretty in tune with pirate radio and not currently AWOL,” Kaylee answered. “If they stopped anywhere else on Earth she’d probably know about it.”

Ruby appeared in the exact same spot that she'd departed from. Dyleniel looked up at her arrival, but hesitated when he saw her worried expression.

"Something happened. There was a fight that broke out at one of Heaven's gates. It started some sort of cascade effect, more than half of the gates are going at it tooth-and-nail," she explained as she hurried to a table that was covered with a map of Earth and began marking it up with a dry erase marker. Her markings didn't seem to correlate to the geography of Earth, which made Dean wonder what the gates of Heaven truly consisted of.

"Where are Dean and Cas?" asked Tom.

"No one's sure. Reports say they were right in the shitstorm."

"I can help," Kaylee suggested.

"You're not fighting near or in Heaven.” Ruby shot down Kaylee's suggestion and Tom nodded in agreement with their mom's assessment. “You don't know what that place would do to you."

"Which gate were they at last?" asked Dyleniel as he started putting on his dual pistol holsters.

"Dyl, you're target number one up there,” Tom warned. “You'll be swarmed as soon as you touch down."

"That would be their mistake," Dyleniel replied while grabbing a short sword from on top of a bookcase, then swinging it to test its balance.

Before the debate could go any further, two men appeared in the entryway. One was hunched over, being supported by the other. Dyleniel dropped the sword and ran to his parents in a gesture that Dean found surprisingly emotional. He helped his dad upright, and Dean got his first look at the couple.

Cas looked the same except for minor variations. His hair was a bit more chaotic. Instead of his suit jacket and trench coat, he wore a black leather jacket that contrasted with his white button up shirt and light blue tie.

The other man was Dean, only older—but not as old as expected. His slightly shaggy hair was grey at the temples and peppered throughout, which generally lightened the whole. He had some sort of black plastic device that Dean didn't recognize tucked behind his right ear. A few crow's feet were visible when he smiled, but otherwise the wrinkles were negligible. An old scar was visible spanning his forehead, just above his eyebrows. He had a short, well-maintained combination mustache and goatee. His overall appearance was a rough cut, somehow polished to remove the most harsh edges.

The older Dean hugged Dyleniel, who embraced him back. Dyleniel extended his right arm to pull Cas into the hug. That Dean kissed Dyleniel on the forehead, then whispered something to his son. He wrapped an arm around Cas, completing the family's group hug, then rested his cheek against Cas's, and sighed with relief.
After a second of quiet calm, the older Dean glanced over to where Kaylee, Tom, Ruby, and Dean were standing. His mouth fell open slightly and his eyes widened. He moved to stand between his family and Dean.

"Dad, he's fine. He's you," Dylaniel said, quickly realizing all the different ways that meeting could go wrong.

Cas peeked around from behind his husband to stare at Dean. The angel put an arm on his Dean's forearm, which had tensed into a fist at his side.

After a moment the older Dean finally managed to ask, "What the hell is going on?"

"Cas—not this Cas, but the past Cas—threw Dean—not you, Dean—past Dean—into the future—I mean the present," Kaylee tried to explain, but paused to double-check her attempt at a statement.

"Dean is—" Ruby started, then stopped and pinched the bridge of her nose. "This name thing is gonna be a problem."

"What are we supposed to do about it? 'Dean' doesn't really lend itself to nicknames and 'Winchester' counts for like five people in this room," complained Dean. Though he had to admit that the name thing was making his headache even worse. So much about the conversation was making it worse.

"Six," the older Dean corrected. "The kids called me 'Dee' when they were younger. You could use that."

"Why should I pick up the nickname? You're the one who's used it before," Dean objected. It was like everyone was asking him to change, and now someone was even after his name.

"You're the one coming into my time. Why do I have to change?"

"Holy fuck." Ruby turned to the older of the Deans. "It's not like you're wearing the same fucking dress to prom. Dean—"

"Is he wearing my clothes?" the other Dean asked.

"He threw up on his only set," Kaylee explained, but that didn't seem to reassure her uncle.

"Listen, Dee," Ruby continued to address the older Dean. "It's for everybody's sanity and just for a day or so. Kali is coming in to help with sending him back."

"Fine," Dee conceded. "What's he even doing here?"

Dean was pretty pissed that he was being talked about like he wasn't in the room, but before he could say anything about it Tom started answering the question.

"He's trying to sneak a peek at the future to get some ideas on how to handle things in his time."

"Awesome," muttered Dee as he ran his fingers through his hair until he touched a bloody gash on the side of his head and cringed in pain.

Cas looked at him with concern. The angel whispered something to Dee, who turned to face him. Cas caressed the cut, healing it. Dee smiled at Cas in a way that made Dean's stomach churn.

"What the fuck happened up there?" asked Kaylee. "If Heaven really did break the ceasefire, I've got to get out there. Finch and the rest of those idiots can handle fighting just fine, but if we're
Dee took a seat at one of the library's tables. Everyone except Dylaniel took that as the signal to pull up a chair for an extended conversation. The nephilim preferred to stand to one side.

"I'm not sure if it's technically breaking the rules, but they started closing the gates before the end of the holy season," Dee explained. "They were pissed, saying that we were trying to pull a fast one on them or something, like we were the ones escalating things during the holy season."

"North America has been playing nice. I'll call the other leads, though, to see if anyone's been posturing," Kaylee assured him.

"Good. I don't know if we have the moral high ground or not. It wasn't obvious what they were pissed about," Dee said, then glanced at Cas. "Anyway, we had to take the long way out."

"They caught up to us during the last few jumps before Earth, but they didn't do enough damage before we were able to get clear." Cas had trouble concealing the distress in his voice.

Dee's hand moved under the table and Cas's mouth flickered with a sad smile. Dean's head pounded at the realization that the other him was patting or rubbing Cas's thigh. His pulse was rising at the thought that they dabbled in little public displays of affection. The other him wasn't just in a relationship with a guy; he flaunted it.

"I think a few are going to fall, so it was worth it," Dee said optimistically.

Dean openly stared at the other version of him, which made Dee visibly uncomfortable. Cas looked back and forth between the two Deans.

"How do you like the future?" Cas tried to ease the tension with some small talk.

"'Like' is probably the last word I'd use for what I've been seeing," Dean replied.

"He saw Dad," added Kaylee.

"Yeah. That's just part of it," Dean said as he looked at Dee, who raised an eyebrow.

"Well, sometimes life doesn't go how you expected when you were a kid," Dee replied, causing Dean to scowl subtly.

"I've been through too much in the last few days to just swallow this fucking atrocity." Dean's eyes reflexively flickered between Dee and Cas. "And take that kind of shit."

"You're taking shit?" Dee gave a humorless laugh. "I've been working nonstop for two days, just got my ass beat by a bunch of angels, and I come home to find my fucking doppelgänger—"

"I'm not a fucking doppelgänger!"

"It's a figure of speech!"

"Okay," Ruby interjected. "You two need to cool down before one of you does something incredibly dumb."

"I'm not the one being an asshole," muttered Dean.

"That's fucking rich." Dee leaned forward toward Dean. "You come into my home, judge me, and then call me the asshole."
Cas put a hand on Dee's chest in an attempt to calm him down and possibly hold him back. When Dee placed his own hand on top of Cas's it was all too much. Dean could feel himself start to jump the tracks. This other guy, Dee, wasn't him. He couldn't be him, but he was. There was something horribly wrong with the entire situation and it was personified in Dee and Cas's relationship.

"I get to judge you—I am you!" Dean shouted. "We're supposed to be the same fucking person, but clearly something went wrong with you somewhere, because I'm not some fucking faggot!"

Dean's heart was pounding and he felt his hands shaking. He knew that he had crossed the line, and based on the silence around the table everyone else was painfully aware of it too. He wasn't entirely sure why he'd said what he did. To be honest, it frightened him.

Dee got out of his chair and walked around the table. Dean thought that his older self was marching out of the room in a huff and only realized what was actually happening about a moment too late. He tried to kick his chair backward, but the Dee grabbed the armrest with his left hand, dodged Dean's startled kick, and landed a hard punch. The younger Dean felt the distinct crack of his jaw breaking. His head flew back, and the chair fell over, having been released by Dee at the last second.

Dee wordlessly walked out of the library. Cas stopped for a moment to look at Dean with a combination of concern and disappointed, but followed his husband out. Dylnaniel watched the scene silently. He hadn't made a single move to stop his dad or even flinched at the assault. He turned to leave the room.

"Dyl, you aren't leaving yet!" Ruby yelled, causing Dylnaniel to stop. "You heal him before you go."

"I'm not a child." Dylnaniel's voice was colder than Dean could've imagined possible.

"Really?" Ruby was fuming. "Because it feels like I'm surrounded by fucking four-year-olds."

Dylnaniel knelt down next to Dean and lightly touched his jaw. He barely looked at Dean while healing him, then got up and left without speaking.

"Fucking hell," Kaylee sighed, then disappeared.

"I'd forgotten how much I hated you," Ruby said as she offered Dean a hand up off the floor.

Tom watched Dean quietly for a moment while clutching his silver locket in his hand. The anguish on his face was particularly painful to see for some reason. He got up from his chair, then left the room too.

"I didn't mean it to come out like that—I don't…. Fuck." Dean rubbed his temples, trying to relieve some tension. He was exhausted, ashamed, and at a complete loss. "What should I do? Go apologize?"

"I'd give them some space. Let them cool down," Ruby advised flatly. "Cas is probably talking Dean—Dee down right now. I'll go check on Dyl, but Dee's always been the best one at talking to him."

The thought that Dee and Dylnaniel were particularly close made the whole thing worse. On top of everything, he'd managed to alienate Dylnaniel twice while wearing the same face as his beloved parent.

"I fucked up," Dean exhaled the words.
"You think?" Ruby started to head toward the hallway leading to Dyaniel’s room, but she turned back to Dean. “I get that things are tough and confusing. I get that you’re gonna try to make it right or you’ll try harder, but if you say something like that to my family again, I’ll be the one to break your face and it’s not getting healed. My family’s seen too much hate—especially Dee and Cas."
had rolled at least three times and settled upside-down on a concrete embankment.

After providing the information to the intake nurse, Cas found a clear span of wall to lean against while waiting for word on Dean. He looked down at his hands, which had Dean's dried blood on them. The first point of impact during the Impala's roll had been the roof on the driver's side. The windows shattered, causing several cuts on Dean's left side. When the car stopped, Cas saw blood trickling down Dean's unconscious face.

Cas stood staring at his hands for nearly an hour. If the ER had been less busy one of the staff would've probably checked him for a concussion or shock, but that night everyone was a little dazed. And even if they'd asked, how would he have explained the utter terror of reaching out to heal Dean's limp and bloody form only to find that his powers weren't working? The sound of a woman screaming down a hallway shook Cas from his thoughts and he decided to check on Dean.

"Have you heard the status on Dean Wesson yet?"

She consulted her CRT computer monitor for a moment, then went back to filling out a form. "He's been stabilized."

"When can I go back there? I need to see him," Cas told her.

"Are you family?"

"Yes. I'm his husband."

The woman stopped writing and put down her pen before looking up at Cas for the first time. She was visibly uncomfortable and glanced to the nurse, catching his attention. The nurse left his post, then walked over to join her.

"Is something wrong?" Cas asked.

"Sir, the state of Mississippi does not recognize your... um...." She swallowed dryly. "Relationship. Hospital regulations say—well, especially with the state of emergency—we can't have just anyone back there."

"I'm not 'just anyone.' I'm his husband." Cas raised his voice. "I'm his only family for—"

"Listen buddy, you need to calm down," said the nurse as he grabbed Cas's arm.

"I will calm down when I can see Dean!" Cas yelled, drawing the attention of everyone in the waiting area, along with the two cops.

Cas looked across the street at the entrance to the ER as he dialed Sam's direct line. He leaned against the diner's counter, then thanked the waitress for letting him use their landline. His cell had been smashed in the car accident and there wasn't much chance of the hospital letting him back in let alone giving him access to a phone. The waitress returned with a pack of ice, which Cas held to his newly forming black eye. As soon he heard the click indicating that the call had successfully transferred, he started talking.

"I need your help. It's Dean."

"Is he okay?" Sam asked as soon as Cas had finished speaking.

"I don't know. We were traveling in Sumrall, Mississippi when there was some sort of blast," he
explained. “The Impala was knocked off the road. Dean was injured and I can't use my powers. I brought Dean to a hospital, but they won't let me see him or tell me about his state.”

"Why won't they?"

“They say I'm not his family, because my vessel is male.” There was a pause from Sam's end of the phone, so Cas continued. "There are police at the hospital. They're armed. Otherwise I would—"

"Cas, promise me you aren't going to fight your way in there. I'll be there as fast as I can, just please don't do anything that might get you shot or arrested."

"Please hurry."

"I will," Sam assured him, then quickly said, “Oh, yeah. What's my last name?"

Sam grabbed one of his old Fed suits, his IDs for Samuel Wesson, and teleported as close as he could to Sumrall. He ended up being forced out of the teleport about 240 miles north of town. After a few minutes he had hot-wired the fastest car he could find and sped toward the hospital.

He nearly hit another car at 100 mph when he suddenly discovered that none of his powers worked either. In his haste, he had planned to telekinetically nudge other cars out of his way. But when the truck in front of him didn't move aside, he almost flew off the shoulder trying to avoid the collision. He wanted to call Crowley and get their people working on that new development, but it would have to wait until he knew Dean was okay.

"Cas.” Sam hugged the angel when he arrived, then held him at arm's length by the shoulders. "I know you're upset and you have every right to be, but please just follow my lead."

They marched across the street and into the ER. Every staffer and cop eyed Cas while several people in the waiting area whispered. Sam ignored their reactions. He walked with purpose up to the intake nurse.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for my brother, Dean Wesson,” Sam explained. “I'm told he's a patient here."

The nurse stared at Cas knowingly. "Can I see some ID?” She reviewed Sam's ID, including the FBI badge, which made her do a nervous double-take. "Alright, I can take you back to see him."

"He's coming too.” Sam tilted his head at Cas. She opened her mouth to say something, but Sam subtly tapped his FBI badge with his index finger as he continued. "That wasn't a question."

She led them down several hallways lined with gurneys of injured people. After stopping in front of a wall of charts, she pulled one from a cubbyhole. Sam took the clipboard from her, confirmed that it was for Dean Wesson, then looked back up at her shocked expression.

"Where is he?” Sam asked.

"38C.” She stared at Sam while he flipped through the charts. "Do you have medical training?"

"No,” he replied flatly. “I'll need someone who can explain these charts to me." He didn't move to hand it back to her.

She was visibly confused and unnerved by his behavior. "Well I can do that for you, sir."

"No, I want someone who wasn't previously involved in Dean's case.” Sam looked down the hall
and saw a young doctor of Central Asian descent leaning against a wall collecting her thoughts. "Her. If she has the time, I want her."

The nurse appeared a little annoyed by the request, but didn't argue. She went over and spoke with the doctor for a moment. The doctor looked over in surprise, but approached Sam.

"Hello, My name is Mary Vaidya. What can I do for the FBI?" She spoke with an accent that betrayed the fact that she had previously lived in India. That suited Sam just fine. He wanted someone with the perspective of an outsider.

"To be perfectly honest, I have concerns about several staff members assigned to my brother's case. I would like you to translate the charts for me and offer a second opinion. If you're not comfortable with that, I understand."

"I could take a look at the situation for you." She showed them back to room 38C while reviewing the charts.

Dean was in a small exam room. An IV machine and pulse oximeter beeped occasional reassurances. He was unconscious, with over two dozen small lesions from the broken window and bruising on the left side of his head. Cas rushed to him, but Sam stood by the door next to Mary.

"It says that...." She skimmed several pages of heavily abbreviated notes. "He has a severe concussion, three minor skull fractures, but no signs of neural bleeding. Numerous small fractures on the ribs, clavicle, left arm. Three of his discs—the soft part of the spine—were ruptured, with signs of paraplegia." She cringed at accidentally reading off potentially devastating news without a filter of gentleness. But before she could stop herself to apologize she saw some other notes and frowned. "He has a grade 4 ruptured spleen.... I'll have to examine him, but for that kind of rupture at the very least he would need several blood transfusions and probably surgery. He's been treated with painkillers, but nothing to address the injury."

Sam furrowed his brow, processing everything she'd just said. "They're not actually treating him?"

"With everything that's happening, we're running low on units of blood. We've entered a triage state, and he's marked as the lowest priority. It looks like he was sedated—code 65," she told him, then translated it. "Your brother tried to attack one of the staff."

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. Somehow he wasn't surprised.

"If you don't mind me asking, is he"—She nodded at Cas, who was holding Dean's hand—"your brother's partner?"

"Husband," Sam replied. She nodded to herself as if suddenly things were beginning to make sense. "What?"

"Dr. Jennings was the one who was attacked." Her expression was less than thrilled. "He's had several complaints by patients for... insensitivity."

Sam could picture it now: the doctor made some bigoted comment, Dean took a swing at him, and a swarm of security had knocked him out. That combined with Cas making a scene in the waiting area—the more backward members of the hospital staff must hate the pair of them.

While Sam was talking with the doctor, Cas looked through the bag of Dean's belongs. His clothes
had been cut off in the ambulance, but his necklace, wallet, wedding ring, knife, phone, and shoes were accounted for. Cas checked Dean, then looked through the bag a second time.

"His hearing aid is gone," Cas said from across the room.

"He's deaf?" Mary asked as she added a note to the medical chart.

"In his left ear and he has moderate tinnitus in his right."

"It may have been removed during the examination," she speculated. "I'll see if we can get a replacement or you might be able to get one once he's transferred to a bigger hospital."

"Can you place a request for transfer?" asked Sam. "I'd like to get him out of here as soon as possible."

"It looks like they're way ahead of you. A transfer request was issued twenty minutes ago." Mary reread part of the order, then muttered, "That's weird."

"What?"

"The request didn't come from our hospital. It came from Baton Rouge—that doesn't even make sense. Jackson is half the distance, but Baton Rouge already dispatched an ambulance. It says..." She looked out the window in the hospital room door to see the police officers who were positioned at the far end of the hall, then turned back to Sam. "It says that he's not to be discharged."

Sam's stomach dropped. Someone found out Dean was there and they were coming for him. He wanted to urgently look around the room for possible locations of magical eavesdropping devices—but neither Cas nor his powers had worked. With Dean's enochian-ward-covered ribs broken, the place should've been crawling with angels or even Lilith's demons, but none were to be found. It was like someone had switched off the magic for the area. He'd have to try out a basic spell once he had some privacy to be sure.

"Did he change his name when he got married?" she asked. "It says he gave his name as Dean Winchester."

Sam rubbed his neck. With a severe concussion, it wouldn't have been surprising that Dean let his name slip. No wonder he was placed on lockdown. If he had to guess, Sam would say that it was angels on their way. Lilith's side was good, but Heaven would be more likely to be monitoring hospital networks.

The clock was running and Heaven had a twenty-minute head start. He had to take a gamble or two. Sam turned to Mary and whispered to her in a deathly serious tone.

"Listen to me. Dean isn't my brother. He's under witness protection and I think some people are coming here for him. I can call in backup, but I don't know if they'll get here in time. We need to get him in an ambulance or we have to move him to another part of the hospital; somewhere we can hide him until we can get him out of here. I'm begging you, can you help me with this?"

She looked at Dean, the cops, and the place where Sam had tucked away his badge, then said, "The ambulance bays are going to be full of security."

"Can he be transported in a van or something?"

"There isn't any place to take him to that's close enough. If the ruptured spleen is that bad he'll probably keep bleeding into his abdomen. I can try to find him some units of blood, to replace
some of the blood loss. But if he's without medical care for a few hours, the blood loss could kill him or the blood pooling in his abdomen could compresses his lungs and suffocate him,” she warned. “He needs to be monitored closely for shock or impaired breathing.”

"Alright. We hide him for now."

"I can get his gurney ready to move. I'll need the husband to help me push it. Can you distract the police?"

Sam walked up to the group of three policemen at the end of the hall. They stopped talking as he approached and watched him closely. He went a little past them, but stopped and turned back toward them. The maneuver caused the officers to turn their backs to the intersection that Cas and Mary had to move Dean's gurney through.

"I've heard some complaints about excessive use of force." Sam withdrew his FBI badge once again. The cops looked mortified. "Is there anything you'd like to get on the record, or maybe off the record?"

"You've seen what it's like right now. Sometimes you have to cut corners to keep order," said one of the cops.

Behind them, Sam could see Mary and Cas starting to make a break for it. He scowled at the officer's response, drawing their attention even more.

Sam pulled a small journal from his inner coat pocket. One cover was an ebony wood and the other cover was coated in silver leaf. He flipped back the ebony cover revealing red pages cluttered with names and dates. He found some blank space on the seventh page and pulled out a ballpoint pen.

“One of your men punched a man in the face a few hours ago—"

"The guy in the waiting area?"

“I’m going to need your names and badge numbers.” Sam put his pen to the red paper and waited.

The cops looked annoyed at their upcoming reprimand, but gave up their information fearing some worse federal wrath. By the time they were done, Dean's gurney was out of sight.

“Listen, if this is just about the fa—"

“Don’t. Just don’t.” Sam wrote the current date next to each of their names in his journal.

“You don’t have to be such a stiff about it,” muttered one of the cops.

“Actually, it's my job to be a stiff about this kind of stuff. You know, there’s a special place in Hell for bigots.” Sam snapped the journal shut and returned it to his inner pocket. He turned to walk away, offering them a parting wave. “I’ll see you guys around.”

Mary guided them up to a large records room in the administrative office section of the top floor. After getting Dean’s IV pump set up and silenced, Sam and Mary went into the hall. Sam reassured her that he’d be fine keeping watch until backup arrived, but she insisted on returning periodically to check on Dean. She hurried off to scrounge up a unit of blood and other emergency supplies for him.
Cas stood next to Dean’s hospital bed, which had been awkwardly positioned between rows of filing cabinets. He watched his husband sleep for about a half hour before Dean started stirring in some sort of mild distress. If his powers had been working he could’ve sensed what was wrong, but instead Cas gently touched Dean’s cheek, which felt a little warm and clammy. Cas took one of the blankets off of him.

"Cas, babe," Dean whispered. His voice was raspy and Cas could smell old blood on his breath. He tried to reach out to take Cas’s hand, but the IV’s in his arm restricted his movement. "Oh, thank god. I heard them say you came into the ER, but they wouldn't tell me what happened to you. What happened to your eye?"

"I'm fine.” Cas took Dean's hand, then stroked the back of it soothingly. “Don't worry about me.”

"You've gotta get me out of here. The doc—" Dean looked away from Cas in a moment of embarrassment.

“What happened?”

"I just wanted to know if you were okay. I thought maybe you were hurt if you were in the ER. The doctor probably thought I couldn’t hear him." Dean pursed his lips.

It was the first time that someone had made a derogatory statement about Dean’s sexual orientation—other than his dad or Alastair. With the two of them it’d purely been speculation or some attempt to hurt him. He hadn't even come to terms with his broader preferences at that point. Back then the hurt was the result of the fear that he would end up being the sort of disappointment that he was mistaken for. Now the hurt was that he was seen for exactly who he was and someone else despised him for it.

He wouldn’t have admitted it to almost anyone—maybe just Cas—but he’d been dreading that moment for years. It was bound to happen eventually even with their general discretion. They weren’t big on public displays of affection and their wedding rings were made of different metals, which incidentally gave the false impression that they weren’t married to each other. It wasn't that he was ashamed; he just didn't want to face a whole new type a hate because of who he loved. Their relationship was shunned enough as it was.

“We're going to get you out of here as soon as possible," Cas told him, filling the uncomfortable silence of Dean not retelling his encounter with the doctor. "Sam is working to get us transportation out of here.”

"Sammy's here?"

"I called him. They wouldn't let me back to see you until he was with me."

"Cas…” Dean's voice wavered. "I can't feel my legs."

"I know." Cas ran his fingers through Dean's hair, next to a badly bruised cheek. It pained Cas to see Dean like that and not be able to do anything to help him. Instead Cas sat down on the side of the gurney, leaned forward and kissed the cheek as softly as possible. A tear rolled down from Dean's eye and met Cas's lips. "We'll get you home and then we'll be whole again."

"Hey, Dean. Glad to see you're awake,” Sam said as he slipped into the records room. He decided to brief them on the situation. "I've got a team coming in to get us out of here. The bad news is that it looks like Heaven might be sending their own team."
“Sammy, Cas, you guys have got to get out of here.” Dean looked frantically between them. “If this is really a no-powers zone, you two are sitting ducks.”

“I'm not completely out of practice with a gun,” Sam objected.

“I'm serious. Just tell your demons where I am and get the fuck out.”

Cas’s expression was a perplexed mixture of comfort and annoyance at Dean's statement. “I'm not going to leave you here.”

“We might not have powers, but since they're not popping in on us I'm guessing neither do the angels,” Sam speculated.

Dean tried to sit up in protest, but gasped and clutched his side. Cas gently held him down to the bed. A few tears of pain and frustration fell from Dean's eyes. Cas picked up a syringe that Mary had left for them and began injecting two milliliters into the IV.

“Dean, I'm giving you something to help with the pain and to calm you down.”

“I don't want to calm down. You.... You two are—”

Cas put two fingers over Dean's mouth, silencing him, then said, "I need you to calm down and trust us."

Dean nodded as his eyes blinked slowly. Some of the tension could be seen leaving his body.

“Cas, you should stay here with him.” Sam wanted to give Dean whatever privacy or dignity could be found while paralyzed and sedated in a storage room. “I'll get back to keeping watch in the hall.”

A half hour later Mary stopped by with two styrofoam cups of coffee. She handed them off to Sam, who accepted them with a tired smile. After checking on her patient, she sat down next to Sam and reclaimed one of the drinks. He sipped on his while they both debated who would break the silence first.

"Can I ask you something?” Sam started.

"Sure."

"What's your real name?"

She nodded, appreciating the fact that he didn’t assume she had a western name. "Maitri."

"As in the Buddhist concept of benevolence?” Sam asked, trying to recall whether he knew a better definition.

"I'm impressed." She smiled, then sipped her coffee.

"I have a lot of time to kill. Theology and moral philosophy has been a recent hobby of mine." Sam shrugged a little at the understatement. “I don’t get it. Why are you here, of all places?”

She laughed a bit at his forward question, but thought on it for a moment before answering. “There’s a mantra that I like: ‘confess your hidden faults; Approach what you find repulsive; Help those you think you cannot help; Anything you are attached to, let it go; Go to the places that scare you.’” She paused a beat, then explained, “If I never came here, I would be something less
“I owe you and I want to repay your kindness, but I’m not the sort of person you want to be affiliated with.” She expected him to explain but he just smiled. He handed the card to Maitri, then added her name and the date to the second light blue page. “If you ever need help—like matters-of-life-and-death-type help—call it and tell them Sam gave you his card. Don’t lose this card and don’t give it to anyone else, because it won’t do them any good.”

She chuckled at the bizarre gift. “What are you, a mob boss or something?”

“Or something,” he smiled knowingly instead of from amusement, which caused her to stop chuckling and carefully place the card in her wallet.

The hospital intercom beeped, interrupting them.

“Code 215: white male, mid-thirties, short blond-brown hair. Patient has paraplegia.”

“All the exits are going to be blocked, and they’ll be sweeping the building, starting with the bottom floor,” Maitri translated.

“How long do you think we have?”

“A full sweep for a code pink usually takes twelve minutes, but it might take longer with the lower levels as crowded as they are.”

“You should get out of here.” When she got up to leave, he reminded her, "Maitri, don’t tell anyone about the card."

Sam moved back into the records room to give Dean and Cas the update. "We've got maybe ten
minutes." Sam pulled an angel blade and two pistols from his jacket. "Any idea if bullets will do the trick against powerless angel?"

"I'm not familiar with this kind of effect," Cas confessed.

"Well—" Sam's cell phone started ringing. "Hopefully, we won't have to find out." Sam took a pistol, which he cocked, then answered his phone as he slipped out the door.

"I could use the gun." Dean's voice was weak, but focused.

"Dean—"

"If bullets don't work on them, you should have the blade. You'll need something that's sure to keep you safe."

The door opened. Cas beat Dean to the pistol, but it turned out to be Sam. He was followed by five men and women in what looked like SWAT gear. Two of them wordlessly started transferring Dean to a portable stretcher, while the other three stood guard. Cas grabbed the various syringes of medications that Maitri had given them, and helped the demons secure Dean to the stretcher.

When Dean was ready, the group went back out into the hall. Two demons led with assault rifles drawn. In the middle of the group were the two largest demons, Sam and Cas pushing Dean's stretcher. Sam only assisted with his left hand and held his pistol in his right. Bringing up the rear was the last demon with an assault rifle.

The floor was largely uninhabited since most of the excitement was centered around the emergency services being provided on the lower floors.

They made it down several corridors before they saw anyone. A few nurses gasped and ducked into offices to hide. They turned one corner to find a cop, but he was handicapped by needing to draw his gun. He froze with his pistol barely out of the holster.

"Keep it pointed at the floor. Eject the magazine, clear the chamber, then drop the gun," Sam ordered. His voice was cold and commanding, a style that Cas and Dean rarely heard from him. "If you so much as flinch, we will shoot you."

Once the cop did as he was told, Cas scooped up the disabled pistol, and their group continued down the hall.

"How're we going to get past the security checkpoints?" Cas asked.

"We aren't," answered one of the demons.

There was shouting from behind them and the sound of running. They moved around a corner just as someone opened fire in their direction from the corridor that they'd just cleared. One of the two leading demons dropped back to reinforce the rear. She threw a smoke grenade around the corner, which triggered a second round of gunfire.

"Go on. I'll slow them down," she said before letting loose a volley of suppressing fire into the smoke-filled corridor.

Their group continued down the hallway, then carefully ascended a staircase to the roof. A helicopter waited for them on the medevac pad. Cas helped the demons get Dean's stretcher into the helicopter while the two other demons and Sam stood guard. As soon as Dean and Cas were in the helicopter, the lead demon helped Sam in. There was only enough room for one of the demons to join them in helicopter. One of the remaining demons traded his assault rifle for Sam's
pistol, then the helicopter started to take off.

Twenty minutes into their flight Dean's state took a turn. His skin was pale and damp as he became even more disoriented. Cas carefully monitored his pulse, which steadily became faster and weaker.

"He's going into severe shock," Cas said.

"It's gotta be the ruptured spleen. It's the blood loss," Sam theorized. "Does anyone have a meatsuit with A- or O- blood type?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"How much longer until we're clear of the effect?" Sam asked the pilot.

"An hour plus or minus ten minutes. We're not entirely sure where the boundaries are."

"Fuck it. He needs something to help keep his blood pressure up. If it trashes his kidneys or throws a clot we'll deal with—" Sam started to dictate their course of treatment, but stopped himself. It wasn't his place to make that decision anymore. "Cas, it's your call."

"I think…." Cas weighed his options for a few seconds. "We should risk the transfusion."

"Cas, I know he'd rather have your blood than a demon's," Sam said as he started digging through the first aid kit for some needles and IV tubing.

Cas took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. After Sam got the transfusion hose running, Cas just sat next to Dean silently running his fingers through his hair. Dean spent the next hour mumbling and fighting a sudden fever.

When they crossed the boundary, Cas and Sam both felt the rush of renewed power. Cas immediately placed his hands on Dean's chest and forehead. Once the healing was complete, Cas collapsed backward. Sam caught him before he hit the floor of the helicopter, but not before the needle was ripped from his arm.

Dean was still strapped to the stretcher, but quickly fought his way free. He scrambled over to the weakened Cas and just held his unconscious husband. Sam put a hand on his brother's shoulder, which Dean took in his own hand and squeezed.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, Dee vs. Dean. I've been looking forward to this for awhile now. Of course the person who struggles with self-loathing is going to hate himself. I kinda love writing Dee & Dean interactions. It's a treat to try to portray the 30 year disparity so intimately.
The Things That Hurt You

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was done.

Dean felt like shit, physically and emotionally. He'd finally snapped under the stress and alienated everyone around him. For a brief few hours he was starting to feel a bit better about the situation. At least Ruby was going to give him some information he could take back with him, but now… It was like every time he'd managed to make some progress it all fell out from under him.

This time it'd been his doing—partially his doing. No matter how confused or uncomfortable Dee and Cas made him, he wasn't the kind of guy to say that sort of shit. He didn't believe in those slurs. He'd even occasionally blackened a few eyes when he'd heard that kind of hate speech in the past.

That was part of what made this whole thing feel so wrong. It'd be different if he was some backwoods bigot; then it'd make sense. He liked to think he was pretty accepting of other people's choices, but this wasn't someone else's choice. This was him. He'd spent sixteen years of his life trying to make himself the kind of man he could be proud of, the kind of man his dad would be proud of.

But he didn't feel proud. He didn't feel capable in this new world. He hadn't really been on many hunts since he'd returned from Hell. He hadn't even considered trying to pick up a woman since kissing Tessa eight months earlier. Sixteen years of his life had been building toward being someone, then his time in Hell had shaken him and his time in 2039 had completely knocked him down.

He went back to his assigned guest bedroom. On his way he saw that the door to Dylaniel's room was closed. He could hear Ruby and Dylaniel talking, but couldn't make out the words. As tempting as it was to listen at the door, the last thing he needed was to get caught eavesdropping. He continued to his room, then climbed into bed without bothering to take off his borrowed clothes.

Dean was walking through the windowless hallways of the bunker, but something was wrong. The walls were jagged stone, not concrete and tile. Everything reeked of blood and death. He could smell death. It wasn't the kind of thing easily forgotten, but the odor was rare. He’d only ever really noticed it while in— Frantically, he looked around and recognized the windowless hallways of Alastair's dungeon.

This was wrong. He'd gotten out. He was in a bunker in 2039 with a few other people, who were more or less his friends.

“They aren't your friends,” whispered a voice of doubt that shook him. He pushed the thought aside; there was something else more urgent than his feelings. His instincts were screaming at him
that there was danger—of course there was danger, he was in the middle of Alastair's dungeon. Every sense strained, attempting to detect which direction the threat was coming from.

The threat was familiar, but somehow he knew it wasn't the archdemon. That creature was back. He was having another nightmare and the creature was back. His skin prickled from the burning loathing that radiated from the unseen beast. Those menacing eyes watched him, hunted him. He needed to find a way out of there.

He made for the entry next to the library, but he couldn't find his way. Every turn led to more hallways and he tried desperately to recall the layout of the bunker. There was a garage down one of the corridors, though he wasn't sure which one. He barely cared, as long as he was moving away from the creature. The hallways became a maze, which he ran through until his lungs ached and he collapsed to the ground.

There was a small puddle of blood in front of him. It turned into an ominous crimson trail leading away from him. He crawled forward, following it for a minute before he saw the blood smeared violently across the floor. Several red handprints told him that the person had tried to get away. Continuing down the hallway, he saw a handful—possibly a literal handful—of black feathers stuck to the partially dried blood. He picked one up and it slowly turned gold in his fingers. He dropped the feather in alarm, then scrambled to his feet and continued running.

Finally, Dean turned a corner to find a dead end. When he looked back, he was no longer in the labyrinth of hallways, he was in the basement with Sam in his cage... but it wasn't actually Sam. The expression on his face was cold and malicious. Dean wanted to turn back, to flee rather than face Lucifer's heckling again, but he couldn't. Some unseen force stopped him, paralyzed him with morbid fascination. Everything else fell away. He could even feel the beast stop chasing him. This was more important. This was the most important. He'd been waiting for this moment for far too long.

"Hello, brother," Lucifer greeted him.

"You're not my brother." Dean nearly snarled the words, but Lucifer only smiled in response for several seconds.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand what's happening here. Personally, I'm surprised that you even sense that something’s off.” Lucifer shrugged slightly as he dropped that line of thought. "People say I'm a destructive force, but look at what you’ve done. It’s truly impressive, the mess you’ve made. Talk about scorched Earth.”

Dean wasn't sure exactly what Lucifer was getting at. It felt like an overstatement. The closest thing he could think of was the bridges he'd just burnt when he snapped at Dee. His stomach soured with guilt at the memory.

"I didn't mean to hurt them.” Dean couldn't tell if he was excusing himself or confessing.

"Didn’t you though?” Lucifer raised an eyebrow accusatorially. “At least a bit. Deep down isn’t there that pit of anger? Anger that the other you failed so spectacularly. He betrayed who you are as a hunter, as a man. For decades he built up this burden and now everyone around you expects you to carry it. You don't need that extra pain in your life, but they don't care enough to even see it.”

"They’ve got a lot going on,” Dean replied, defending the others.

"So they don’t care about you? That’s understandable. Nobody has ever truly cared about you.”
Lucifer paused a beat, inviting Dean to argue with him, but he wasn’t sure who to hold up as the disproving example. “But that’s fine; sometimes that’s what it takes to be strong. Look at you. You’re self-sufficient. You’re the kind of person who functions best without people tying you down. And the best part of all is that nobody needs you.”

“Sam, he needs….” Dean hesitated.

“You’ve seen what he’s capable of. You’ve heard what he will be capable of. Do you really think that there’s anything you’re bringing to that table? He’s not your problem anymore.”

“My whole life has been about protecting him.”

“Except when you were free. When he was gone at school and when you couldn’t find him. You weren’t weighed down by him. It’s best if you get as far away from him as possible,” Lucifer suggested. “How much of a relief do you think it was for this Sam’s brother when he was taken out of the picture? One less wild card capable of leveling a city in play. One less person to worry about or clean up after.”

“I’m not like that. I’ll make things work with Sam.”

“This Dean tried to make it work for twenty years and now he can’t even look Sam in the face.”

“I’m not like him.”

“Prove it.” Lucifer spoke with a determination that was profound.

“What do you want from me?” Dean could feel the wrongness of the situation, but he wasn’t sure what specifically was bothering him at that point. It seemed like in his own fucked up way Lucifer was trying to be nice to him, to motivate him. The archangel was at least being more pleasant than when they’d met earlier. “Why are you talking to me like this?”

“Because you’re so close to seeing things for how they really are.” For a moment Dean thought Lucifer’s eyes glowed with fire. “If you could just accept my help—”

“I don’t need help from the Devil,” Dean said defiantly.

“I’m not the Devil.” Lucifer strolled beside the bars of his cell, dragging his fingers along them. “If you could accept my help, you’d get everything you want.”

“And what do I want?”

“The power to save your family—your real family. Not your captors, these damaged and unstable failures. You’re right to be angry,” Lucifer assured him. “The other you, he needed that.”

“What?”

Dean was beyond confused. The turns in the conversation were making him wonder which way was up. He couldn't tell whose side Lucifer was on. He couldn't even tell whose side he was on—the thought made a heat inside his chest flare briefly.

“You know what hurts the most?” Lucifer asked

Blood trickled down the walls of the basement, but Lucifer didn't seem to notice. Dean waited for some instruction on torture from a master. His subconscious was almost certainly tapping all the knowledge he'd gained under Alastair's tutelage.
“The truth.” The simplicity of Lucifer’s answer shook Dean. He was expecting some advice on method, but Lucifer had sliced straight to the heart of pain itself. “You were right about the other Dean, that there’s something wrong with him. That's why your words hurt him so much.”

“I-I didn't mean to—” Dean tried to explain himself, but he was cut off.

“Don't lie to me,” Lucifer growled. “It's dismissive.”

“It came out by accident.” Dean looked around the room, trying to avoid Lucifer's eyes. He noticed there weren't any doors or windows, and the walls slowly pressed inward. It was another nightmare. He just had to remember that it was a nightmare. “You're not real. I'm fine. This is all in my head—”

Suddenly, Dean fell to his knees and clutched at his chest. There was a hot, tearing sensation below his skin. He felt like his flesh might burn away from the inside out. The flame was anger, hatred—it wanted to break free. It liked attacking Dee and would happily do it again if allowed. The realization that part of him enjoyed hurting Dee was terrifying.

“Do you know why the truth hurts?” Lucifer continued, ignoring Dean's agony. “Because it's inescapable. He knows what he is, what choices he's made, but you don't need to follow that path. They can't make you.”

Lucifer snapped his fingers and the hateful burning in his chest cooled. Dean looked up at Lucifer and felt a sickening gratitude for his help. Slowly, he staggered to his feet.

“They aren't your family. You understand that, right?” Lucifer didn’t wait for Dean to answer. “They have their own lives, their own Dean. You're some asset that they've been lugging around. They’ve been keeping you under lock and key—literally chained up at times.”

“It's for security,” he replied.

“Security? Keeping you from even knowing where you are or seeing the sky. Meanwhile their Dean is running around in Heaven.” Dean wanted to tell him to shut up, but he couldn't argue with Lucifer's anecdote. “Go ahead. Try to find a map of where you are or peek your head outside the door for even a moment. You've asked for their help saving your world and they don't even want you to know some basic information. They want you locked up because you're a commodity. Those AFE officers knew it. In this time, you're nothing more than a weapon and breeding stock. This world is full of scavengers and they're no different. When push comes to shove, they’ll try to find a way to use you.”

“They're trying to help me.”

“They're sure taking their time with it. You want answers, but they're barely giving you actionable intelligence. How much do you really know? When are you actually going home? How? What are you supposed to do when you get back?”

“It's complicated.” Dean could tell that it was a complicated situation, but he'd had those same doubts. Surely there was more useful information he could've learned in two days.

“There were archdemons and leaders of Heaven to kill from the beginning. When did cutting off the snake’s head become such a complex task?” Lucifer asked. “Maybe they're taking their time with you? Slowly turning you to their thinking. Making you want their understanding or approval—but you don't need it. They've done disgraceful things. You don't need to be like them. You don’t need their admiration. It's okay to hurt them.”
Dean closed his eyes briefly to try suppressing the impulse to listen to Lucifer. When he opened his eyes the bars containing the archangel were gone. He turned to retreat up the stairs, but remembered they weren't there. There was no way out of the room. He told himself that it was just a nightmare as Lucifer slowly approached him with a menacing grin. It didn't matter that he knew it wasn't real; he wanted to run.

"I know you want to run, but you can't. Not from us." Lucifer transformed into a mirror image of Dean as he continued walking forward. “Not from yourself. Not from him."

"You're not me.” Dean’s voice wasn’t as convincing as he had hoped. “I’m not gonna hurt anyone.”

“Don’t you get it? It’s too late. You already have.” The other Dean pinned him to the wall, then leaned in close to whisper in his ear. “But that’s fine. They aren’t important. What’s happened in your past isn’t important. The only thing that’s important is what’s going to happen in your future.”

Dean was trembling. “What’s going to happen in my future?”

"You and I, we're going to do great things."

Dean woke up gasping for air. His head was still killing him. He was shaking and flush with sweat. Thankfully, his borrowed clothes weren't soaked through. Asking for a favor, like another change of clothes was one of the last things he wanted to do.

It must've been the middle of the night, not that anyone could tell in that windowless place. As he walked down the halls he noticed it was particularly quiet and several of the bedroom doors were closed. The isolation was kinda nice. He needed to collect himself, to calm his nerves after another damn nightmare. It was something to do with Hell and being chased again…. There was also something about Dee or Lucifer, maybe both. He shuddered at some mostly-forgotten interaction.

He went to the library and dug through the cupboard where Kaylee had stored the booze and weed. Drinking himself into a state of dreamless sleep sounded like the best plan available to him. He poured himself a tall glass of whiskey, then took a long pull. He moved to sit down at one of the large tables, but stopped short.

His eyes settled on the door in the entryway of the adjacent room, which presumably led outside. He could slip up the stairs and take a breath of fresh air without anyone knowing. It would help ground him, to maybe see the same moon that had existed back home, to feel free and independent for the first time in who-knew-how-long. He chewed his lower lip, tempted by the voice in the back of his head encouraging him to go exploring.

"Can't sleep?"

Dean turned to see his older self sitting in an armchair that was nestled in a quiet corner of the library. On the armrest was a book opened to about half of the way in. He also had a glass of what looked like whiskey. The similarity wasn't lost on Dean… or probably Dee for that matter. He didn't answer.

"Yeah. Me neither." Dee sipped his drink while watching Dean. "They aren't as frequent, but I still get the nightmares, maybe twice a week. Sorry to break it to you."

Dean didn't know what to say. His pride, decency, practicality, and bitterness fought for dominance. He wanted to yell and ask for forgiveness in the same breath, but nothing came out.
How was he supposed to make things right when everything was so wrong? He’d planned on apologizing, but he hesitated. His doubt whispered that this wasn't his home and they weren't his family. Did he need to find a way to truly make peace with Dee or just avoid another shot to the jaw for a day?

After a long silence, Dee sighed, then asked, "Are we both just going to pretend that the other doesn't exist?"

"I can't pretend that you don't exist. I haven't been able to since I got here." Dean tried to keep the frustration in his voice from turning into shouting. He took a deep breath to calm himself. "Everybody thinks that I'm you—"

"No wonder you're pissed." Dee huffed a sympathetic laugh.

The unexpectedly self-deprecating comment made Dean soften a bit. Maybe Dee could be made to understand why he was so messed up after all.

"I don't blame them; it's confusing as hell. But I can't deal with having all your crap piled on me. And I just snapped…. I don't know why I said it." Dean rubbed his temples, but avoided rubbing his eyes. He didn't want to appear too emotional. "You know I'm not…."

"I know you're not a homophobe and I know why you said it. Because you could hear it — Dad's voice in the back of your head — right?"

Dean stared at his older counterpart, stunned by the question. Those thoughts, they were just the sort of things his dad would've said. It hadn’t even occurred to him, but suddenly he could better appreciate the way they’d seemed to dominate his mind whenever Dee’s relationship had come up.

"Let me guess," Dee continued. “Ever since you found out about me and Cas you've been completely freaked out and nobody understands why?"

The accuracy of the guesses made sense. They were sort of the same person with the same upbringing. What was surprising was that despite that, somehow they'd ended up so far apart—but Dee didn't seem surprised. Dee had been wary of him from the start... because he remembered the discrepancy when everyone else had forgotten or never even knew it existed.

"They don't know me.” Dean gestured toward the bedrooms. “They only know you."

"Yeah, well, I know you. And I get it,” replied Dee. “I think you fucked up handling things, but I get it.”

“God, I think I fucked up.” Dean threw up his hands in exasperation. He clutched the back of a chair to find some tangible stability, then took a moment to swallow his pride. He grabbed the bottle of whiskey and his glass, walked across the library and sat down in a chair a few feet from Dee. “How do we do this? I mean if we're both gonna be here we gotta figure something out. I just don't even know how to deal with you, or us, or whatever.”

“You mean how do we interact?” Dee asked. “Well, I'm gonna suggest the first ground rule be that if you agree to not be a dick, I agree to not punch you in the face.”

“Deal.” Dee huffed an exhausted laugh, then raised his glass and almost took a sip before adding, “I get a warning though.”

“I kind of feel like me having to be held back counted as a warning,” Dee said in his defense, but Dean didn't acknowledge it.
“What about the personal stuff?” Dean felt like a child. It was more or less all personal, but he couldn't even bring himself to be direct about Dee’s sex life. “The whole gay thing.”

“I'm not gay. I'm pan—and I'm seriously embarrassed for you,” Dee muttered, then suggested, “When you get home go online more or read some "Deadpool" or something. Educate yourself.”

Dean wasn't sure what a pan was exactly, but he took the hint that he'd oversimplified the situation. Luckily, the smirk on Dee’s face indicated that he hadn't actually insulted the guy somehow.

“You know what I meant.”

“Listen, I'm not going to try to convince you about who to love or how to feel. It wouldn't work anyway. If there's one thing that I've learned through all this it’s that you are what you are.” Dee’s eyes lowered in reflection. “Change, the kind that's worth anything, has to come from the inside, otherwise it's just oppression.”

"You aren't gonna try to convince me that Cas is my soulmate?" Dean asked, a bit startled by Dee using the word love.

Dee actually laughed at the question. "Soulmate? Please—Cas doesn't even have a soul. No, I don't believe in that fate stuff. I don't care what anyone says, relationships take a lot of work.” Dee shrugged and held up his wedding ring. “If you want to make this not happen it'll be easy. You can go back to your time and dodge the whole thing with him, but in my opinion you'd be passing up the best thing that ever happened to you.”

"I just don't have a thing for him." The sentence felt awkward to say, but Dean noticed that he didn't feel nearly as nervous as he had a few minutes earlier.

"Why would you? You just met him and you haven't even looked twice at a guy—maybe once,“ Dee corrected himself, causing Dean's cheeks and ears to get warm. "I'm just saying that it's okay to be open-minded. Try new things or you may never find the few things that are most important."

Dean refilled his glass, then leaned forward and refilled Dee’s. The guy wasn't as bad as he’d thought. He still didn't understand about a million different aspects of his older self’s life, but they'd managed to chat for over a half hour without serious injuries. In fact, Dee was even trying to impart some Bobby-esque wisdom throughout the conversation.

It was strange to think that someday he might fill that sort of role: the mentor. Supposedly Dee had mentored Kit for years and helped raised a handful of kids. Maybe those kinds of relationships lent themselves to interjecting life lessons every few sentences? Granted, he wasn't sure that all those lessons were applicable to him. Dee was more experienced, but his priorities were another matter entirely.

“The whole angel thing aside, I just don't understand why you would choose this life.” Dean nodded at the wedding ring. He’d brought them back to the elephant in the room: the sexual orientation issue.

“Exactly what part of this do you think is a choice?” Dee asked as he raised an eyebrow. “I can't choose who I am anymore than I can choose to not be a vessel, but what I do with what I've been given—that's where the choice comes in.”

“But you know that I'm not into guys,” Dean said with what felt like a reasonable amount of confidence.
“I know that you've never let yourself dwell on guys for any stretch of time. But you can't honestly tell me that you've never been flustered by a guy.” Dee smiled at a memory. “You remember junior year English—what's his name? With the leather jacket. He introduced us to Ghost Rider. Was his name Max?”

His name was Mal.

“That doesn't count.” The specific mention of the leather jacket made Dean think of Cas's new clothing. He supposed Dee had a type, but not his type. His type was a badass- or tiny-dress-wearing woman, preferably both. “I made that choice already.”

“A choice not to act on a feeling doesn’t make that feeling not exist. Look at how much it scares you. Why would it scare you so much if you could just will it away?”

“Because I'm weak.”

Dean could feel the booze breaking down his filter. This was a dangerous game, especially with this guy. The one person in the world who could truly understand his self-loathing. It was getting too real, but he couldn't stop himself. He'd kept in too much for too long.

“You're not—”

“You're biased.”

“Listen.” Dee’s voice had the commanding edge of a veteran giving advice to an idiot kid. “I've seen a lot of shit in my years, more than you can comprehend right now. And you know what? It's hard. Every fucking day is hard. You're gonna fuck things up sometimes. You're gonna occasionally break and think you can't keep going. But you're not weak. You're just pretty fucking far from perfect.”

“With Hell, fighting with Sam, now all of this shit…” Dean pursed his lips. He hesitated to finish his thought — some part of him wanted to try and play tough — but Dee wasn’t putting on an act for him. It was comforting and he wanted to return the display of trust. “When you break, how do you keep going? How am I supposed to keep going, facing all of this?”

“I've lost a lot over the years…” A flash of pained recollection on Dee’s face turned into a seemingly-inappropriate confidence. “They'll try to take everything away from you. They'll try to take your family, your home, your hope, your body, your dignity, your freedom…. The one thing they can't take away is that little thing that makes you you. That's your foundation and backstop. You've got to be comfortable with it or else you're not gonna have the footing to fight for the rest of it.”

“Yeah. Well, what makes me me?” Dean asked the one person who might be able to tell him.

“How should I know? We aren’t the same person anymore.”

“You know what hurts the most?” Dee asked as he swirled his the whiskey in his glass.

The question gave Dean a strange feeling of déjà vu. He thought of torture... Alastair... for some reason he thought of Lucifer. It had been incredibly distressing to see Lucifer earlier, but that didn’t satisfy the shadowy association in his mind. He pushed that line of thinking aside, relieved by the fact that he knew the answer from somewhere.

“The truth.”
Dean was thrown a bit by being told he was wrong. He could’ve sworn he’d recently been told all about it. But Dee’s voice seemed to convey his extra years and all the unpleasant personal experience that came with understanding the nature of hurt.

“What hurts most is your fears, your insecurities thrown back at you. It hurts because you’ll wonder… that maybe all those fears are actually the truth.”

“Well, what if they are?”

Dee leaned back in his chair. For a long while he considered what Dean was asking and for a moment Dean wondered if the quiet contemplation was a sign of doubt. Prior to this conversation, he’d assumed that there was something wrong with Dee, that surely he must’ve snapped under the pressure at the very least, but he seemed to be fairly well put together. Not that that meant Dee didn’t have doubts… just maybe he deserved a little bit of faith. So Dean waited for him to compose his answer and then immediately understood the hesitation once he started responding to the question.

“Sam was always the smart one, you know? He’d have all the answers and I was always just cribbing off his notes.” Dee chuckled, but pain flickered in his eyes. “He used to talk about Hell and demons—all that stuff. He’d say that it’s not the truth that scares us, it's the unknown and unfamiliar.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Like I said, he was the smart one.”

Dean wasn’t entirely sure if Dee was praising Sam for being correct or criticizing himself for something.

“You talk about Sam like he’s dead.” Dean glanced at the floor. Somewhere down there Sam was imprisoned, possibly still in that pathetic state he'd been left in. Kaylee had said Dee stopped visiting her dad after the first year. After hearing Dee lecture on the nature of hurt feelings it started to make sense why.

“There are some people who….” Dee’s words turned into a sigh. “I love him and I trust him. When he talks I think it’s the truth, but he's not always the one that's using his mouth to speak.”

“Do you ever wish you could switch it off? To not care—not be tied down,” Dean mused aloud. Hadn’t he felt freer when he was on his own, not burdened by caring for Sam? That thought floated in his mind, but he couldn't tell how convinced he was at that point. “Maybe I’m better off without those attachments?”

“I don’t believe that for a second. Yeah, loss is awful, but loss doesn't take away the good. It just distracts you from it.” Dee smiled. “I know it’s corny as hell, but seriously, love is a powerful thing. Don’t underestimate it.”

"Thanks for the tip, Captain EO," Dean jabbed.

"Go fuck yourself." The two Deans stared at each other uncomfortably. "I guess there are some insults that don't really work between the two of us."

“We’re never telling anyone about this, right?”
“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

"I'm sorry I hit you. It's just that Cas and I have taken a lot of hate over the years. I can get pretty defensive about my personal life, but I didn't really think that it's sort of your personal life, too, in a way, and you're entitled to be freaked out about… well, everything." Dee sipped on his whiskey, then added with a slight shake of his head, "But yeah, if you think that that was the first time someone called me a fag, then I've got some bad news for you about the world."

"You want to punch me in the face again? Honestly, that might make me feel better about the situation," Dean said while burying his face in his hands.

"I wasn’t really saying that to make you feel worse," Dee explained. "I mean, a lot of people are gonna hate you—"

"Stop trying to comfort me," Dean muttered, then reached for his drink.

"Oh, shut up and let me finish. One way or another, dating a guy or not, angel or not, whatever— you're gonna have to shoulder a lot of hate in life. Part of the trick to surviving it is that it's a little easier when you know how to accept yourself, good parts and bad. Life is so much easier when you don't hate yourself." Dee stared at Dean knowingly. "There are gonna be plenty of people out there happy to do that for you."

"So, how hard’s the hit when you’re”—Dean pointed to himself— "the person hurling that kind of hate?"

"Yeah. It hit kinda close to home, but I’ve had worse.” Dee looked at nothing in particular, recalling some memory.

"I hope they got more than a broken jaw for it."

"This scar.” Dee used the hand holding his whiskey to point at a scar on his forehead. ‘It’s from a skin graft—nevermind, long story short, there were two people responsible for scarring up my face: a Templar and a Knight of Hell—"

“What the fuck?”

“Long—"

“Long story. I get it.” Dean waved his hand, encouraging his older self to get to the good part.

“Anyway, I bit the Templar’s ear off and killed the knight by stabbing a nail through her eye.” Dee cut the to chase and gave a nonchalant shrug that didn’t really make Dean feel any better.

“Jesus fuck…. I guess, thanks for only breaking my jaw.” Dean looked at the scar a little closer, then his eyes drifted to the black plastic device tucked behind Dee’s right ear. At first he’d mistaken it for a radio or something, but now he wasn’t so sure. "I’ve gotta ask, what's with the big, black ear-bling?"

Dee smiled at some realization, then leaned forward so that he was more clearly in the light. He pulled the device off and tossed it to Dean, who caught it. Dean turned it over in his hands, but still didn't recognize it.

“Alright, what am I missing?” Dean asked while examining what seemed like a magnetic part of the device.
“You have to look at me when you’re talking and I’m not wearing that because...” Dee said a little slower than normal. Dean looked up to see Dee point to himself, then use his right index finger to point to his ear, down his cheek, and to his lips. "...I'm deaf."

“Oh... shit... okay.”

Dean suddenly felt incredibly uncomfortable holding what must’ve been a hearing aid or something. Dee held up his hands, indicating that he wanted the device back. Rather than tossing the important piece of equipment, Dean very carefully handed it to him. Reattaching the aid took hardly any time since that magnet he’d been looking at apparently held half of it in place somehow.

“It’s not so bad,” Dee assured him. “It’s got bluetooth, pretty good fidelity—I can listen to music in meetings and nobody knows,” he joked, which Dean found comforting.

"Too many rock concerts or just old age?"

Dee responded to being called old by flipping Dean off.

"If you get hit with a powerful enough whammy, not even angels can heal it." Dee considered saying something else, then continued, "I have... a few injuries like that. I used to fight in the highest weight class. It takes a toll after awhile."

"Used to?"

Dee raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm sorry. I'd like to see you beating people's asses when you're sixty."

"I caught a peek of that right before my head snapped back from the shot to my jaw."

“I’ve been known to come out of retirement for special occasions.”

"Let's say you get a do over, what would you change?” Dean asked.

He was pleasantly surprised with their heart-to-heart, even if it had been awkward at times, but he was dying to get to some practical information. If Dee was the closest thing he was gonna get to a Bobby figure, then he was going to pick the guy's brain for all it was worth.

"I wouldn't hesitate to do what needs to be done....” Dee trailed off, uncertain of how much detail he'd go into. "I know that's easy to say—for me to sit here in this fuckstorm and tell you to jump into the deep end."

"How deep is the deep end?” Dean asked warily.

"I kill humans... angels, demons, anything that wants to see the world burn. But we're so far along... there might be too many fires.” Dee sipped his whiskey. "Let Sam make the deal with Crowley."

"You're kidding?” Dean leaned away from Dee and stared at him in disbelief. “I'm not gonna just let Sammy damn himself."

"Hell is the only power base you'll have until you can win over the angels. When you get back, your hunter network is going to be decimated and no angel will want to back you. You think the non-humans will side with a group of hunters? You need the demons to get your foothold."

"There's got to be another way," Dean said, but he couldn't think of anything.
"Only one that you're even less likely to go for."

"What can be worse than that?"

Dee assessed Dean, debating whether to even mention the option. That didn't bode well.

"Taking Lucifer's line off the board," Dee finally said coolly.

"What…?"

"Destroy their souls while killing Sam and Kaylee." Dee was clearly not thrilled by the idea, yet there they were. “You'd probably have to kill Ruby too. She wouldn't let you touch them.”

"You can't be serious."

"Told you you wouldn't like it…. It doesn't get Heaven off Cas's ass, but it'd fizzle out the apocalypse—at least until Lucifer finds a way to make another line."

"I-I can't do that."

"I know…. I couldn't do it either."

Dean watched Dee reflect on some memory. It was almost certainly after Sam had been possessed, when Dee could’ve killed him. Or maybe it was before? He didn’t want to ask because he honestly didn't want to know. Here he’d been worrying about the things Sam had done, but maybe he had also fallen into the realm of moral ambiguity.

Dee shrugged, then continued. "You could hunt other arch-vessels. It'd undoubtedly earn you some enemies upstairs, but taking the heavy-hitters out of the game for a few decades would be huge."

"You're suggesting I go around killing humans—humans who didn't even do anything." Dean imagined what that would look like. He'd be one sliver of justification away from being a serial killer. “That’s a slippery slope if I ever heard one.”

“They’re vessels…. I know that doesn’t mean much back in your time, but it’s huge. It does mean something even if it’s not clear.”

“You know what’s gonna make it clear? Killing people over it.” Dean shook his head as he appealed to Dee’s tactical side. “I'm no expert, but killing a group of people sounds like a great way of putting them in a spotlight.”

“Fair enough,” Dee conceded the point. “Hey, I can’t force you to do anything, but if you drag your feet you’re gonna end up right back here. There’s a difference between keeping your head down and burying it in the sand. Heaven is already priming for a war; don’t let them get fortified.”

“You don’t seem that concerned with Hell,” Dean observed aloud. “That’s the fight that’s already spilling out onto Earth.”

“Hell is the easy one—"

“If Sam joins them,” Dean corrected, earning a tiny shrug of acknowledgment.

“It’s not perfect, but he’s good at it. He can do it.”

“Fuck.” Dean put down his glass, then ran his fingers through his hair. “Sammy and me, we got
in this fight before the angels showed up…. When I got out of Hell I thought that it'd go back to normal; we’d start hunting and everything. But he wants out. More than anything he just wants a quiet life with the kid—Kaylee. He’s not gonna get that if he’s running Hell, is he?”

“Like I said, ‘not perfect,’” Dee said apologetically.

"If he does find a way to get out of the life, it's like on some level I've lost him, and you're telling me we'd be fucked. And if he stays in the fight, he doesn’t get the life he wants and... what, he's playing for team Hell? I know you say he can handle that, but with Lucifer—and it's Hell…. He was already killing humans when I left. I don't know. I just….” Dean didn't want to say it. “How are we supposed to do it—I mean, you guys had your shit together, but we don’t. Sam and I were just barely starting to patch things up between us in 2009. But after seeing him now, knowing what he's capable of...."

"He's just Sam. He's still your brother, no matter what,” Dee told him. “I know that for a fact. If you're gonna get anywhere in this, you're gonna have to trust him.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was both a lot of fun to write and at the same time very tricky. It felt strange to be going into the chapter with the objective of having Dean(s) talking the philosophy of hate, doubt, insecurity, choice, etc. Normally, Dean is a bit more surface level, but I’ve personally never written him off as dumb. Luckily, Dee is older, wiser, and a lot more comfortable with himself, therefore I felt like Dee could lead Dean through these topics.
“Did you two apologize or are you just too drunk to physically fight each other?”

Dean and Dee turned to see Tom standing in the doorway of the library wearing a grey bathrobe. He was barely awake, playing with his hair to fix the temporarily-flattened side of his afro.

“We’re good,” Dee replied in reassurance.

They had talked for what must’ve been hours. In many ways it was just what Dean had needed. Not only did he have a chance to express some of his frustrations and fears, but he’d been given some food for thought. It wasn’t that he was planning on making any major life changes. He wasn’t even sure he agreed with everything Dee had said. It was the realization that his life could’ve gone in this bizarre direction and yet somehow he’d ended up being okay… maybe not great, maybe not entirely happy, but at least fairly content despite considerable adversity.

“Okay, I’m gonna go take a shower, then get started on breakfast.” Tom turned to leave, but stopped long enough to add, “By the way, Dyl’s awake.”

Dean sighed with a renewed feeling of shame. “I should go apologize.”

“He’ll forgive you. He doesn't really hold grudges.” Dee reconsidered his statement. “Actually, he holds grudges better than almost anyone I know, but he always has a good reason for it when he does.”

“Your kid scares the hell out of me,” Dean commented as he stood up and stretched.

“He’d be glad to hear it,” Dee said with a smile, then picked up his paperback and tried to find where he’d left off.

Dean found Dylaniel in his bedroom. The nephilim was sitting cross-legged on his bed doing what Dean could only assume was meditating. He hesitated to do anything that might interrupt the exercise, but took a moment to glance around the only bedroom in the quarters wing that he hadn’t already explored.

He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but he was still surprised. Two of the walls were lined floor-to-ceiling with bookcases full of the most meticulously organized comic book collection Dean had ever seen. The remaining wall that his bed wasn’t against had a large weapons display on it that contained everything from a Barrett M107 rifle to the broken pieces of a small metal knife. His nightstand held a speaker connected to an ipod, a glass jar of what looked like dried flowers, and three framed photographs. With a slight pain, Dean recognized the photos as being of Bobby and Sam’s two dead children.

“What do you want?” Dylaniel asked flatly without opening his eyes.

“Could we talk for a minute?” When Dylaniel didn’t respond right away, Dean started to worry
that he’d done even more damage than Dee had guessed. “I can leave you alone—”

“I don’t have the capacity to endure much right now, so if you’re going to argue—”

“I wanted to apologize,” Dean hastily clarified.

Dylaniel opened his eyes, looked over at Dean, then gestured for him to enter the room. After taking a deep breath, Dean tried to mend things between him and Dylaniel.

“Dyl, I'm sorry that I've been a dick to your family. I have problems, with myself and a lot of stuff. It's wrong for me to be taking that out on all of you.”

“You aren't the only one with problems.”

“I know.” Dean felt a bit like a child being scolded, but he deserved a moment of humility.

“Whatever your problems are, you need to figure out how to deal with them. If you need help, we’ll try to help you, but I don't tolerate this kind of behavior indefinitely,” Dylaniel warned. “If you were anyone else you wouldn't get this third chance. I don't know if I could give you a fourth.”

“Okay. That's fair.” Dean nodded. “Is there anything I can do to help make things right between us?”

“What's your problem with my parents?”

Dylaniel's question was so direct that it caused Dean's brain to hiccup. He’d felt that their relationship was wrong. He still didn't like it, but even Dee hadn’t really put him on the spot to explain why it should bother him.

“Do I—does your dad ever talk about his dad?”

“No.” Dylaniel's brow furrowed with concern. Evidently, he could appreciate some of the power of a father-son relationship.

“My—our—” Dean shook his head at the phrasing. “When I was growing up it wasn't okay for two men to be in a relationship.”

“It wasn't okay?” Dylaniel parroted back in confusion.

“That's part of how my dad raised me.”

“Your dad was a bigot,” Dylaniel suggested.

“Excuse me?” Dean was taken aback by the statement. His dad was old-fashioned and could be harsh, but the phrase 'bigot' seemed a little extreme.

“He was prejudice against non-heterosexuals. He was a bigot,” Dylaniel explained.

“My dad was a rough guy, but he was under a lot of pressure. He was trying to raise Sam and me on his own and wanted to make sure we were tough enough to make it in this world.”

“Being under pressure only mitigates so much. It's not an excuse to be an ignorant asshole,” Dylaniel said completely neutrally, as if reading a weather report.

“You're calling my dad 'an ignorant asshole'? You've never met him.”
Dean could feel himself on the verge of fighting to defend his dad. The man had been his idol for decades and some kid who'd never met him was attacking his memory.

“If he thought teaching his kids homophobia would make them tougher, then he was most definitely ignorant. Him being an asshole is just an educated guess, based on comorbidity rates.”

“He didn’t...” Dean wanted to say that his dad hadn't taught him homophobic views, but he hesitated. He remembered the cold glares and the muttered curses. He remembered the sharp learning curve of how to act masculine and tough… and he remembered what it meant to lapse.

In his youthful innocence, the lessons on how to act had been internalized as what to feel. It was a feeling, not some profound truth or well-reasoned argument. His dad taught him to feel that homosexuals were weak and that weakness would get them killed.

“My parents and every member of my xe's family are considered among the most able fighters on Earth, and they don't conform to your dad’s theory.” Dyaniel's tone turned subtly colder at the word ‘theory’. “It's an ignorant belief and putting any sort of aggression behind it is dangerous.”

Dean was a little offended still, but it was hard to argue with Dyaniel. His dad had been wrong. He’d been wrong about Sam, shutting his own son out because he wanted to do something different. In his fear of the unknown, Dean had sided with their dad.

He’d already realized that his dad had been wrong about Sam. It was an ongoing process to try to accept Sam for what he was, but at least Dean was trying. Now he was confronted with the realization that his dad had been wrong about entire classes of people. He’d need to be more accepting of many people: witches, non-humans, Dee and Cas… and maybe himself.

“I can see why you'd incidentally be an asshole to my parents.” Dyaniel's words shook Dean from the introspective moment. “Just try to avoid it going forward and you’ll have made things right.”

After making amends, Dyaniel asked Dean for some privacy. As he was leaving the room he noticed Dyaniel resuming whatever meditation-like exercise he'd been doing before being interrupted. Dean stared thoughtfully at the unreadable twenty-one-year-old nephilim wearing a dual-knife holster in his own bedroom full of comic books, then proceeded down the hall to find Tom or Dee.

He could hear some upbeat music and singing coming from the kitchen. He peeked in the doorway to see Tom working at the stove. Tom was wearing a black tank top, a purple plaid knee-length skirt, and a pair of fuzzy charcoal-grey slippers. A gold chain hung between a nose piercing and his left lower earlobe piercing. Tom noticed Dean staring at him and stopped singing.

“You have face jewelry?” Dean asked, still struggling to process Tom’s appearance.

He hadn’t been wearing any earrings or a nose ring earlier. The guy had worn a few necklaces, but Dean wore a necklace. It wasn't exactly an indication of… well, he wasn't really sure what Tom’s situation was.

“I don't usually wear piercings if I'm on base,” Tom explained.

“Dress code?”

“I had to go into combat with them once. A set of chains got caught on an enemy's armor. It tore up my nose, eyebrow and right ear in three places.” Tom gestured at the right side of his face. “It was easy enough to heal, but I learned that lesson.”
Dean’s eyes drifted down to the skirt again. It was definitely Tom’s skirt, not some improvised garment like the bedsheets sarong he’d worn back from Lena’s. He wasn’t sure he wanted to ask.

“I like my clothes.” Tom answered the unspoken question. “I wear whatever I’m in the mood for, unless I need more practical clothes, like on base.”


“Damn right it’s cool,” Dee commented as he entered the kitchen. “I swear Tommy’s single-handedly saved the textile industry in its darkest hour.”

“I can’t help it if my excellent taste in fashion is highly revered in some communities,” the witch replied with a grin.

Dean couldn’t tell if they were joking about Tom’s clothes or if Tom really was known for his fashion sense. Either way, the tension of his uncomfortable staring had thankfully been replaced by lightheartedness. Tom resumed his singing and even shook his hips slightly to swoosh his skirt to the music.

After checking the clock, Dee tapped Tom on his shoulder to indicate that he needed to get by him. Tom sidestepped, allowing Dee to open the oven door. The smell of bacon wafted forth and Dee nodded with approval.

“How much longer?” Tom asked.

“I’ll take yours out in a minute.” Dee glanced over at Dean. “Bacon extra crispy, right?”

“Yeah.” Dean looked around the kitchen and realized they were making some sort of family-portioned breakfast. “Can I help?”

It was strange to be helping make a family breakfast for his alternate-future family. He’d occasionally helped Bobby cook, but as great as the old hunter was, they’d never listened to music or joked around while cooking. Aside from the time at Bobby’s, he’d never had access to a full-size kitchen and therefore had only ever prepared food alone. But this was a group effort, and it felt good. Dean was tasked with brewing the coffee and making hash browns. Tom continued to cook fruit pancakes while serenading the masses. Meanwhile, Dee prepared bacon and some sausage.

“So, how’d it go with Dylan?” Dee asked while forming sausage patties.

“Well, he called me and Dad assholes, but I think he was trying to be nice when he did that.”

“On the plus side, he didn't punch you in the face,” Tom noted aloud.

“Yeah. I think the two of us are okay,” Dean agreed.

Cas entered the kitchen and took a seat on a stool near Dee. He watched Dean with a thoughtfulness that was somewhat unnerving. Cas’s presence made Dean suddenly self-conscious of his own behavior. He didn’t know whether it was better to avoid looking at Cas for fear of staring or if that would be perceived as some slight. Ironically, the more he dwelled on the complicated dynamic between Cas and him, the more Cas seemed to be aware of it.

“I’m sorry that this situation is making you uncomfortable,” Cas told Dean in a move that was painfully direct.

He could see where Dylianiel had inherited the trait.
“It’s okay. You shouldn’t be apologizing to me…. There are a lot of things that are confusing about this time—place. You two should be pretty low on the list,” Dean said as something akin to an apology. “I don’t entirely get it, but I don’t need to. I’m not important here. He is.” Dean nodded toward Dee. “And he’s happy, so that’s gotta be good.”

“You’ll figure out that whole happiness thing someday,” Dee smiled at Dean.

“I can’t see you guys through all the hearts and rainbows,” Ruby said as she walked into the kitchen and headed straight for the coffeemaker. “One of you Deans needs to kiss Cas and make up.”

Dee shoved her playfully, but noticed that Dean had started blushing.

“Rube, watch the teasing,” Dee suggested.

“You’re such a coddler,” Ruby jabbed, but stuck out her tongue in fun.

Dee smirked, then started digging through the cupboards. “Tommy, where do we keep the salt?”

When the food was done being prepared, everyone dished up and relocated to a nearby parlor that had been equipped with a large dining table. Dylaniel joined them a few minutes later after collecting his own plate. The conversation was dominated by Ruby and Tom gossiping about some coven and the demons associated with it. Occasionally they would provide small explanations for Dean’s benefit, and maybe to some extent the other non-witches. He couldn’t really follow the conversation, but it was entertaining to watch two of his more jovial companions talk about one of their common passions.

Maybe a half hour after they started breakfast, Kaylee walked into parlor holding a coffee mug and a file folder. She looked slightly frayed around the edges, but Dean couldn’t tell if that was from fatigue or stress. She started unbuttoning the collar of her long black formal coat while assessing Dean. He expected that she was taking in the fact that everyone around her seemed to be fairly amicable because her expression relaxed.

“Well, that was a whole lot of drama and chaos,” She muttered as she pulled up a chair next to Tom and eyed his plate with predatory intent. “It took me hours to peel all the other officers off the walls…and with the fighting starting back up so soon…. Ugh.”

“How bad is it?” Dee asked as he straightened in his seat, drawn into the topic he could fully appreciate.

“Heaven pushed our people out, so the fighting is back on Earth.”

“No surprise there,” Dee commented. “We can barely hold any ground in Heaven for a day when we're prepared. It's a miracle that we didn't just lose everybody who got caught in the first few skirmishes.”

“There might’ve been some reluctance to fight during the holy season even if they felt threatened,” Cas suggested. “Now that the ceasefire is over I doubt there’s any point to pressing their territory.”

“So if the fighting is on Earth, are you guys playing defense?” Dean asked, trying to get a better picture of the objectives.

“It’s a mixed bag. A good amount of the fighting is in neutral territory, though depending on how you look at it Earth should be ours to defend,” Kaylee explained. “We don't really have defensible
positions in a lot of that territory, aside from our bases, but it is potentially ours to lose.”

“What scale are we talking for the fighting?” Ruby asked. “I know the contested gates of Heaven were pretty widespread.”

“It looks about as bad as the 2035 Darkwater incident. We're looking at most of it being scattered throughout time zones -7 and -6 in North America as well as -5 and -4 in South America—not including the Badlands.”

“We should go check in, see if we can help,” Cas said, mostly directed at Dee.

“Ops were actually running pretty solid when I left,” Kaylee replied. “I drew up another 50,000 from Hell to assist with the fight itself and fortifying possible targets. We have three Gates of Hell close enough to the brawling that we're just pulling grunts as needed. It's not the most elegant way to win a fight, but for such a spread-out mess like this we can make it a bit of a numbers game.”

“You think Heaven will withdraw?” Dean wasn’t sure what sorts of factors would convince Heaven to cut their losses in a fight, but it seemed like a good thing to find out.

“Generally speaking right now they're fighting over shit territory out there. There’s some agricultural land and some human cities, but I just can’t see why they’re making this into such a big deal. All I can imagine is that they're fighting over hurt feelings. I doubt they'd want to hold that ground. I mean, I can't think of any value to it for them.”

“It splits our Pacific and Atlantic coasts in North America,” suggested Tom.

“That might make a real difference if we couldn't teleport,” Kaylee pointed out. “If they want to ground all flights it'll cripple them just as bad.”

“Angels hate dealing with anti-flight or anti-magic areas,” Dee clarified for Dean’s benefit, then he added in a slightly bitter tone, “but the Templars don’t mind it that much.”

“They don’t have enough Templars for that large an area—at least I fucking hope they don’t.” Kaylee rolled her eyes at the thought and took a long sip of coffee.

“They could be looking for weak points,” Ruby suggested with a shrug. “Seeing if we didn’t get our shit back in order fast enough after the holiday.”

“Whatever they’re up to I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. Oh by the way, Dyl—” Kaylee handed a one-inch-thick file folder across the table to Dylandiel. He opened up the file and stared at its contents silently. “It didn't even take the other officers thirty minutes to pick someone out.”

“What's going on?” Dee asked with audible concern in his voice.

“Dyl got an ultimatum put on him. He was pulled from the field until he works at spreading the line. Some threats were thrown around,” Tom replied.

Dee’s eyebrows rose at the mention of threats, some of which may have been directed at his son. Dylandiel didn't look at his parents while explaining, “I waived my choice if it would mean less harassment.”

Cas turned to Dee for his reaction, which was worried disbelief.

“Who's the lucky… human, angel?” Ruby asked.
“Angel. Camiel,” Dylnaniel answered while continuing to look through the file.

“Dylan, you don't have to—” Dee started, but stopped when Dylnaniel looked up at him.

“I just want this over with. If it will get them to leave me alone, then I'll manage.”

“They can't make you do anything.”

“I'm tired of fighting with them over this and so are they.” Dylnaniel closed the file and placed it on the table in front of him. “Camiel is an excellent fighter and leader, it makes sense for her to have an extended bloodline.”

“Do you know her?” Cas asked, trying to find something positive about the situation.

“I’ve met her.”

There was a pause while everyone waited to see if Dylnaniel felt like elaborating, but he didn't. Dee pursed his lips subtly while debating whether to continue pursuing the topic.

Dylnaniel turned to face Kaylee, then said, “Ariel might be returning from Hell shortly. Do I still have leave to command him in the Badlands operations?”

“You might be the only person I know that prefers the Badlands to domestic leave,” Tom muttered into his coffee mug.

“Why are you running ops in the Badlands?” Dee asked, having suddenly been provided with an entirely new set of concerns.

“Kay's trying to scare off a suitor,” Tom explained.

Kaylee turned to her brother and gave him an annoyed expression at being thrown under the bus.

“You really need to stop using Tommy and Dyl to frighten those guys,” Ruby told her.

“It's called delegation. I'd scare them myself, but I've got a lot to do,” Kaylee joked, but got back to answering Dee’s question. “Ariel made a dumb but probably innocent nephilim comment. I was planning on making him spend three horrific months with Dyl, then seeing which way the wind was blowing.”

“It wouldn't be horrific.” Dylnaniel spoke in a tone that sounded almost sinister. “It’d be educational.”

“You'd destroy him,” Tom guessed.

“He's a seraphim. He’d be fine.”

“You're not exactly benched at this point,” Kaylee said to Dylnaniel as she tried to redirect the conversation away from the topic of her suitor. “But I think you'll give dozens of people heart attacks if you stroll into the Badlands right now. I know that place doesn't bother you much, but they'll all think you're walking into an open grave.”

“How tightly are they going to constrict me?”

“I wouldn't expect to be leading from the front any time soon.”

“Am I being stripped of my position as CAG?”
Dean could actually hear the apprehension in Dylaniel’s voice. He wasn’t sure what CAG was other than some sort of rank, but it clearly meant a lot to him.

“You'll still be allowed to be involved planning ops, but yeah… I doubt you'll be doing much in the field for the foreseeable future,” Kaylee said apologetically.

“Everybody takes a little time off occasionally,” Tom added while trying to smile reassuringly at Dylaniel.

“I don’t.”

Breakfast ended up lasting several hours. Dean noticed that, despite the high political and military stakes of current world events, everyone else seemed to be fairly laid back. He supposed it made sense that they’d have to find islands of normalcy in an otherwise hectic existence. When they were out in the world they dealt with the world, but when they were at home they could take some time to focus more on their family.

It was a little strange to find himself embedded in this familial setting. Dee, Cas, and Ruby were all people he had known of for longer, but he couldn’t help but feel closer to Tom, Kaylee, and Dylaniel because he’d been interacting with them more during the last few days. In some ways it was comforting, seeing a glimpse of what might be considered peace in their war-torn world.

Yet at the same time it was disorienting to see candid moments of happiness from sources he’d never expected; most notably was the other him being a father and husband. Thankfully, Cas and Dee seemed to be keeping their interactions a little more platonic, probably for his benefit. He wasn’t as freaked out by their relationship in theory, but he couldn’t imagine how he’d react if the pair were to actually do something like kissing in front of him.

Another interpersonal dynamic that he wasn’t expecting was how close Dee and Ruby were. They sat next to each other at the table, teased each other, and even had inside jokes. He wasn’t sure he’d ever been that close to someone other than Sam and to see that relationship with Ruby was surprising. The level of comfort between them was almost intimate, and it made him wonder whether there had ever been any tension with Sam or Cas. He personally couldn’t imagine having a thing for a demon, but he also couldn’t imagine being attracted to Cas.

Dean’s brain lit up with a red flag when Ruby wrapped her arm around Dee and rested her head on his shoulder. He smiled knowingly at the friendly gesture and rested his cheek on the top of her head. In a single swiftly action she pressed a button on his implant, then turned to Dean.

“Alright, now we can tell you all the dirt,” she said with a childish grin.

Dee reached up and turned the implant back on. “That’s never gonna get old, Rube.”

“I don’t know; eventually your age’ll probably rub off on the gag.”

“You're going to get a lot of aging jokes if you live with immortals,” Dee advised him. “It pays to have thick skin.”

“Basically, just be like Colossus,” Tom said while leaning back in his chair.

“Luke Cage,” Dylaniel corrected. “Colossus only had impervious skin when it was metal, but Luke Cage’s skin was impervious by default.”

“Guess who made every birthday and holiday present be comic-book related,” Ruby told Dean
while elbowing Dee in his side.

“It wasn’t every present,” Dee denied. “There was… the….”

“Oh, this'll be good!” Ruby smiled while watching Dee struggle. “You need some help with that? Fuck, I bet the inside of your wedding rings are inscribed with the Batman symbol or some Hellblazer shit.”

“Cas, don’t show them the Batman inscription!” Dee shouted in feigned concern when Cas started touching his ring.

“So Dyl,” Dean interjected in an attempt to get off the topic of Dee and Cas’s wedding rings. “I noticed the comic book collection. Any chance you have a Superman #1 that I can bring back and sell for a few million?”

“Not even Crowley can find that issue,” Dylaniel replied in what Dean suspected might’ve been a joke. “I'm generally not a fan of Superman.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at the realization that he had no idea what kind of taste Dylaniel had.

“Who's your favorite?”


“You like a vigilante?” Dean was a little impressed by the choice, though he suspected that Dee being his father may have shaped Dylaniel’s range of exposure.

“He’s effective—”

Dylaniel elaborated slightly more on the character, but Dean was too distracted to retain the information. He felt a wave of heat pass over him. It was oppressive and made him want to take off his overshirt. No one else appeared to be aware of the temperature change, which made him look around in confusion.

"Are you okay?" Tom asked him.

"Just felt a little warm all of a sudden," Dean said while realizing that everyone was staring at him.

"Menopause?" Ruby teased. She glanced over at Dee, who gently kicked her foot, but smiled at the joke. "Yeah. You aren't denying it."

"If you're sick, I could heal you," Cas suggested.

"Um... okay," Dean replied, a bit nervous about the idea of physically interacting with Cas.

The angel walked over to him and touched his forehead. Dean's heart was pounding from mild embarrassment. It was silly that such a small thing was making him anxious, and it was only made worse by knowing that Cas could almost certainly sense his discomfort. Cas's brow furrowed and he tilted his head.

"You aren't sick. I'm not sensing anything wrong with you."

"Thanks for trying." Dean couldn't tell if he was blushing or if another wave of heat had hit him. “I'm just gonna go splash some water on my face.”

Dean found the closest bathroom and washed his face with some cool water. When he looked up at himself in the mirror he had a strange feeling of deja vu. He'd had a moment like this in his
dream, where he was face-to-face with himself. ‘You and I, we’re going to do great things,’ echoed in his mind. He had been looking at a mirror image of himself, but the ‘you and I’ confused him. A lot of things from his dreams confused him. That was the nature of dreams.

He pushed the thought aside, then dried his face and began walking back to the others. As he walked through the hallways he remembered the labyrinth from the nightmare. He'd been running in it... because he was being chased. There was a creature that had been hunting him. He'd felt the beast’s eyes on him, watching him.

Dean looked over his shoulder as his heart lurched. For a moment he could've sworn that he was being watched. His imagination conjured up thoughts of hellhound leaping from nowhere at him. Maybe that's what the beast in his dream had been? It made sense that he'd fear them... though it'd been months since he'd consciously thought about them.

“Are you sure there's nothing wrong with me?” Dean asked Cas when he got back into the parlor.

Ruby took a go at the low-hanging fruit. “Oh, there's a lot wrong with you.”

“You seem to be healthy,” Cas assured him.

“Have you been sleeping at all?” Dee asked. “I know that it's hard normally, but dealing with all of this probably isn’t helping much.”

“Well enough.... I don't know. Maybe you’re right. With everything that's going on—” Dean stopped mid-sentence. The beast was watching him. It didn't make any sense, but in his soul he knew it.

Dylaniel's eyes flashed with blue light as he stood up, knocking back his chair in his haste.

"Incoming!” Dylaniel shouted while drawing two daggers from his hip holsters.

The others scrambled to their feet, readying however they could for a fight at a moment's notice.

"Wha—" Dean could barely react before he heard the flapping of wings.

There were a dozen angels, maybe more. It was hard to tell exactly what was happening because there were too many people in the room. Dean stood closest to one of the doors, which was blocked by two angels. Dylaniel and Cas were to Dean's left, but deeper into the room. Kaylee and Tom were on his right with angels between them. Lastly, Dee and Ruby were about halfway down the right side of the room, near a second door, though several angels stood in their way.

“Grey shirt: blocker!” Dylaniel shouted.

Dean didn't understand the meaning behind it, but Cas and Kaylee both turned their attention to the angel wearing a grey shirt on the far side of the room.

Kaylee dodged an angel blade and threw herself over the table. Another angel took a swing at her while she was finishing her tumble, cutting her arm. She reached up, touching his chest to scorch him with the First Light, then kept fighting her way toward the angel in the grey shirt.

As soon as the fight broke out, Tom placed his hand on a chair next to him, then said a few fast words. He dodged an attack just as he finished activating the quick draw spell. The chair disappeared and was replaced by an angel blade. He knelt down, scooping it up in time to block another swing. He and the angel were in a stalemate, each pressing their blade against the other’s,
until Tom hooked the back of the angel’s knee with his offhand. The angel fell backward and Tom forced both blades down into the angel’s abdomen.

Dylianiel was surrounded by three angels. He parried one attack with his offhand while slicing the throat of a second angel. The third angel swung at him, but the hit was partially evaded when Dylianiel turned suddenly after dropping one of the angels.

“Careful with them!” one of the angels yelled to her subordinates.

Dean was unarmed, but that apparently didn’t lessen the attention he was garnering from the angels. He tried to evade one of them only to find out that he couldn’t move. He struggled against the unseen force, which wavered slightly, but didn't break. For a moment he thought he was done for, that an angel would just walk up and stab him in the heart with no resistance. But the angel that was coming at him had her freehand extended, not her blade. His rigid body dragged along the ground to meet her, but just before she touched him an angel blade pierced her chest from behind.

Tom pulled his angel blade from the one that had been confining Dean, then had to immediately turn to parry an attack coming from behind him. He cut through that angel, only suffering a small slice on his chin in exchange. Then Tom hurried to assist Ruby and Dee, who were fighting five angels.

When the fight broke out, Dee had immediately grabbed a sabre from on top of a nearby bookcase. While the weapon was effective against angels in his hands, he was at a slight disadvantage because he was trying to help the unarmed Ruby. Her right wrist was cut while dodging a swing during the first seconds of combat, but she just used the blood to coat her left palm and began quickly reciting an incantation while trying her best to evade the blades. By the time she cast the spell incapacitating two angels, the other three had been downed by Dee and Tom.

With the angel that had been telekinetically holding him dead, Dean collapsed awkwardly to the ground. Another angel made to grab at him, but he tumbled over a body and shoved a chair between them.

He needed a weapon. The closest dead angel had fallen on top of her angel blade, making the weapon difficult to access and it was in the same direction as the angel that was pursuing him. There was a free blade on the other side of the table. He crawled under the table and tried to reach for the blade, but was tripped by a table leg when his cover was pulled away and thrown across the room. He rolled a few feet, settling on his back after losing track of where the coveted angel blade was in the chaos.

Cas stopped going after the angel in the grey shirt and rushed to fend off an angel that went after Dean in his vulnerable state. He dropped the angel, then offered Dean a hand up. Immediately after getting Dean to his feet, another angel moved to attack Dean, but Cas lunged to intercept the hit. A third angel's blade missed Dean by a few inches—stopped by Cas's chest. Light shone out of Cas's mouth and eyes as Dean attempted to catch him, but his body slipped through Dean’s hands and fell to the ground.

Dee screamed and dropped the sabre. He tried to run across the room to Cas, but Ruby and Tom each grabbed one of his arms, to hold him back from getting any deeper into the fray in his distraught state. While they were distracted by Dee, another angel hit the group with telekinesis. Ruby slammed into a large bookcase, which fell forward onto her. Tom was launched across the room in the other direction. Dee was thrown backwards straight through a wooden door and down a hallway.
Dylaniel finished killing an angel, then turned at the sound of his dad screaming. When he saw his xe’s body he froze. Kaylee downed the angel in the grey shirt, then stopped an attack that was meant for Dylaniel. He didn't see the attack or his savior. He just stood motionlessly staring at his xe's body.

"Dyl-Dyl!" Kaylee yelled despite being right next to him.

Dylaniel didn't react at all. She slapped him in the face, which made him look up at her. His eyes flashed with blue light, but he didn’t say anything. Her heart sank.

She grabbed his chin so that she knew he was focusing on her, then ordered, "Get them out of here!"

Dean was shaken out of his own shock over Cas’s death when Ruby, Dee, and Tom were thrown. He ran to Tom, who was closest to him, then grabbed the witch’s hand, pulling him up onto his feet. While Dean was distracted an angel swung at him, slicing a long shallow gash along the length of his back. Tom yanked Dean away from the angel and lunged, stabbing the attacker in the chest. Tom made to go to Kaylee, but Dylaniel grabbed his and Dean’s arms.

“Oh fuck, no,” Kaylee said to herself before she disappeared.

A moment later the parlor itself disappeared before Dean's eyes.

There was a brief falling sensation, then Dean, Tom, and Dylaniel were standing in a field of lush grass. Not a single building was in view and the only sound was crickets chirping. The sun was just behind some hills on the horizon, indicating it was either dawn or dusk.

"What the fuck?!" Tom wheeled on Dylaniel. "Take me back!"

"Protect him,” Dylaniel told Tom before disappearing.

“Fuck!” Tom yelled while kicking a clump of grass. He squatted down and ran his hands backward over his face and hair. After taking a minute to collect himself and wiping his eyes, Tom put his hands together to whisper a prayer. He waited a few seconds and tried again, but nothing happened. Tom stood up, reached under the waistband of his skirt to access a hidden dime bag, then he pushed up Dean's left sleeve. “This is gonna hurt.”

"What are—" Dean's question was answered when Tom started carving a rune onto the underside of Dean’s forearm with the angel blade. He reflexively tried to pull away, but Tom gripped tighter, holding him steady. Tom's expression was suppressed rage, so Dean just endured the pain quietly.

"In case we get separated," Tom explained. Once he was done carving, he dumped the weed from the baggie, then used it to collect a few drops of blood. "I'll be able to find you."

"What do we do now?"

"Do you have matches or a lighter?” Tom asked while patting down his waistband for any other resources. The witch’s voice was colder than Dean had ever heard from him. All things considered, Dean was amazed he was even functional.

Dean checked his pockets. He had his wallet, which contained $32, a fake ID, a credit-card-sized multi-tool, a razor blade, and three quarters. He held out the meager offering. “This is all I’ve got.”
Tom took the quarters and started checking the years on them, eventually returning all but one of them. He removed the gold chain jewelry, then put it and the single quarter into the tiny pocket in his waistband. “It's diluted, but we’ve got a little silver and my gold. Do you have any leather on you?”

Dean handed over his belt and Tom inspected the unfinished edge of the leather before nodding to himself.

“"This is okay for starters, but if we get jumped I’m gonna need some more mats—we’ve only got an angel blade and a razor for weapons.”

“Can you summon another weapon?”

Tom looked over Dean and his possessions before answering. “No, I need an artifact of at least as much mass, the harder and heavier the better,” Tom said as they both took in their surroundings. “If we can get some fire or ichor I can do some damage without a second blade. I might be able to make something work with less….”

“Ichor?”

“Blood from a mortal wound,” Tom explained.

Dean held out his left hand, which still had some of Cas’s blood on it. Tom stared at it for several seconds, then cut off a small patch of his shirt. He careful wiped up as much of the blood as he could. They were both silent, uncomfortable with using a remnant of Cas’s death like that, but they had almost nothing else and the situation was almost certainly worse than they could guess.

“I’m sorry,” Dean eventually managed to speak. “About your uncle.”

“Me too,” Tom said as he turned and looked at the dim sky. “If you see any good-sized rocks grab them for cairns.”

“Cairns?”

“Trail markers. We keep moving.” Tom started walking up the side of the hill they were on. “Come on. I’m not dying in some fucking field.”
Dean and Tom had walked for probably fifteen minutes when it became obvious that the sun was setting. The low fields were muddy in spots, so they tried to stick to a ridge of hills. Since Dyaniel had failed to mention where they were before he’d taken off neither of them knew which direction was best to head in. Tom suggested that they were somewhere in Europe based on the time of day and the weather, but that only narrowed the possibilities to millions of square miles.

“I swear, if I see Dyl again, the first thing I’m gonna do is punch him in the balls,” Tom muttered after slipping on some wet grass for the third time. Not expecting any excitement in the bunker, his shoes were nothing more than slippers and neither of them had jackets. Dean had offered his outer shirt to Tom, who was only in a tank top and skirt, but Tom refused, explaining that he’d grown up in a cold climate.

“At least we’re well-hidden,” Dean suggested weakly.

“So well-hidden that we don’t even know.” Tom shook his head. “If they’re having the knock-down-drag-out….”

Dean wasn’t sure whether Tom was more angry or worried. Things had obviously taken a drastic and wrong turn. The two of them had been sidelined for their own protection, or maybe just for Dean's protection. Either way Dean felt frustratingly helpless and he wasn’t the one whose family was in danger. They had no idea who was still alive or what the attack on the bunker meant to the bigger picture. They were figuratively and literally in the dark.

“So what's the plan? Find civilization?” Dean suggested what he thought was an obvious answer, but Tom’s huffed laugh dashed that assumption.

“Welcome to 2039. All islands of civilization are at least a fifty miles apart.” Tom stopped walking and looked back to Dean to emphasize his next point. “Anyway, we need to be careful about who sees us. This is Europe and you’re white, so you might blend in a bit better than if we had gotten dropped in Africa or South America. But there are still Heaven-sympathetic humans around and if they recognize Dean Winchester, we’re fucked.”

Dean nodded in renewed understanding, then continued following Tom. He’d had guards on the bases and all, but they’d acted so much like guides that he’d forgotten he was a marked man. Now he was out, beyond the protection of an AFE base or the bunker. He had Tom, but he was still exposed.

He wondered why Dyaniel hadn’t dropped them at another base somewhere. Maybe if the bunker’s security was compromised, the bases were questionable? That was an unnerving thought. The bunker was supposed to be one of the most secure locations in the world and Heaven had found it somehow. Or maybe the kid was just too upset to be thinking clearly?

The idea of what Dyaniel must be going through made him misstep and nearly trip. Dean
remembered all the confused and horrible feelings he’d experienced at the death of both of his parents. He didn’t know Dylaniel very well, but it was clear that the nephilim experienced emotions even if he didn’t put those emotions on display. Dean had hurt him twice in little more than 24 hours and now the kid had lost a parent—a parent who died trying to protect Dean.

“You aren't worried about them recognizing Tom Winchester?” Dean asked, wanting to focus on something other than Cas dying because of him.

“I'm the least famous in the family. Only a few small circles even know I’m related to them.”

“Why's that?”

“Same basic reason I got dropped out here with you. I'm human. I'm not even a vessel.” Tom’s matter-of-fact tone nearly covered up a little pain in his voice. “When we were kids, Dad would make sure we always had guards. He got a lot of threats, being the King of Hell. No one ever threatened his human kid. Maybe it was too hard to imagine him actually having a human kid. Maybe they just don't see me as a threat worth noting. Compared to angels, demons, nephilim, arch-vessels….”

“You're a witch. That's pretty cool.” Dean was a little surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth, but he was even more surprised that he more or less meant it. “Lately it's been like I can't even help in a fight. Every enemy is a demon or angel. Before I came here, I could barely take a single demon without carefully laid traps and now it's like demons are the small fish.”

“You're the Sword Of Heaven,” Tom corrected, caught off guard by Dean’s self-pity. “You can fight anything.”

“No. Right now I'm just a guy with a razor blade and no fucking clue what he's doing.” Dean held up his two-inch-long weapon in exasperation. “I don't know what you all expect from me. I can't even keep myself alive. I got shot in the first five minutes I was here. I’d be dead if it wasn't….”

Dean rubbed his left hand on his jeans. He couldn't see any of Cas’s blood left on his hand, but he thought he could feel it.

“Here.” Tom turned back and handed him the angel blade.

Dean looked down at their one serious weapon. “I didn’t mean that you needed to….” He sighed. “You should have it.”

“Listen, just take the damn knife. I'll be fine. Like you said, I’m a witch,” Tom mimicked Dean’s voice. “And ‘that’s pretty cool.’”

“So if we aren’t looking for civilization, what are we even looking for?” Dean asked while trying to safely holster the angel blade in his pants while he wasn’t wearing a belt. He eventually settled on just carrying it at the ready.

“Human artifacts, fire, charcoal—a small animal would be great.”

“Small animal?” Dean’s fledgling enthusiasm for witches wavered slightly. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not,” Tom admitted. “I want to put a veiling spell on both of us before we risk putting out a distress call strong enough that it might be intercepted.”

“You gonna call in some angels to airlift us out of here?”
“I can’t call any angels from here. I already tried praying. Dyl dropped us on desecrated ground.”

“Desecrated?”

“Think consecrated, but for Hell instead of Heaven,” Tom explained. “It’s not impossible for angels to move on it, but they don’t like the place. It makes them less willing to look for us here. Unfortunately it also means that prayers don’t broadcast as well. Which is why we’re walking around freezing our asses off.”

Dean had wondered why Dylaniel had chosen there of all places. Now that he knew at least one factor it raised other questions. How safe was desecrated ground, really? The bunker was supposed to be safe and that had fallen through. Also, what sorts of effects did the desecrated ground have on half-angels? Effects that Dylaniel had been willing to endure in order to give them a better chance at staying hidden.

“You said we’re probably in Europe; how common is desecrated land there?”

“Common enough that it doesn’t tell us where we—”

On the horizon there was a flash of light. Both of them dropped to the ground and tried to take cover on the opposite side of the hill top from the blast. The fast motion made the cut on Dean's back ache anew, but the pain barely registered as he cringed waiting for whatever shockwave or fallout might come their way.

“Was that a—” Dean started, but he was interrupted by the rumble of the explosion’s soundwave passing them. “Was that a fucking nuke?”

“Not a nuke. They don't look like that.” Tom peeked over the hilltop, then stood up. “It was something though.”

Dean got off the ground too. An orange glow emanated from the center of the explosion. They both watched as smoke began billowing into the sky. He’d never seen anything like that in person before, yet Tom didn’t seem nearly as shaken.

“Is this normal?” Dean felt sick at the idea, but this was his first time out and about when the ceasefire wasn’t in place. He wasn’t sure what to expect.

“I hope so.” Tom ran his fingertips over his goatee. “I haven't worked in Europe for a few years, but there occasionally are bombings… just not that big.”

“You wanted fire. Do we head towards it?” Dean asked hesitantly as a green flare was shot into the sky along one edge of the blaze.

When he didn’t get an answer right away he looked to Tom. The witch watched the fire in the distance, weighing unpleasant options, then turned to Dean and shook his head.

“There’s nothing good that way. We’ll skirt it and see if we can find a road we can follow from a safe distance.”

“What’s the flare mean?”

“It’s a distress call from a human city.” Dean opened his mouth to object to their inaction, but Tom cut him off with a worn glance. “I get wanting to help. I do. But that’s miles away and that kind of carnage—there is nothing there, except a wall of fire consuming everything on its way to the edge of the city. And while it spreads, tens or hundreds of thousands of grief-mad people are going to
be pressed out into a tiny ring of land. They will be hostile to basically any outsiders, and when they realize how little resources they have left…. If their land isn’t desecrated they’ll probably just ally with Heaven on the spot to get some sort of aid brought in immediately. If their land is desecrated, then I want to have at least a few-mile-headstart on the mob.”

“How can you be sure?” Dean’s words were more disappointed than doubtful.

“This isn’t my first time seeing a pyre like that,” Tom answered, then kept walking.

Dean spared another long glance at the fire before following his guide. He’d get back home and find a way to stop this sort of thing from happening. It wasn’t the kind of thing to be seen once in a lifetime, let alone multiple times.

“Get down,” Tom said as he suddenly crouched at the top of a particularly tall hill.

Dean quickly knelt down next to him and looked where he was pointing. A few hundred feet away the silhouette of a building was just barely visible in the dim moonlight. It sat in the low land, where it had been hidden by the hills until then. Its windows were dark and one of the ceiling corners appeared to have collapsed.

“Are we going in?” Dean asked.

“I hate that it’s on the low ground… but these out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere places don’t generally host squatters very long. I doubt any refugees from the city could’ve gotten here this fast, but they probably know it’s here.” Tom’s brow furrowed. “But we need supplies. We go in quiet and cautious. Search the place, then get out fast. Stay behind me and watch our rear.”

They moved as silently as possible down the hill toward the building. When they were about a hundred feet away Tom stopped and probed something on the ground with his foot. Dean crouched down to investigate what turned out to be railroad tracks heading towards the building.

“It’s a train station,” Tom whispered to Dean. “Probably for whichever city’s burning over there.”

“We might find some signs,” Dean suggested, hopefully of figuring out where the hell they were.

“Remember: artifacts, fire—even dry raw wood is good—charcoal, animals,” Tom repeated his wish list. “Priority number one is covering our asses so we can blink out of here safely.”

“Blink?” Dean asked quietly while they crept along the train tracks. “I thought you said we can’t get angel help?”

“We’re gonna get demon help. I’m a soul-sworn member of my mom’s coven. If I meet a pretty low bar, she’ll hear my call.”

Dean thought about the state of the fight at the bunker when they’d left. The last time he’d seen Ruby, she was pinned under a bookcase in a room that was expecting who-knew-how-many angels.

“How do you know she’s….” Dean hesitated to finish the thought.

“She's my Maji. If she was killed I'd feel it,” Tom replied.

They followed the tracks to the station. It was a single story and no bigger than a house. To Dean’s disappointment, there weren’t any obvious signs indicating which stop it was. Nearly
every window was broken, along with the front door, which had collapsed from wood rot. After a quick check of the perimeter, Tom stopped, then turned to Dean.

“Let me go first,” Tom whispered. He put the razor blade and cloth swatch of Cas’s blood in his main hand before entering.

Even Dean could tell that the place had been scavenged at least once before. On one side of the main waiting area the debris had been sorted into little piles, while on the other side there was a large pile of mixed materials. There were stone bricks, smashed wooden beams or furniture, and crumpled bits of plastic that had probably been food packaging a decade earlier. Upon closer inspection, Dean noted that all of the electrical wiring had been stolen, along with small pieces of hardware like nails and hinges.

Tom started digging through a pile of rubble and found a broken plastic telephone. It had been largely stripped of functional parts, but he nodded in approval at its size and weight. He whispered a few words, then the telephone turned into a silver dagger. He handed the razor blade back to Dean, who returned it to his wallet, and continued his search. Within a minute he found a piece of decorative molding that was able to be magically traded for a pistol.

“No angel blade?” Dean whispered, seeing their limited selection of weapons.

“I only had one queued up,” Tom explained with a shrug. “The spell is personal. It’s not meant to arm a hunting party.”

“Can you at least change the bullets to—”

“Shut up,” Tom interrupted while raising his hand.

Dean gripped the angel blade, expecting some sort of fight. Instead he heard the scratching of tiny clawed feet scurrying in a corner. Tom unabashedly clamored over a pile of rocks, chasing the sound.

“Duratus,” Tom said, causing the scurrying to stop. He then started digging through the pile that the sound had come from. After a moment, Tom laughed with some small measure of relief. “Got him. Keep an eye out. This is gonna take some doing.”

Dean tried to be lookout, but it was a bit hard to focus with the occasional sounds of cutting bone and tearing flesh. He disliked when witches used bodily fluids, but the fact that he was listening to someone trained in blood magic make those sounds was even more sickening. Tom recited some more incantations, then walked over to Dean. The witch had a shiny smudge on his forehead and extended a wet thumb towards Dean’s face. Dean recoiled in disgust.

“Seriously?” Tom did not sound amused.

“Sorry, reflex.” Dean grimaced, but forced himself to hold still. The blood was still a bit warm. If there had been much light, he’d probably have looked a bit green.

“It’s just some fucking blood.” Tom complained more to himself than Dean. “You know what, it’s not ‘just some fucking blood.’ It’s an 800-year-old spell that’s helping cover our asses.”

“Quality craftsmanship—what do you need to call Ruby?” Dean asked as he started pilfering through a new pile of debris, trying to distract himself from the cooling liquid on his face.

“As a member of her coven, if I’m in enough distress she’ll be able to sense it and locate me….” Tom hesitated to continue explaining his plan, which caught Dean’s ear. “So… all we need to do
is get me in a state of distress and she should know exactly where I am.”

"Distress?"

"I need to have like a panicked combat high,” Tom said, causing Dean to drop the piece of wood he was holding and stared at him. “I was thinking maybe you could choke me out?"

"Excuse me?"

“Like choke me basically unconscious,” Tom reiterated.

“You're serious? You want me to strangle you?!”

"I need to get that fear rush and it's just the two of us. Better you choke me out than us beat the hell out of each other—you’d just have to be sure to stop if I go limp."

"This might be the worst idea I've ever heard."

"And block the air flow, not blood flow. If you stop the blood to my brain I'll probably pass out before she can find me. The air'll give us more time."

“Air flow—that's like smothering.” Dean threw up his hands. “I've never smothered anyone before and I’m not gonna try it out on one of my friends!”

“Come on. It’ll take like a minute and then we’ll be out of here!”

“If I don’t accidentally kill you. What’s worse: being stuck out here alone or having your mom show up and fucking kill me?!”

“I don’t know what to tell you—” Tom was cut off by the sound of a floorboard creaking on the station’s deck.

Both Tom and Dean took cover behind a large pile of stone as three people started firing semi-automatic weapons through the windows. A ricocheting bullet pierced Dean’s right calf muscle. He tried to ball up tighter while holding his bleeding leg.

Tom cut both his palms with the silver knife and clutched Cas’s ichor for a second in focus. As fast as he could, he picked up a large rock, threw it to the left as a distraction, then circled to the right. He raised his hands palms out, and shoved at the wall their attackers were using as cover. A bullet hit him in the pocket of his left shoulder, but he’d dealt more damage. The entire stone wall crashed backward onto the shooters.

Dean tackled Tom, shoving him backwards as the roof started caving in. They managed to roll to the corner farthest from the collapse, where the roof fell at an angle rather than straight down. For a few seconds, they both just lay there in the dark wondering how badly buried they were. They both felt like idiots for letting themselves get caught off-guard and subsequently buried in the decrepit building.

When the chunk of roof shifted above them, Tom raised his hands, ready to try another magical push, but the roof was being lifted away. With some minor difficulty Ruby dug them out enough to see that they were alive.

“Oh, thank god,” Dean groaned. “I’ve never been happier to be ambushed in my life.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tom said through gritted teeth as he applied pressure to his bleeding
shoulder.

“What the fuck are you talking about? You know what, I don’t care,” Ruby said as she looked up from Tom’s injury, blinked her eyes black, then took in their surroundings. “It’s safe enough. I’ll be right back with some help.”

Ruby disappeared, then returned a moment later with Dyaniel, Kaylee, two East Asian women, and a teenage girl with brown hair and bright blue eyes. All of them had cuts in their clothes and light armor, but their injuries had all been healed. Despite having no visible injuries, Dyaniel looked extremely worn and his armor was particularly damaged. Tom and Dean were pulled from the rubble and the brown-haired girl immediately healed both Tom and Dean’s gunshot wounds as well as Tom’s cut hands.

“Jie, let Anael know we’ve got them. The rescue’s done, put everyone on the hunt,” Kaylee said to one of the other women, who nodded, then disappeared. She then gave some instruction to the second woman in Abyssal, causing her to leave. When Kaylee noticed the burning city in the distance she turned to the brown-haired girl. “Miro, have Roth find out who's behind these damn bombings. This shit’s gonna spread before the night’s over.”

“Yes, Kay,” Miro replied, but looked at Dyaniel with concern. “Dyl, are you okay carrying them on the jump?”

“I'm fine.” He tried to reassure her by adding, “I've jumped a group in worse shape.”

“Stay safe,” she told everyone before disappearing.

“What's going on?” Dean asked once he was alone with his core group of familiarity.

"Lucifer is gone," Dyaniel said with some audible bitterness.

Dean’s stomach dropped. His brain was confused static for a moment as he realized that he had no concept of how bad the situation could be. He’d never had to deal with something on that scale. He didn’t even really know what ‘gone’ meant.

"Gone?"

"When I got down to the basement the gates of his cell had been torn off and the warding was trashed,” Kaylee explained. “We don't know if they took him or just freed him, but there were maybe eight or ten dead angels and just as many Templars.”

"If they freed him we'll know soon enough," Tom sighed.

"Sam can handle Lucifer, right?” Dean asked in growing desperation. “I mean, he got him in the cell."”

"After personally killing like a hundred million people. And we don't have the cell this time. The angels messed up all the warding and we don't have an archangel to fix it," Kaylee said grimly. "If Dad and Luci really do fight each other there's gonna be a lot of collateral damage—if they even get the chance to fight each other."

Dean thought back to the minor bickering he saw in the cell. There had been broken furniture, fire, and Sam—well, Lucifer had been thrown into a wall. He tried to picture that on some larger scale. It was hard to imagine how much that behavior should be scaled up to, but the death toll of hundreds of millions made it something inconceivable.
“He—they had like a fit. Maybe they'll just shut down?” Dean suggested.

“If we're lucky, but that won't last very long, if at all. They can snap out of that in a second if they need to,” Kaylee explained. “They can change on a dime. It’s gonna be chaos.”

“Maybe not as much as you think,” Ruby corrected. “Your dad might be able to take control sometimes, but with their lives on the line again… we can bet Lucifer is gonna be dominating.”

"Where's Dean?” Tom interrupted, obviously referring to his absent uncle.

Dean looked around at their rescue party and noticed Dee’s absence for the first time.

"They took him." Ruby answered Tom’s question, but she watched Dylaniel’s reaction.

Dylaniel straightened slightly and didn't make eye contact with anyone.

“Ho—gods. Fuck!” Tom yelled.

He covered his face with his hands, paced for a moment, then turned to watch the glow of the burning city. His back was to everyone else, hiding his reaction to the news. Kaylee reached over to gently squeeze his arm.

“They, as in Heaven?” Dean asked, but all he got in response was a few bleak looks. “How do we get him back?”

“We can't,” said Ruby. “He's gonna be under such tight security, and we’ve never been able to get in beyond right at the gates.”

“Heaven is an incomprehensible maze to anyone who isn't an angel. They are heavily fortified with a superior force of angels in both strength and numbers.” Dylaniel’s description of the hopeless situation struck Dean. The night before, Dylaniel had been ready to charge a gate of Heaven with a sword for his parents. Now he was just defeated.

“Lucifer, Heaven…..” Dean’s voice faltered. “There’s gotta be something that somebody can do.”

"Hell’s locked down its gates, but we’ve mobilized fifteen of our knights and one million demons topside. Four archdemons have come up personally, and all of our hellhounds are at the ready,” Kaylee offered as cold comfort. “We’re just waiting for Lucifer to make his move.”

“You're gonna throw all that at one person?” Dean asked, trying to understand how so much could be directed at a single target and so little could be done to save Dee.

“Lucifer can rally both demons and angels—and after basically coming back from the dead, you can expect he’ll have an army behind him,” Ruby answered. “Not to mention that ‘one person’ can burn through a million angels, demons, and humans with scorching light.”

“With Lucifer on the board and with our uncle in Heaven’s hands, Michael will be in play eventually,” Kaylee elaborated. “If they fight each other we’ll all die. Yes, we're gonna throw everything thing we’ve got at either or both of them. We’re running out of time and we’re gonna hit whichever we can as hard as we can.”

Dean felt faint. They’d told him about the ongoing war. They’d told him that they’d had to fight Lucifer eleven years earlier. They’d told him the importance of not being caught by Heaven…. But hearing stories and warnings was nothing compared to finding himself in the moment. This was more than a war or a fight between powerful individuals. They were facing what could easily
be the end of the world. Everyone else knew it. Based on their grim reactions, they’d seen the writing on the wall as soon as Lucifer had escaped. Dee’s capture was just the second impassable obstacle to overcome.

"What about this Dean?" Tom asked as he turned back to the group.

Dean was a little surprised to be considered with everything else that was going on. For a minute, he’d even forgotten about himself as a priority.

"He needs to get back to his time. This place is igniting. If we don't move fast we might not be able to send him home."

"Dyl, where's our highest concentration of angels?" Kaylee asked. "If a group of them work together maybe they could knock it out fast."

"It was Belfast, but Sam knew that too. After Lucifer was contained, personnel assignments went back to their previous layout. His intel is old, but most of it isn't out of date. He might try to hit those locations early." Dyaniel pursed his lips. "Anael and Rachel should be scrambling the personnel assignments for all angels and relocating the nephilim, but they are likely scattered for the moment."

"Can we move up…." 

Dean couldn't make out the rest of Ruby's words. He felt overwhelmed. There was a heavy sensation in his chest. His eyes could barely focus and an intense heat started prickling his flesh. For a second he wondered if the stress of the situation had finally given him a heart attack, but then he noticed Dyaniel.

Dyaniel was hunched forward ever so slightly and breathing through his mouth. He touched the side of his head, but didn't otherwise indicate that he was in pain.

"Michael is moving on Earth. He doesn't have a vessel yet, but he's trying to contact me."

Dyaniel's brow furrowed when he saw Dean’s distress. "He's trying to contact both of us."

"Dean?" Tom asked as he cautiously took a step closer.

Dyaniel and Tom’s voices sounded very far away. Dean was having trouble processing what they were saying. Something about Michael.

"Dean? Are you trying to outrun me?" echoed a voice inside his head. When it spoke its words overwhelmed his other senses. He could see Ruby saying something to him, but he couldn't hear her. He could only hear the voice. "You're on the wrong side of this. They will lose and you will die with them. What will happen to your real family without you?"

“Stop talking,” Dean told the voice. He couldn’t tell whether he was speaking or not, but it felt like his mouth had moved.

"I can save you. I can return you to your family. Just let me know where you are," the voice coaxed.

“No.”

"I know you're close, near one of the fires… by railroad tracks…. Just open yourself to my power and it will all be over."
Dean could feel the loathing bleeding through Michael’s words, turning them from an offer into a threat. He’d known that voice intimately. For days it had been his distrust and doubt, that hatred and those hunting eyes that had been stalking him in his dreams. The beast was Michael and now he was pouncing. Dean stumbled and collapsed, overwhelmed by the candid interaction.

"Wha! No, no, no," Kaylee said as she knelt down next to him. She gently started slapping his cheek, desperate to hold his attention. "Dean, you're staying with us. Don't listen to him."

"Why is he taking such a beating?" Tom asked Dylaniel and Ruby, the two people there that knew the most about the angel-vessel relationship.

"I don't know," Dylaniel stared down at Dean in concern.

"Dean, can you hear me?" Kaylee tried again to get some sort of reaction out of him.

"This isn't real." Dean clenched his eyes and gripped his head in pain. Blood began trickling from his nose and tear ducts.

"Holy fuck!" Ruby exclaimed. “When he first got here and you all put wards on him, did you copy them verbatim? Where'd you get the designs from?"

“We gave him the standard set against scrying, tracking, and involuntary summoning,” Tom replied.

“Did he get the enochian ward limiting the angel-vessel link?” Ruby asked, but Tom, Kaylee, and Dylaniel all just stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded. “Cas and I designed it. You two have it on your spines—we must've told you guys. Jesus fuck.”

Ruby kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner. The warding to hinder communication between an angel and zir vessel had been applied out of the purview of Tom, Kaylee, and Dylaniel. Back when Tom was only seven and Kaylee was a baby, Sam, Dean, and Kaylee received their wards. Cas had given Alex, Dylaniel, and Sa’dah their wards within hours of their birth. After the first night of placing wards in Sam and Ruby’s cabin twenty nine years earlier, it had become an afterthought, something reserved for immediately after a baby was born into their family. The last time it’d been done was twenty years ago, in Hell. None of Dean's three guides for the last few days had been aware of how exposed he'd been to Michael.

“This is like when Luci was giving me visions,” Kaylee worried aloud while looking at Dean's writhing form. “But worse.”

“Can we knock him out?" Tom asked with a growing sense of urgency.

Ruby shot down the idea. “Michael can get to him just as easily when he's asleep.” She’d heard that line of thinking back when the concern was Alex saying yes to Lucifer. Alex at least had had the warding to mitigate the effects. Dean was another story.

Ruby silently pulled her knife from its holster, then stared at Dean thoughtfully. Kaylee and Tom didn't see her drawing her weapon, but Dylaniel watched her. She exchanged a worried glance with the nephilim while trying to steel herself.

"Even if we can get the warding spell on him, if Michael's pressing through your ward, what chance does he have of enduring this?" Ruby told Dylaniel. Her kids looked up to see her holding the knife. “I don't like it, but you all remember how bad it was with Lucifer and he wasn’t as aggressive. If Dean breaks we're dead.”
"Heaven still has hooks in his soul. If you kill him, you'll be sending him right to Michael, and how long will he last then?" Dylaniel pointed out, defusing Ruby.

She sighed with a combination of relief and disappointment at her own helplessness, then put away her knife.

"How long do the wards take?" Tom asked.

"Too long. The prep work alone is an hour…" 

Dean hadn't been able to fully follow the conversation since Michael began speaking, but he'd caught brief glimpses. Something was wrong with him and they were trying to decide what to do. He struggled to listen, to understand, but the pain was making it hard to focus. Just when he started wondering if he could die from Michael speaking to him, the archangel turned his attention to some other important matter. There was a nuisance that urgently needed to be addressed—Lucifer.

Dean wanted to warn the others that something was happening with Lucifer, but he was beyond incapacitated. His vision had turned dark and he could only hear howling, like an agonizing echo from Michael's words. He couldn't tell which direction was up, which made him think he was dreaming, until he felt himself convulse.

A jolt of electricity shot through his body as he hit the ground. His eyes stung while drifting around, trying to take in the fuzzy scene. He tried to move, but his limbs tingled and weren't responsive. Dylaniel was kneeling beside him, one hand on Dean's forehead and the other centered on his chest.

They were inside a building. Loose paper scraps and dust floated through the air, along with the sound of yelling and gunfire. There was an explosion and Dylaniel leaned over Dean, shielding his body. A gust of wind and the sound of flapping wings accompanied two massive golden blurs engulfing him. Then everything started to fade again.
Difficult Decisions

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

The sound of birds chirping agitated the throbbing pain behind Dean's eyes. He felt oddly hot and damp. The room was too bright, but he quickly discovered that he couldn't roll away from the light without feeling nauseous.

"Careful. You're still recovering."

The voice was feminine and sweet, with an Indian accent. After a few seconds his eyes adjusted to his environment, a stone room with a row of arched windows along one wall, allowing him to see her. She was middle-aged with dark eyes, grey interspersed throughout her black hair, and a gentle smile that somehow made her seem more youthful.

"My name is Mary," she told him. "I'm a doctor."

"What…?" Dean tried to sit up, but she put a hand on his chest. He relented, sinking back into his padded cot.

"You took a lot of physical and mental stress over the last few hours. After you passed out, Dylan kept you hidden while the witches were preparing to place your wards. Unfortunately, he had to keep moving you, which caused some damage."

"Damage?"

"Teleporting causes a temporary disruption of electrical impulses. It’s not harmful when the body has time to recover between jumps, but if it’s done too frequently it can cause accumulated damage to the nervous system. Apparently, he had to restart your heart toward the end."

“I died?” It was most definitely not the first or last time, but it was a shock every time.

She paused for a moment to think about how to respond. "That's hard to say, but your heart wasn't stopped long enough for your soul to release and that's what's important."

“Where am I?”

“The Kalighat Kali Temple, in West Bengal."

“Beng—I’m in India?”

“Yes. You're under the protection of Kali.”

Dean went to run his fingers through his hair, but felt something stuck to the skin on his left forearm. When he slid the sleeve up he saw a bandage covering the carving Tom had placed on him in the field.

“Our angels are spread thinly, so as a triage measure non-lethal injuries are being treated with
human medicine. The cut on your back was also mended with stitches,” Mary explained.

“Where are the others?” Dean realized she might not know who all he was talking about.
“Kaylee, Ruby, Tom, Dyl—what's going on out there?”

“Ruby, Tom, and Kay are helping coordinate the fight.”

Dean's brain stuttered when she didn't mention Dyaniel as being in the fight. The kid seemed to live for combat. “Where's Dyl?

“He's recovering deeper in the temple.”

“Recovering?”

“Before the series of teleportation jumps he took a significant amount of damage, most of which he healed himself.” Mary frowned subtly. “He's not an angel. He only has so much power to do angelic things. He ran himself out getting you here—actually, you two only made it to Jirja. Despite the chaos he managed to get a call for help out, but he was mostly incapacitated by that point.”

Dean had no idea what incapacitation meant. “Is he going to be okay?”

“The less power he had, the more jumping disrupted his nervous system too. Right now he's having trouble regulating several functions of his autonomic nervous system; most notable are his heart rate and blood pressure.”

“Why haven't the angels fixed him up? Isn't he hot shit in their army?”

“His injuries aren't mechanical like broken bones or cuts. It's much more nuanced than that. The angels haven't seen this sort of injury in a nephilim before. It'd be straight-forward if he was an angel or a human, but angels have always been scared to interfere with nephilim endocrine or nervous systems.”

“But he's gonna be okay?”

“He's resting. Right now there are several machines acting as a failsafe for his nervous system. There's been a marked improvement over the last two hours, but it might take a while before he is on his feet.” She paused for a moment, then added, “If you’re feeling up to walking, I'll take you to him.”

She lead him through the stone hallways of the temple. The room he'd woken up in had small exterior windows, which allowed light in and offered a view of a serene pool, but as they walked into the interior the tone changed. It reminded him less of a holy place and more of how he'd seen the headquarters of the French resistance portrayed in movies about WWII. Wires ran along the ceiling. Tiny desks were set up anywhere there was enough room for a person to work.

Every room they passed held people hurriedly going about their business. The overwhelming majority of people appeared to be of Indian descent and many were speaking languages he didn't recognize. He suspected Hindi was the most common one. A few prayed before altars, but for the most part their demeanor was wartime professionalism.

Dean had to stop for a moment when they walked through a large chamber that had been converted into a communications center. Dozens of people were on phones, speaking into cups of blood, or communicating via trance-like states. At any given time there were seven analysts tabulating data, then adjusting numbers on a massive chalkboard. It was impressive to see, but Dean didn't speak
Hindi and had no idea what it all meant.

“What are they doing?” he asked Mary.

“Computing and monitoring the real-time troop, civilian, and casualty numbers for various regions and demographics.”

“And you're using a blackboard?”

“They have electronic records too. It's just good to keep the boards in case of an EMP.”

Dean watched the boards for several minutes. He wasn't sure what any given number represented, but he noticed that numbers were slowly dropping. The bottom row was only updated once, though it was written in red chalk, indicating some special significance. One of the red numbers increased by fifty-six.

“What are the red ones?”

“MVP,” Mary replied grimly, then noticed Dean's confused expression. “Minimum viable population. It's the fewest people necessary for a species to survive.”

“Survive—they're crunching the numbers on extinction?” Dean eyed the red number that had just increased and pointed at it. “How can the minimum go up?”

“That column is for angels and nephilim. Their viability is linked to both their own population, humanity's population, the gender balance of their vessels, and more. Any of the MVP’s can fluctuate—”

One of the operators stood up and yelled something, which quieted the room. Then he read off a report. Four of the operators teleported away and three ran down the hall.

“Brazil went dark about half an hour ago. The first tallies are coming in and it doesn't sound like there's much left.” Mary sighed.

Dean watched as the live population numbers starting being revised down by hundreds of thousands at a time.

“They had a lot of people,” Dean guessed with a sinking sensation.

“They also had nuclear weapons.”

Dean could've spent hours anxiously watching the numbers update, but thankfully Mary guided him away from the morbid spectacle. She took him downstairs, through a security checkpoint, then into the center-most room. It was sparsely populated compared to the nerve center upstairs. A few portable curtain walls had been set up to create private recovery nooks.

They found Dylaniel lying in a cot toward the back. He had an IV of some clear fluids and dozens of wires, which came out from under his medical gown, were hooked up to several monitors of various sorts. To Dean's surprise, he was awake, though Dylaniel just stared at the rough stone ceiling.

A little girl of about ten years old sat on a pillow next to his cot, reading a book to him. She had black hair, light brown skin, and vibrant golden-brown eyes. She wore a lavender and magenta kurta. The girl smiled excitedly at Mary and began conversing with her in Hindi, but they were
interrupted by some beeping across the room.

“I’ve got to check on that really quick,” Mary explained to Dean and the girl. Just before leaving Dylandiel's nook, she turned to him. “Dylan, I'll be back to check on you in a few minutes.”

"Hi, Dean!” said the little girl. She wasn't technically wrong, but he still pitied the kid.

"Hi…. Um, I don't know how to explain this, but I'm not Dean—"

"Of course you are. You're always Dean!" She giggled at some sort of inside joke.

“Okay…."

He looked at Dylandiel, who wasn’t reacting to anything. He wasn't really sure what to do. The girl plopped back down to her pillow, then picked her book up.

"Would you like me to start the story from the beginning? You haven't heard this story yet, but you like it.” She held up the book, which was maybe fifty pages long. She was nearly halfway through. “Or we could make the middle be the start for you, then the beginning would be your middle, and before the middle would be the end… but you wouldn't get a happy ending.”

That felt about right.

“Does the story have a happy ending if you don’t change anything for me?” Dean asked, sitting down on the pillow across from her.

“Sometimes. Sometimes, I stop here.” She flipped to about 90% through the book.

“You don’t finish the story?”

“No. I just change where the ending is.” She grinned at him, then flipped through the pages. “I like change. It gives you so many new stories instead of just one.”

Dean sat beside Dylandiel’s cot and listened to the story a bit. She started reading from a random line about a third of the way through the book, but he didn’t really care. As much as he wanted to chase down whoever he could and beg intel from them, exhaustion won him over. He succumbed to story time, a strange moment of calm and innocence in the middle of what was chaos and pain.

"Devi, can you get me some water?” Dylandiel eventually asked quietly without looking at her.

"Okay," she replied before kissing his forehead and skipping out of the room.

"She doesn't know what's happening, does she?" Dean asked, but Dylandiel didn’t answer.

"She's my cousin, Gabriel's daughter. They're going to kill her, either side. She's the last piece of Gabriel's grace…." Dylandiel explained quietly. "She's all that's left of his betrayal."

Devi came back with a cup of water. Dylandiel finally stopped staring at the ceiling when she offered him the water. He smiled at her and Dean wondered how hard it must be for Dylandiel to feign a smile. He wasn't exactly good at emoting under normal circumstances, but one of his parents was dead, the other was a prisoner of war, and the world was literally going up in flames.

When Dylandiel tried to sit up, he started wobbling slightly and his hand couldn't quite reach the cup. Dean hurried to hold Dylandiel up while Devi helped with actually sipping the water. Dean noticed the back of Dylandiel's medical gown was open slightly. There were bandages all along Dylandiel's spine, with wires coming out every few inches. Even part of the hair by his nape had
been shaved off to accommodate the adhesive securing the wires. Beyond being weak physically, he was literally wired into several pieces of electronic equipment.

Sitting next to the cot, hearing the beeps of monitors, Dean was suddenly reminded of when Sam broke his arm, maybe 18 years ago. Or, Dean supposed, 48 years ago, now. They’d been playing superheroes and Sam had fallen—well, jumped—off the roof of a one-story building. Dean couldn't have been more than twelve since he hadn't known how to hotwire a car. He'd been most concerned about Sam, but as he waited beside Sam’s bed for the nurses to set the bone other fears had crept into his mind. He didn't know how to pay for the cast, their dad would be upset that he let Sam get hurt, the hospital might call child protective services—that was the main reason Dad had them avoid hospitals, but Dad was away and he didn't know how to set bones. He'd sat there, helpless and horrified while somehow trying to keep his cool for his little brother.

Now he was sitting beside Dylyaniel, helpless and horrified by the situation around him, trying desperately to keep his cool for.... Dylyaniel barely seemed to care whether Dean was having a crisis. Maybe the little girl, Devi, was giving him a sufficient audience to play tough for. Maybe he just wished he could be calm and collected in an emergency of this magnitude. He suspected that Dee would've probably known what to do. The thought made him have to look away from Dylyaniel.

“Hey, Dyl,” Ruby said as she entered the recovery cubicle and knelt next to the cot.

She nodded at Dean, who sat on the stone floor with his knee acting as a third pillow for the napping Devi. Dean carefully repositioned Devi in order to free himself, while Ruby turned her attention back to Dylyaniel.

“How's your body treating you?” she asked.

“I can't stand up.” He tried to lift his arm, but it quickly started shaking, then fell weakly to the cot. “Lucifer's out there and I can't even stand.”

“It's temporary,” Ruby assured him. “Mary says that once your heart is straightened out you should have a fast recovery.”

“And how long will that take?” Dylyaniel asked rhetorically. After a moment he nodded to Ruby’s knife. “Give that to Dean.”

Ruby didn't question whatever Dylyaniel was getting at, so she passed her knife to Dean.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Dean asked with the sudden concern that Dylyaniel was going to request something like a mercy killing.

“You can see that it's just a knife, but give it to me,” Dylyaniel instructed. Dean inspected the knife briefly, then handed it to Dylyaniel. The nephilim closed his eyes for several seconds. “I've blessed it. It's only effective in my hands, but if you touch it you may be able to sense it.”

Dylyaniel continued to hold the knife, but gestured for Dean to also grip the handle so that he could make some contact with the wood. Dean could feel a mild, serene power coming from the weapon. Dylyaniel was trying to pass on the priceless skill, which was both very considerate and frightening.

“How do I bless weapons?” Dean asked.

“'Bless' is actually a misnomer. It's not about praying, or God. It's about having conviction.
Usually righteous anger works well. You have to know with every fiber of your being that you are doing the right thing—that your act is bettering the world.” Dylaniel thought for a moment. “It's not faith in God or Heaven. It's faith in yourself.”

“Fuck.”

Dean decided to let Dylaniel sleep, so he tagged along with Ruby. She had just arrived from Guilin, where she'd been organizing some of the more magically-proficient demons. They were working to desecrate large areas of land, though several of their attempts had drawn the attention of Heaven, resulting in the deaths of too many Maji. Rather than risk the caste being decimated, they decided to work in smaller groups and Ruby was freed up to check back in at the AFE’s new official headquarters.

“How're your wards holding up?” she asked while guiding him through the building on her way to some sort of command meeting.

“Every once in awhile I get this feeling like there's someone whispering about a mile away.”

“That's probably fine. Heaven’s influence isn't as strong here, so that, combined with the wards, should be keeping you and Dyl fairly Michael-free for a while.”

“He isn't just gonna find us again….” Dean stopped walking. “That's what happened, wasn't it? He could sense me and I led him straight to you guys.”

“You didn't know. None of you knew.” Ruby rubbed the back of her neck. “When Lucifer got out the first time, he tried communicating with the kids and Sam, his vessels. It did a lot of damage to them, but it wasn't as much as what Michael was putting you through. You couldn't have known what he was trying to do—hell, that he was doing anything at all. Dyl might’ve been just as blindsided if Michael had been able to detect him as easily as you. Gods, I should really talk to him about his warding and make sure he understands how it works. He’s had it so long... I mean, he clearly doesn’t even think about it anymore.”

“Works?” Dean looked down his body. “Do I need to know anything about keeping this working?”

“You’re fine, but we had to build a loophole into Dylaniel's warding. He can selectively activate or deactivate it based on each grace,” Ruby tried to explain. “Without it, Cas wouldn't be able to sense Dyl in that special angel-vessel way or communicate.... Well, he wouldn’t have been....”

Ruby crossed her arms in front of her chest in a gesture that he recognized as sadness more than anger.

“I'm sorry.” Dean didn't even know where to begin. “About Cas and Dee, Dyl, Sam, and…. I don't even remember the names of your other kids. Fuck, how horrible is that?”

“Alex. My son’s name was Alex. He loved magic and breaking every rule he could find. My daughter's name was Sa’dah, but you—Dee called her Sadie. She loved nature and was always happy.”

“I…. ” He wanted to apologize again. He wanted to say that he was sorry for so much, but he didn't even know where to begin. “I wish I could've met them.”

The corner of Ruby’s lip curled up at his comment. He was waiting for her to make some sort of snide comment back at him, but it didn't come.
“You and Alex would've gotten along.” She smiled at a thought. “If you could've seen past his horns. He always had them out, big ones too. I have no idea how he didn't hit shit with them constantly.”

“Horns?” He'd briefly seen Kaylee with horns, but the idea was still new.

“Don't tell me that if you could manifest horns you wouldn't have done that throughout your angsty teenage years?” Ruby gestured for Dean to keep following her, so they continued through the building.

“Fair enough,” Dean conceded. “I'm trying to picture what Dyl's angsty teenage years looked like.”

He wasn't sure if he was making polite small talk to fill what could otherwise be depressing silence or if he was seeking substantive information. Was he legitimately interested because he cared about Dylaniel or because he wanted to better understand what it had been like for Dee to raise a kid? Dean nearly missed the first part of Ruby’s explanation because he was too distracted by the realization that he wasn't nearly as freaked out by the idea of someday being a parent.

“Dyl was like a time bomb that never went off on the wrong people. It's just that he'd get pushed a lot by people—and he wanted to be patient, but you know how it is being a teenager. So he got into a few fights, which was mostly bad news for whoever he was fighting.”

Dean reluctantly brought up their current predicament. “Having Dyl out of the fight right now—how bad is it?”

“In theory he could stand a chance in a fight with Lucifer, which is almost unheard of, but that doesn't mean Lucifer would let it happen. I'm not sure if Luci would hunt Dyl down like last time or try to avoid him.” Ruby shrugged. “Aside from that... our angels can definitely feel Dyl’s absence. I don't know if it's 'cause he's popular or some sort of subtle Sword of Heaven thing, but there's not as much wind in their sails without him.”

“You said Lucifer hunted him down last time?” Dean asked, earning a nod of acknowledgment from her. “How old was he?”

“Ten.”

“Jesus.”

“All things considered, his teenage years weren't that bad.”

As they were walking a man in a dirty grey suit hurried up to Ruby, then wordlessly handed her a report. She asked the man something in Abyssal and he answered as briefly as possible before rushing off.

“Sorry about that,” she said to Dean while looking over the report.

He tried to sneak a peek at papers, but realized they were written in Abyssal. Before he could ask, Ruby’s face dimmed.

She started walking faster and told him, “Come on, sitrep is gonna be moving up.”

Dean hastily followed her. As they marched down the halls, Ruby instructed bystanders to locate various people. Something was moving up their timetable and not many people seemed to be
When they reached the meeting room there were already three women there. The first was one of the Asian women who was in the rescue party from the field—he was pretty sure Kaylee had called her Jie. Beside her stood another woman with red hair who he didn't recognize. Last was the brown-haired teenager Kaylee had called Miro.

“Did you get the latest report from our North American gates?” Ruby held up the papers to show Jie.

“How long until they break through?” asked Jie.

“Three hours,” Ruby read off the report. “Two, if they focus their fire.”

“Break through?” Dean ventured into the conversation. He only vaguely understood what a gate was, but he got the distinct impression that breaking through them was a bad thing.

“We've got angels trying to break into Hell.”

“Do we know if they serve Heaven or Lucifer?” asked the redhead.

“We don't know.” Ruby tossed the report across the table to Jie a little too hard in her frustration. “All they have to do is think to take a hard shot at the Howling Gate and they'll be downstairs in twenty minutes. The fucking thing’s never been able to seal properly after Heaven fucked it up!”

Jie suddenly looked very alarmed. “How many people know how weak the Howling Gate is?”

“Fifteen.” Ruby started ticking people off on her fingers. “Four on Earth, ten in Hell—”

“And one in Heaven.” Kaylee finished her mom’s sentence as she entered the room followed by Tom, Salviel, the other Asian woman from the field, and a stout man with olive skin.

“You can't be serious,” said the redheaded woman in disbelief.

“Sorry, Anael.” Ruby sighed. “Dean was on the mission to the Howling Gate. He was around for the debriefing and kept up on it for years. He definitely knows that toxic pit is shaky at best.”

“It's about to get more reinforcements on the Hell side,” Kaylee explained. “I just approved one of our backstop measures. We’re sabotaging every gate we have in the Americas, Europe, and the Atlantic. All defensive efforts will be redirected to the remaining gates.”

“That's fourteen gates.” Jie looked to the others for their reactions to the news. “Any aid we send to those regions will have to pass through a gate on the opposite side of the world. The delays involved—”

“We’ve pulled up every soldier we have except for a minor garrison. It’s not our mobility we have to worry about, it’s theirs.” Kaylee glanced at the non-demons in the room. “Wall-to-wall in size, Hell is insignificant compared to Earth. It’s the size of a small country, but we have thirty-three gates that come out around the world. If Lucifer gets into Hell, not only will our people be massacred, but our gates will be a transportation hub for whoever he wants to let in. One of his armies could take a shortcut through Hell and appear two hundred miles to our east in a minute. I don't care if it means blowing every gate. Lucifer isn't getting into Hell.”

“Don’t you all teleport anyway?” Dean asked reflexively. When everyone turned to look at him he felt like an interloper.
“Angels fly, it’s usually just too fast for human perception,” Anael corrected. “There are forms of interference that can slow us and demons down. The region that we’re in now has one of those effects. It might only slow us down a bit, but in battle even seconds can matter.”

“Depending on the gate and the target, it could save Lucifer or Heaven a lot of time to detour through Hell,” agreed Ruby. “The strategic value doesn't mean as much to Heaven because they have their own gate system, but they still might want it just to prevent Lucifer from—”

Everyone was briefly distracted by Dylianiel entered the room. He moved a little slower and more deliberately than normal as he pushed a small cart of equipment that was still wired to him, using it almost as a walker. He closed the door behind him, though Dean noticed that the nephilim paused briefly to gather some strength before walking to the table. Miro and Tom both tried to help him, but he waved them both off.

“Does Mary know you're up and moving around?” Ruby asked with a raised eyebrow.

“She and I have different priorities,” Dylianiel evaded the question.

“If you're busting out, at least sit down,” Tom said while dragging a chair over to his cousin. “The last thing we need is you falling and yanking a bunch of wires out of your brain.”

“They aren't in my brain,” Dylianiel countered, but he took the seat. When everyone continued to stare at him for a moment, he waved a hand at the table inviting them to continue.

“Any other news from downstairs before we move on to the local shitstorm forecast?” Tom asked.

“Our deserter rates haven’t been as bad as last time, but I don’t know how long that’s gonna hold,” Kaylee continued. “The more writing that ends up on the wall, the more people—demons, angels, humans—who’re gonna want to flock to the biggest force.”

“Speaking of which,” interjected Miro, “it appears that all but four of the detonations of European cities were done by Heaven. There’s been a fast-spreading propaganda campaign blaming Lucifer and offering protection to any surviving humans siding with Heaven.”

“Who did the other four?” asked Salviel.

“Lucifer,” Miro answered, not surprising anyone.

“Is there any way to contain the burn-and-blame campaign?” Ruby asked.

“I don’t know,” Miro confessed.

“With all the old borders going up it’s probably gonna contain itself,” Tom muttered before elaborating. “With the revival of the Berbers, Set has a pretty strong presence in North Africa and the guy is literally fueled by chaos and war. His territory isn’t going to collapse easily. Heaven might be able to press its influence into parts of North and West Asia, but it’s going to run up against Kali and Guan Yu, etcetera.”

“Miro, do we have any word from Tamara?” Kaylee asked, but she didn’t look optimistic.

“She was supposed to be evacuating from Lienz with the rest of our staff, but no one’s heard from them for nearly an hour….” Miro’s voice trailed off into a silence that lasted for several seconds.

“Okay.” Kaylee nodded to herself, trying to regain some focus. “Does anyone have any ideas on how to stop Europe from burning to its edges?”
“Do we need Europe?” Ruby asked gingerly. “I don’t want to be the bad guy here, but, cost-benefit, what is Europe worth to us?”

“Heaven’s taking entire cities of humans for faithful and Templars,” objected Anael.

“No, they’re taking fractions of cities. Mostly untrained, shellshocked, proto-Templars who are thousands of miles away and can’t teleport without angels shuttling them,” Ruby corrected. “Maybe we should care if we’re thinking weeks down the road, but right now we’re fighting what’s in front of us and hoping for a lot more fights ahead.”

“We’re a global force,” Anael countered. “The whole world is right ‘in front of us.’”

“Maybe it shouldn’t be,” added Salviel with an apologetic shrug.

Miro laid out what Salviel and Ruby were skirting around. “You’re talking about pulling out of an entire continent.”

“You already started evacuating half your bases—”

“One-third.”

“I’m not trying to pick a fight,” Ruby replied. “I’m just saying that if we’re going to start withdrawing troops from that mess we need to order withdrawal for the remaining two-third or they’ll be lost.”

“But if we pull out entirely it’ll be nearly impossible to take back,” Miro pleaded.

“Miro,” Dyaniel’s voice was gentler than Dean had ever heard from the nephilim. “The land’s already lost, but the people don’t need to be.”

“But… I….” She closed her eyes, then nodded. “I’ll spread the word.”

It took everyone a moment to collect themselves after Miro had teleported away. Dean had never seen a conversation like that. Sure, he’d talked with other hunters about risking their own lives. He’d even seen Kaylee, Tom, and Dyaniel talk about minor military and diplomatic actions, but nothing on the scale of nations or continents… and the meeting wasn’t even done.

“How are the Americas?” Ruby asked, but when no one immediately volunteered she sighed. “So what’s Lucifer doing to the Americas?”

“As of when we walked in here, he’s actually off the grid again.” Dean could hear the fatigue in Kaylee’s voice. “After the first bit, there were a ton of sightings and attacks, but nothing from him personally in the last thirty minutes or so.”

“First bit?” asked Dean. He’d been lost in a field with Tom and unconscious during the beginning of this whole horror show.

"There was about an hour when he initially got out where nothing happened. At first we thought he was being held by Heaven, but when he showed up without any big move from upstairs—I mean why hold him for a short time, just to randomly let him go?"

“Could he have escaped?” Jie suggested.

“Maybe, but then you’d think Heaven would be trying harder to catch him,” replied Tom.
“Why would they even bother?” Anael muttered bitterly. “As long as he kills more of us than their angels, what does Michael care? We’re all just a means to him.”

“Either that or Lucifer could’ve done enough damage on the way out that they just don’t want him back,” Salviel mused aloud. “Maybe that’s just wishful thinking.”

“When Michael was attacking me,” Dean interjected, “he stopped because he had to do something regarding Lucifer. It was like he suddenly had to deal with a new pain in his ass.”

“That was a little after Lucifer started showing himself,” Ruby noted with interest.

“Going off the other theory: say he wasn't captured by Heaven. Why would Lucifer just do nothing for so long?” asked Jie.

"Because he wasn't sitting on his hands; he just wasn't in a populated area,” Ruby suggested.

“Great.” Tom groaned. “Now we get to worry about whatever is so important that it’s on the top of his to-do list, but we don’t know about it enough to keep eyes on it.”

"It doesn’t have to be tactically important. It could be personal,” Ruby pointed out. “I'm guessing the first thing he did was the one thing that both he and Sam could agree on. I’ll bet that they were at Alex's and Sadie's graves. Beyond that, who knows.”

“There is one other thing they agree on,” Tom added. “Does anyone know where the biggest Templar strongholds are?”

“Istanbul, Manassas, Fort Worth—” Dylaniel began.

“Istanbul and Fort Worth were both leveled… about the time Michael became distracted by Lucifer,” Kaylee confirmed.

“Grab a few ghouls and I bet you'll be able to find a lot more Templar bases.” Tom rolled his eyes at his own suggestion. “Who wants to wager the four European cities he took out were actually full of Templars?”

"You think he's trying to eliminate the Templars?” Anael asked, skeptical of the strategic value of killing humans first.

"You all know how Sam felt about Templars,” Ruby reminded them. “They both could be looking for some vengeance.’

“Luci could be trying to win points with him,” Kaylee agreed.

“Wouldn't you? Why start by fighting the enemy within?” Ruby pursed her lips. “This is gonna be bad. Do we have any details on how he's acting? Lucifer has to be dominant, but are there any signs Sam's getting through?”

"With the exception of a few strings of attacks on Templars, Lucifer's actions have been very….“ Salviel chose her words carefully. “Erratic. It's likely that Sam is fighting him with fleeting success."

"Erratic?"

"He's spontaneously left in the middle of attacks. there have been several massive explosions in unpopulated areas. And there's the fact that he recently went quiet."
"Since when did quiet become so terrifying?" Tom sighed. "Anyone want to guess?"

"You mean aside from lulling us into a false sense of security?" Dylaniel suggested.

"If Dad's in relative control—and that's a big if—" Kaylee said. "—I'm guessing he'd go to the Badlands. Lucifer made the damn place. I'm betting if they go in there then a thousand ghosts'll try to tear them to pieces."

"Lucifer wouldn't let that happen." Anael shook her head. "I don't care what they do to a vessel, ghosts are not going to kill an archangel."

"Would it disable them?" Ruby asked thoughtfully.

"For a time, maybe."

"We need to start searching the Badlands, now," Kaylee ordered.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Anael, then she disappeared.

"Sending in search parties a very dangerous move… all around," Dylaniel said quietly. "Intentionally or not, wisely or not, any angels going in to search for him are entering a trap."

"I get that you understand that place better than us, but this is one of those times when we need to make sacrifices to get intel. The fog of war is rolling in on us and maybe you didn't get to see it last time around, but we're going to quickly find ourselves blind." Dean could see Kaylee trying to make it clear that she was not being dismissive of her much-younger cousin. "If Lucifer's there we need to know and if he's vulnerable we need to know even more. In the meantime, all we have is speculation."

"If he is in the Badlands, what does that mean?" Ruby asked Dylaniel, trying to restore any dignity he might've lost.

"If Sam took them to the Badlands, the ghosts will attack both Sam and Lucifer as well as their body," Dylaniel explained. "If Sam breaks, Lucifer could simply teleport away and Sam will be severely weakened. In that case Lucifer probably isn't in control, but he will be eventually—"

"So maybe Sam is buying us time?" Jie seemed slightly hopeful at a thought. "Maybe he knows something we don't?"

"He knows a lot we don't," Ruby replied. "He can read Lucifer's mind."

"Can we contact Sam somehow?" suggested Salviel. "Maybe he can tell us what Lucifer is planning?"

"The reading-each-other's-minds goes both ways and Lucifer is a lot more powerful in that dynamic than Sam." Ruby shot down the idea. "We could try to find a spell, but I doubt there'll be anything powerful enough that Lucifer can't overcome through sheer will. Mind-soul links are some of the hardest things to break even with the best conditions."

"Just when I thought things might be looking up," Tom groaned.

"I didn’t finish," Dylaniel said, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. "If they are in the Badlands, which we haven't confirmed, it doesn't mean that Sam took them there." His words somehow managed to bring the entire mood in the room down. "Lucifer might be enduring his own beating to intentionally weaken Sam. He could be getting ready to make a significant move."
Kit came in the doorway, wordlessly hugged Tom, then stood beside him. The kitsune had a few cuts and bruises and looked fatigued as anyone, but that didn't stop him from occasionally bouncing on the balls of his feet with compulsive energy. Dean wondered if there was a way to redirect some of that energy into Dylaniel.

"Any word on Heaven other than their attack-and-conversion efforts in Europe?" Ruby kept the meeting moving while they waited for word from Anael.

“We think that they're involved in a considerable amount of the fighting in South America, but it's hard to say,” Tom said, answering as best he could.

“Is there a problem with the intelligence from there?” asked Dylaniel.

“There's a problem with our intelligence from everywhere—the fucking fog,” Kaylee replied bleakly. “Part of the problem in South America is that we're not even in half the fights. It's not clear who's fighting who in any given location: Team Lucifer, Heaven, the humans—”

“Don't forget Supay and Pomba Gira,” Tom added. “They're both tough as hell.”

“South America is a clusterfuck. We don't have enough intel to give them orders from on high and multiple attempts to communicate have failed anyway,” Kaylee summarized. “The only good news is that Heaven seems equally or maybe more caught in that quagmire. The bad part of the good news is that it doesn't seem to be making an opening for us. The real threat is Heaven continuing to hold Dean and their gates are locked up tighter than ever.”

“We believe he hasn't said yes, but we only think that because Michael hasn't been spotted on Earth,” Salviel explained. “Our intel from Heaven is essentially nonexistent.”

“We have dozens of angels in this building; can't we get some thoughts at least? Someone has to have some insight as to what Michael is capable of.” Kaylee looked to Jie. “Anael used to hold high rank, maybe she has some thoughts? Salviel, you used to be a prisoner up there, can you give us a projection? That's our real deadline.”

“I'll check with Anna, and see if there's word from the Badlands,” Jie agreed, then disappeared.

“Projection? You mean for Dee saying yes?” Dean felt sick. "He wouldn't break. He lasted decades with Alastair and he didn't have all this to fight for.”

Ruby looked over at Dylaniel in her moment of hesitation, then turned to face Dean. "He just watched Cas die and he probably doesn't know what happened to the rest of us. If he thinks we're all dead... I'm not sure how long he'd fight it."

“He'll fight it,” Dean said weakly.

Dee had been so confident and collected. The idea of him breaking was profoundly unnerving…. But Dean remembered Dee screaming at Cas’s death. That was no longer the composed man he’d chatted with last night.

“We can't count on him holding out,” Tom added. “If he breaks then Michael and Luci are both of the board and we don't have a way of keeping them apart. Anything we try has to be done before that happens.”

“What are we supposed to do? Heaven is an airtight, incomprehensible labyrinth to non-angels and our angels would be outnumbered four-to-one even if we sent all of them up. They have spent
decades fortifying themselves. It will be a killing floor just inside the gates and my dad is undoubtedly in the very heart of Heaven with Michael,” Dylaniel said coldly. “He's gone.”

The tension was slightly broken when a beautiful Indian woman entered the meeting room followed by a small entourage. She wore an orange and hot pink kurta and exuded confidence and power in a way that surpassed even Artemis.

“You're awake,” she said while looking Dean over.

“Dean, this is Kali,” Ruby introduced their host.

“Thank you for helping me.” Dean offered with something between a nod and a bow.

“I don't have much choice.” Her tone wasn't rude as much as it was inconvenienced. He supposed she did have bigger concerns than one man. “You're a piece recklessly pulled from a complex machine. Even under the best circumstances I wouldn't trust the angels to put you back properly.”

“Properly?”

“Most of those feathery things think they're as old as time itself. They can't even comprehend time let alone manipulate it safely. They think they have some ‘God-given ability’ to manipulate time. It's made them sloppy.” Kali didn't bother looking at Salviel, the lone angel in the room, for her reaction. “If we leave you to the angels they'll likely mess it up and cause even more damage.”

“Aren't you the god of destruction?” Dean asked. “Don't you want damage?”

“That's such a human question.” Kali looked at him with an expression of amusement and disappointment. “I'm the goddess of change. Destruction is part of change, but I'm not fond of the kind that can't be recovered from—global extinction being the worst of it, catastrophic temporal paradoxes being a close second.”

“Catastrophic?” Dean hesitated to guess.

“Timelines bleeding into each other, causality not functioning consistently—it would be chaos riding its own momentum. For mortals like you it would be insurmountable loss and suffering. For me it would be an incredible mess to clean up and rebuild,” Kali explained. “And that's why we take the time and effort to fix the machine even in circumstances like these.”

She looked around the room for a moment before addressing everyone.

“I wanted to see how many of you were mobile and present. Some of the North American officers are starting to arrive.” She nodded to Kit, acknowledging the effort he'd exerted somehow getting to eastern India. “I'd like to have a meeting about how to organize our consolidated forces.”

“Now or give them a few minutes to get in?” asked Kaylee.

Kali decided for the group. “Fifteen minutes, in the courtyard.”

“Salv, can you start making the rounds?” Kaylee requested, causing Salviel to immediately nod, then disappeared.

As Kali turned toward the door she saw Dylaniel sitting off to one side. She walked over and knelt to be closer to eye level with him so that he wouldn’t try to stand up.

“Hello, mani,” Dylaniel greeted Kali.
“I’m so sorry.” Kali touched Dylaniel’s chest briefly. “I promise, beta, we’ll make them pay.”

Dylaniel glanced briefly at the others then spoke to Kali in Hindi. Dean got the sense that no one aside from Kali’s entourage was following what was being said. The nephilim seemed to be imploring her to do something, but she shook her head. One of Kali’s follower’s eyes widened with alarm at something Dylaniel said. The goddess smiled at him sympathetically while speaking with him for a minute or two. After a thoughtful pause, he nodded, then sat up with a little more conviction. Kali lifted her head as if sensing something of interest far away, though she didn’t seem particularly rushed. She patted Dylaniel’s shoulder, then walked over to Ruby.

“Rubahnali, you're my friend so I'm telling you now,” Kali told her, “if Lucifer comes into my domain, don't try to stop me.”

“Please don't fight him.” Ruby spoke in barely more than a whisper, knowing just how hopeless it was to ask and how important it was to stop Lucifer. She didn't even know if she was asking for Sam's life or Kali's—maybe both. “We can find another way—”

“I know how much you care for Sam.” Kali hugged Ruby and lightly kissed her cheek. They spoke quietly, both understanding the intimacy of their conversation, in spite of the room full of people. “Lucifer killed both of our loves; the only difference is that yours hasn't finished dying yet.”

“I'm begging you. We’re family.”

“I'm thinking of our family. He'll kill Devi, Dylan, Tom— Do you think he'll let Kay live or is one vessel enough when there's no one left to stand against him?” She leaned even closer to whisper in Ruby’s ear. “What do you think Lucifer will do to you?”

Kali released Ruby and walked to the door without waiting for an answer. Before leaving she looked back to Ruby, who couldn't find any words to argue with. Kali’s expression softened. She nodded in parting to her friend, collected her aides, then left.

Ruby leaned against the table and tried to pull herself together. Inevitably it would happen. Lucifer would eventually try to hit them where they'd gone to ground. The western world wouldn't satisfy the archangel who felt entitled to anything and everything. He'd come for the territory, the security of vanquishing his foes, and maybe Kaylee and Ruby. And when he did come, Kali, one of the fiercest gods in existence, would be fueled by vengeance and wrath.

“If Lucifer crosses into Central Asia it's gonna be a bloodbath,” Ruby said as she pushed her hair back and covertly wiped her eyes.

“Can she beat him?” Dean asked, unsure of his capacity for hope. “I mean she's a god and he's just an angel. He's hesitating. He's got to be scared of her.”

“Lucifer isn’t ‘just an angel,’ he's an Archangel,” corrected Dylaniel. “They can be just as strong as the gods of the highest pantheons.”

“He might be hesitant to enter her territory because she has a significant number of faithful to draw on and the home field advantage, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's scared of her,” Tom pointed out.

“Luci’s so full of himself that he's not scared of anyone,” Kaylee added. “He probably doesn't mind ripping the West to shreds while we sit here wringing our hands. He could easily be getting stronger while we're bleeding out.”
“I just don’t get it,” Dean muttered. “What does Lucifer want? I keep hearing about him destroying stuff, but what’s he getting at?”

“Kill all the—well, anything that isn’t a friendly angel. Rebuild the world to some purer state,” Kaylee explained. “He’s always talking about how we ruined God’s last masterpiece.”

Dean had to grip the edge of the table in front of him to keep himself steady. It felt like all the blood must’ve drained from his face. Based on everyone’s looks of concern for him, maybe all the blood really had drained from his face.

“Are you alright?” Ruby asked. “Are the wards holding?”

"They're fine. I just…." Dean looked between Ruby and Kaylee. “When I was talking to him—Lucifer—he said that he wanted to go to my time because the world was nicer then. He can't actually do that, right?"

The silence that followed was probably the most terrifying sound Dean had ever heard.

"If he gets ahold of you he'll be able to tell which time-space you're from. I've heard of following someone back to their source time. It's like a teleportation piggyback without the witchcraft that non-angels have to go through. But to travel without the source entity…." Dylaniel paused to consider the question. “Even then it may be possible."

Dean could feel his pulse rising. "Wait, there's nothing stopping Lucifer from jumping back to 2009 and tearing up the world?"

"He'd need to get ahold of you first, to figure out a trajectory," Dylaniel clarified.

"You guys have to send me back, now."

"That's not easy," Ruby replied. “It takes time."

"We don't have time! I can't—” Dean shouted in a panic, but he was cut off.

Kaylee waved her hand and the heavy doors leading to the hallway were slammed shut. She caught Tora and Mir’s eyes, then pointed to the door. The knights both nodded in understanding, then disappeared to take up positions outside.

“Dean.” Her voice was quiet and intense in a way that chilled him. “Take a breath and consider what you're yelling about and what it means to everyone who doesn't give a fuck about your timeline.”

“Wha…?” He tried to calm himself down enough to see what she was getting at.

“Lucifer is an archangel, more than capable of jumping thirty years. If he really does want to go to your time, all anyone has to do is serve you up to him. He’ll piggyback the port or maybe even make the trip alone. It doesn’t matter. Either way he's completely out of our hair.”

“That might be the only practical way to stop him without killing him,” Ruby agreed gravely.

Dean looked around the room. They'd all stumbled upon an easy fix to one of their apocalyptic emergencies, and all they had to do was betray Dean and everyone in his timeline. Part of him felt like running for it, but he was still dependent on them for getting home. He was completely at their mercy.
His keepers all exchanged uncomfortable glances. With a small shiver he realized that each of them was struggling with the thought of using him. Kaylee and Tom both seemed to like him, but Kaylee had a huge number of people she was responsible for. Dyaniel's opinions on Dean were harder to gauge, as were his loyalties and priorities. Ruby had been surprisingly warm towards him, but he knew she had a cold pragmatism and was incredibly defensive about Sam. Lastly, Kit was in the room and a complete wildcard based on Dean's ignorance.

"There's gotta be another way to stop Lucifer," Dean said anxiously. "There's gotta be a way to kill him—"

"We can't," Kaylee replied. "We don't have Gabriel. We don't have Alex. I couldn't take him on my best day. Dyl isn't anywhere near capable of fighting him."

"Sam will keep fighting him. Kali will help. You have those knights and some seraphim," Dean suggested.

"He'll cut through the seraphim and disable the knights without breaking a sweat. Who even knows what condition Dad is in?" Kaylee rebuffed. "But okay, maybe Kali and I can do it. Let's say we kill Lucifer. It'll cost us many of our best people. So what do we do about Michael? We can't reach Dean. I'm not just talking rescue. We can't even kill him. I hate to say it, but assassinating him is one of our only ways out and we still can't manage it. Michael will be in play eventually, and he'll know every military secret we have."

"What military secrets do we even have left?" Tom asked. "The majority of our command is dead or missing. We don't even know which bases we have left standing. We're cutting off whole continents to slow the hemorrhaging." He shook his head. "Michael will just be kicking ash that far into the party."

Dean's heart sank. They were spelling out why they couldn't afford to fight both of Lucifer and Michael. At any moment they would say they were sorry for what they had to do. He hated it, but in all honesty he could understand the decision. With a sigh he braced himself for the news… but the bad news that came wasn't what he was expecting.

"We're gonna lose," Kaylee said with an almost clinical emotional distance. "The Earth is already dying and we have two impossible fights ahead of us. Even if we could wish away Lucifer, Michael is going to arrive so late in the fight and untouched…. Earth falls any way we slice it. Hell can't survive more than nine years after the last human’s death—and that's assuming that Heaven leaves us alone. If we sabotage every gate possible and reinforce the Howling Gate with everything we've got, the absolute best projections are fifteen months."

"What if we use time travel to get rid of Lucifer, but we don’t…" Tom mused, but realized the flaws in his thought. "Nevermind. He's probably too strong for us to send him somewhere against his will and the potential logistics and paradoxes involved….” He let out a long sigh. "This whole thing is fucked."

"W-we're fucked," Kit corrected.

"You're right. We are." Kaylee looked up solemnly. "I know my vote. We don't tell anyone about Lucifer's threat to hop a ride, so that we don't get a Judas. We send Dean back fast and quiet. That's it. We'll deal."

"You…" Dean didn't know what to say. He wanted to save his family and world, but they were talking about giving up their best shortcut on maybe their only path to survival in order to help him.
“A slim chance at saving a wasteland or a fair chance at preventing the wasteland.” Tom agreed with Kaylee. “It's not much of a debate.”

Ruby looked at her kids and Dylaniel for a long while before nodding in agreement.

“You're all idiots. Stop killing yourself for me!” Dean yelled. He couldn't understand why they were so willing to fight and die for him. He was basically nothing to them—some temporal tourist. Every time they tried to help him it'd just made their situation worse. “I don’t want this blood on my hands.”

“This isn’t about you. It’s about saving as many people as possible,” Kaylee argued.

“They aren't your people—”

“That doesn’t matter when they are billions of them!” Kaylee snapped at Dean. She wasn’t upset at him. She was upset that that was how he was going to learn one of the hardest lessons. “There are billions of innocent lives with a chance at a better world and that’s something we haven’t had in decades. Don’t tell me that you’d betray that to save this place.”

“But this isn’t my home,” Dean hesitated. “You aren’t my family.”

“And what does it say about our lives, our existence, that we’re prepared to sacrifice this world and you aren’t?” Kaylee stood resolute. “I refuse to unleash that kind of despair on a world that still has hope.”

“Dean….” Ruby spoke cautiously, holding back emotions that he couldn’t begin to understand. “I'm not going to let Lucifer make Sam kill all those people.”

He could understand that.
Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

The others had their larger tactical meeting in the courtyard to attend, but they had all agreed to secrecy before breaking up their own meeting. The ritual to send Dean back to his time was scheduled for a few hours out since the site had to be prepared. Rather than listen to any more depressing news, Dean decided to find a place to be alone, away from all the people who would likely die in the coming hours or days.

Before he parted ways from the group, he thought about saying something to Kit. The guy had been largely silent during the meeting, but he’d been accepted into that most private of conversations by the family. There was something about the trust they’d placed in the kitsune and his anguished expression every time Dee was mentioned that made Dean feel like he was missing some nuance of their relationships.

But before Dean could think of anything to say, Kaylee went up, put her hand on Kit’s shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Kit closed his eyes, then nodded subtly. When she pulled her hand away, Dean spotted some fresh blood on the pad of her index finger. He wasn’t sure what’d just happened, but that was like so much here, and there wasn’t going to be time enough to understand it all. He turned away, resigned to the fact that he would probably return to 2009 with more questions than answers—but at least he would return… hopefully.

One of the temple attendants found a small set of quarters for him to use temporarily. The room was windowless, in the basement, beyond a security checkpoint. It held six bunks, but Dean suspected that it had been cleared for him. While lying down on one of the bunks, he was once again reminded of his nature as an asset, something to be guarded and hidden away lest interested parties get ahold of him.

Heaven wanted him, dead or alive. Lucifer wanted him… probably alive at first, but not for long. Those closest to him in this time wanted him gone for his own wellbeing. And everyone else didn't realize the extent of his value as a pawn.

He was exhausted and didn't know how to begin processing everything that was going on. It was suggested that he try to rest before the ritual, but he didn't know how he was supposed to relax. This whole world was going to shit, partially because of him, and the others were throwing away one of their best shots in order to protect his time. He want to save his world, but he wanted to save this world too. He wanted more than he could manage and any pragmatic feelings were drowning in guilt.

The door opened without a warning knock. Kali entered, then closed it behind her. He didn't really know much of anything about her and the idea of being alone with her made him uncomfortable. She was easily one of the most powerful people he'd ever met; supposedly she was one of the most powerful people in existence. Before he said anything she began speaking.

“I want to take a look at you before we’re under a deadline.” She crossed the room as she spoke,
not waiting for his cooperation. Dean started to get up, but she held up her hand to stop him. “It's easier if you're lying down. Try to relax your body as much as possible. The experience can be very intense. I'm going to have you recall memories from your root timeline while triggering your power centers.”

“Power centers?”

“I need to know how your energy interacts with time-space in order to navigate the right path for you,” she explained, then noticed that Dean still looked confused. “Do you really want a lecture on temporal physics or can you just trust that I know what I'm doing?”

“Okay. Fair enough.” Dean raised his hands in surrender.

She lowered his arms to his sides, then repositioned his head so that his chin wasn't as close to his chest.

“Try to relax,” she instructed.

“It's hard, with everything—” he started to say in his defense, but was interrupted when Kali placed her palm over his heart.

A wave of tingling spread out through his body, then lingered in the back of his head for a moment. He sunk into the cot, slightly intoxicated. Part of him recognized the fact that she'd just tampered with his body and mind, but a larger part of him didn't care and greedily hoped she'd do it again.

“What was the last thing you did before you traveled to our time?” she asked as she rested three fingers on the top of his head.

“I asked Sam to sing 'Hey Jude' to his daughter,” Dean said in a voice that was unusually light.

He remembered the way Sam had looked at his newborn daughter—Kaylee. It reminded him of the way their mom had looked at Sam.

“Tell me something you did before that.” Kali redirected his thoughts back to the more recent history.

“I played cards with Sam, Bobby, and Cas.”

They'd been sitting on the floor, killing time while Ruby worked on designing a spell to contact the hunter network. He hadn't realized how much work magic actually involved. The fact that Ruby was able to create spells from scratch was really impressive when it came down to it… and he'd been there taking her effort for granted.

Kali touched the center of his forehead. “Before that.”

“I….” Dean hesitated.

The truth was that he first thought of making fun of Cas’s awkward behavior, but the memory made his guilt flare up. He'd had some idea that an angel falling was a big deal, yet it hadn't occurred to him just how far from home Cas had found himself by helping them. The more he thought about the way Kaylee and Dyl had talked about fallen angels being vulnerable, the worse he felt for teasing Cas…. Cas, who had somehow ended up loving him—or at least Dee. “My niece was born.”
“Further back.”

“I was fighting an angel and I couldn't hurt it. I couldn't save Sam.” Dean cringed subtly at the memory. “I didn't know what to do. We'd never fought an angel before. I didn't even know if it really was an angel.”

She lightly touched his adam’s apple. “Further.”

“Sam and I were arguing about Ruby and the baby.” Dean's voice shook as he spoke. “I... I wanted him to leave her. I didn't want to lose him again. I thought she'd take him away from me. I thought she'd turn him into a monster.”

“Keep going.”

“I was looking for Sam. I thought I was going insane trying to find him. There were times when I felt so close to finding him, but he wasn't there.” Dean's pulse was rising with emotion and a strange adrenaline rush. “I crawled out of my grave. The dirt and splinters stung in the cuts on my hands, but I knew if I stopped moving I would die again. I felt alive and it terrified me, the thought of losing it.”

Kali’s hand moved down to rest over his heart.

“I was in Hell. I didn't have skin or blood. I was made of ash and brimstone. My master was pleased with my work. There was so much pain, but... when my master told me he was proud of me—I think I felt part of my soul break... I don't know if I even cared.” Dean felt another rush and gasped, but he didn't stop. “We were at Bobby's house, getting ready for the fight with Lilith. I saw Ruby talking to Sam in the basement. She was trying to tempt him with something. I thought she was trying to tempt him... I let her walk into a devil’s trap, then I convinced Sam to leave her there.”

Kali slid her hand down toward his stomach.

“Sam had another one of his visions. I was holding him steady as he sat on the edge of his bed. It scared me, that I couldn't protect him, that he was in so much pain. I didn't understand what was happening to him. It scared me. He scared me.” The memories were coming back as vivid as if it’d happened that morning. “I was at a bar. There was this incredible brunette who said she was a yoga instructor. I made some cheesy joke about her flexibility, but she gave me the nod anyway. Her skin is so soft; I could just melt in it. I spent the night at her place. When I woke up I wondered... just for a moment, I wondered what it’d be like to wake up in someone's arms every morning.”

Kali’s hand continued down to touch him about halfway between his belly button and penis. His balls started tingling and he could feel the blood rushing to his groin. Part of him was embarrassed by his forming erection, but mostly he was consumed by intoxicating power. He helplessly tried to continue describing the memories, but it became harder to speak.

“A school trip—the bullies got Ryan. I fought them—on the bus he fell asleep. His head on my shoulder. He was scared, so I held his hand. When he squeezed my hand—my heart was pounding so hard.” Dean's eyes started watering. “My first sawed off—I cut it down myself. It was mine. I could start—hunting—keeping Sam safe—make Dad proud—make myself proud—all I ever wanted. I was hopeful—first time since she died.”

Kali reached between his legs, cupped his ass, then pressed the flesh below Dean's tailbone. He shuddered and came. For a moment he didn't move. A few exhausted tears leaked from his eyes.
“What the fuck did you do to me?” he whispered.

“Just be glad I didn't use the more invasive route to stimulating your muladhara.” Kali gave a little shrug. “I told you it could be intense.”

“I'm not supposed to...” Dean looked down at the wet spot on his pants. He would've been more embarrassed, but she didn't seem to be surprised or even really care.

“Heaven already has a Sword Of Heaven and I doubt anyone down here is thinking about five months from now.” Kali waved a hand and Dean's pants were unsoiled. “Don't worry about me. I’m not interested. Being guardian to one archangel's line is plenty for me. The responsibility of two lines sounds horrible.”

“Guardian to an archangel's line…” Dean muttered to himself. Before coming to 2039 he'd barely thought about the possibility of having kids. If he had to be honest there were more than a few times that he'd been pretty lax with contraception during one night stands. Now the idea of having a kid, intentionally or otherwise, carried so much more weight. Independent of things like love, being in a monogamous relationship suddenly made more sense. He probably wouldn't face the same sort of political pressures Kaylee and Dylaniel had faced, but he was gaining an appreciation for the burden. “That's basically a lifetime job, isn't it?”

“Being a parent often is.” She turned and started walking to the door. “I have the information I need. You should sleep if you can. When we leave here in a few hours we'll change the world. You'll need your strength if you're going to survive it.”

Dean was completely emotionally and physically exhausted. He was disturbed by the memories that had been drawn out of him, some fond and others painful. And now he'd had a lesson brought home, that he carried a responsibility that would shadow every intimate relationship or fleeting exchange he'd have going forward. He fell asleep thinking of the moments in his life, wondering which were pivotal despite their apparent mundanity and what his own future held. For the first time in too long he didn't have a nightmare.

Dean was woken by a knock at the door. After waiting a few seconds, Ruby peeked her head in and greeted him. She might've appeared her normal self, but her eyes lacked some liveliness.

“We have about an hour before we’ll leave for the site. There's gonna be a quick briefing in a half hour.” She spoke in a professional tone, reserved. It somehow felt worse than if she'd been visibly upset. She turned to leave, but he sat up quickly and she waited to see what he was doing.

“Ruby.” Dean wanted to ask her if she was okay, but he knew how ridiculous that sounded. He thought about saying he was sorry, but she already knew he was. She could see him struggling with what to say, so she fully entered the room. “Is there anything I can do... to make this easier for you?”

She stared at him thoughtfully for a minute. He was worried that maybe he'd been too forward, that it would've been better for them all to go through the next few hours keeping up a brave face. Then she took a deep breath and nodded. He took a step toward her, worried that she might have difficulty getting the words out.

“Promise me... that we’ll kill Lilith—you, me, Cas....” Ruby looked at the floor and Dean stepped closer, debating whether to put his hand on her shoulder. Instead she hugged Dean in a move that made him a little uncomfortable, but he tried not to show it. He embraced her because he thought that's what Dee would've done, and she seemed to appreciate it. “Just keep Sam, Tom, and
Kaylee safe, whatever it takes.”

“I promise,” he agreed, though they both knew he could only try his best. For a moment he closed his eyes and accepted the hug for the sincere gesture of concern and support that it was. “You’ll never believe me, that we got along.”

“Never’s a little extreme.” Ruby let out a small huff of amusement. “If I don't believe you, tell me you know about the S-shaped birthmark on my meatsuit’s ass. That'll probably shut me up.”

“That'll probably get me punched in the face by Sam,” Dean replied with a little smile, then he threw caution into the wind. “I've gotta ask: you and Dee seemed… close.”

“Nothing ever happened.” Ruby spared him having to say the words. “You know how we're both stubborn pains in the ass? Loyalty is part of that stubbornness. When it comes down to it, we don't betray the people we love.”

Dean’s mind did a doubletake on Ruby talking about love. He knew that she was deeply committed to Sam. She’d stayed with him and their kids through so much, but he’d never heard her say the word. He’d heard about Dee and Cas’s relationship being described as love and despite his personal feelings on the matter, for some reason the idea of an angel loving seemed more acceptable than a demon loving. But those were old ideas tied to some primitive notion of good vs. evil. Life wasn’t so two-dimensional. Ruby wasn’t so two-dimensional.

“Did you love Sam, back in 2009?” He whispered the question, unsure of what either a yes or no would mean.

“I didn't know what love was back in 2009, but yeah, looking back, I loved him even then.”

“Thank you.” Dean hugged her a bit tighter. “Thank you for everything you've done. For being there for him.”

“It… it wasn't enough.” Dean could hear her fighting through a tightness in her throat.

“It was more than anyone else could've done.”

“You’ll do more.”

“We’ll do more,” Dean promised.

On the way to the mission briefing, Ruby took them on a slight detour to gather Tom and Kaylee. Kaylee's temporary quarters were empty when they got there, and possibly completely unused. However, Tom’s room was still occupied. Ruby knocked on the door, waited a second for a reply, then knocked again. They could hear something probably being knocked off a nightstand.

“Tommy, you awake?” Ruby shouted into the room.

“Yeah.”

“We’re meeting in ten.”

“Yeah.”

“It's in the main hall.”

“Yeah!” Tom yelled in a slightly annoyed tone.
Ruby rolled her eyes with a new understanding of the situation. “At least take some craebus powder once you're finished,” Ruby instructed, then continued down the hall.

“What?” Dean asked while following her.

“It's a very strong upper.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “We're on the brink of maybe the biggest fight of our lives. There's no doubt in my mind that Tommy spent the last few hours working his way through half the women in the building.”

“What?” Dean glanced back at the door to Tom’s room, suddenly realizing what ‘finished’ meant.

“He might smoke like a chimney, but women are his real drug of choice.” Ruby shook her head. “Even if he wasn't fucking all night he probably didn't get any sleep.”

“Does he get nervous before combat?” Dean found the thought a little hard to believe. Tom seemed awfully level-headed and experienced in the field.

“No, but he hasn't seen his dad face-to-face in ten years,” Ruby said grimly. “That's gotta be on his mind.”

Dean kept following Ruby down the halls.

“We'll probably skip the sitrep and jump straight into the mission briefing before heading out to do the ritual.”

“Sitrep?”

“Situation report,” she translated for him. “Right now we have about a hundred analysts figuring out the latest, from all corners, but unless some miracle happened there’s nothing worth talking about.”

“Any chance things have improved?”

Ruby stopped walking. She looked at Dean with unmistakable pity. The hallway they were in was empty, but she still stepped so close to him that they were almost touching.

“I was in the comm room watching the numbers about an hour ago when it happened. We dropped below the MVP on humans, which took out demons and angels too. Kali ordered that the numbers on the boards be faked so that morale doesn't tank, but we're officially at the end of our rope.”

She kept going to the meeting and he followed in a slight daze. They'd talked about the end of humanity, but now they were actually beyond the point of no return. It was a surreal feeling, knowing that all the activity around him, to the extent that it was unrelated to getting him home, was futile effort. He didn't know whether he would prefer to keep working at any task until the end or just spend his final hours chasing highs. He'd indulged in sex, booze, and food right after selling his soul, only to eventually focus on killing Lilith in the final stretch. But even then there'd been some measure of hope, that maybe killing Lilith would break the contract. This world didn't have hope anymore.

Dean entered the meeting room, which only had a handful of people in it. After that harsh realization he needed a drink, but it was morning and he doubted the temple had a bar. He saw several kettles and stacks of clay cups on a large wooden conference table. He grabbed a cup, but smelled something floral and spiced. Upon inspection, all the kettles contained the same perfumed drink.
“It's chai, a spice tea,” explained Ruby.

“They don't have any coffee?”

“You want coffee, you'll probably have to hit one of the human cities on the coast. Inland it's easier to go local. Try it; you might like it,” Ruby commented while pouring herself a cup. After putting down the kettle, she reached into her pocket and withdrew a piece of paper, which she tucked into his overshirt’s breast pocket. “Before I forget. It's a few recipes and craft notes for the other me. I couldn't go back for my grimoire—not that you’re really gonna be taking any carry-ons.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Ruby was called away to answer the questions of a handful of witches, so Dean was temporarily on his own at the strangest gathering he'd ever attended. He poured himself a cup of chai, then watched the crowd trickle in.

Kaylee walked in looking a little worn. It almost looked like she was limping. She made a quick stop to whisper something to Salviel. The angel nodded, then touched Kaylee, who immediately straightened up, whatever had been ailing her cured. While Dean was watching Kaylee, Tom must’ve slipped in unnoticed because Dean turned to find him sipping a cup of chai next to him.

“Did you manage to get any sleep?” Tom asked Dean as something akin to lighthearted small talk.

“Some.” Dean couldn't quite conceal the smirk on his face. “You?”

“Nope.” Tom chuckled. “One of Kali's attendants is an ex-girlfriend. It seemed like a good time to make some bad decisions.”

“All thing considered, I'm guessing you weren't the only one making bad decisions.”

“As long as one of us has their head on their shoulders we should be fine.” Tom took another sip of his chai. “It's not like we have anything important on calendar for the day.”

Tom saw Kit enter the room and immediately pulled out two joints. He lit them, took a starting puff on both, then passed one to Kit as a greeting. As soon as the other people in the room started noticing the pair smoking, a handful of people drifted over to partake in a little tension-breaker. Tom passed out a dozen joints, which were shared among about twenty people… including Dean.

He had to admit, the combination of weed and chai was a nice sort of way to start the morning.

“D-Deepi again?” Kit asked Tom, between two quick puffs of his joint.

“You can smell her?” Tom guessed.

“Y-You're gonna need ten showers to play it cool w-with me,” Kit replied with a grin.

“Look who's talking.” Tom nodded at Kit’s chest. “You missed a spot.”

The kitsune looked down at his shirt to see that a small bloodstain was forming over his left pec. He glanced down the neck hole, then started blushing. With only causing a slight distraction to the beginning of the briefing, Kit managed to locate a small cloth, which he placed under his shirt. Kit and Tom traded a few quiet whispers. Kit snickered, then Tom elbowed him in the ribs.

Dean continued to scan the room as more people arrived. He didn't recognize most of the people there, but there were a few familiar faces. Anael and Jie were observing from the far side of the
room. Miro was chatting with a few people by the entrance. Salviel tried to engage Kaylee's two guards in conversation, but neither seemed particularly interested. To his surprise Finch walked in.

Dean turned to ask Tom about Finch’s presence when he noticed Dylandiel quietly talking to Tom. Tom shook his head, but Dylandiel asked his question again.

“I'm not helping you kill yourself,” Tom told his cousin, drawing Dean’s attention further into the interaction. “Anyway, we're turning the whole place into a no-fly zone. The spell wouldn't work.”

Dylandiel acknowledged the point with a head movement that nearly resembled a nod, then walked back to Miro and began relaying some information. Dean moved closer to Tom.

“What was that about?”

“Dyl wanted me to carve a rune on his chest. When activated it can force angels back into Heaven. He shouldn't be talking like that. It's dangerous in general. We don't know how it'd affect him just being in the blast range, but activating it himself…. We've never had a nephilim try it. It could send him upstairs gifted-wrapped or just kill him straight out.” Tom eyed Dylandiel. “It's all a moot point. The ritual site is already being converted to a no-fly zone. Being able to eject angels isn't all that helpful if Lucifer can teleport to be right next to you. Then it just comes down to a quick draw.”

“He's serious about fighting Lucifer.”

“It's basically been on the top of his to-do list for ten years.” Tom waved his hand holding the mostly-smoked joint. “We've got a bit of a Moby Dick situation on top of all the rest of it.”

Dean thought back to Dylandiel’s particularly cold demeanor while discussing Lucifer at the bunker. Ruby had mentioned that Lucifer had hunted the boy down when he was ten years old. There was clearly a lot of animosity in addition to any feelings of duty Dylandiel might have as the Sword of Heaven.

To Dean's relief, Dylandiel looked fairly healthy. He was moving without any wobbling in his legs and there was a little more energy in his face. He was even wearing his normal armor and weapons. It wouldn't have surprised him if Dylandiel shied away from using powers, but at least it appeared that he was planning on being around to help with the ritual. Dean couldn’t imagine how devastating it would be for Dylandiel to miss it.

There were roughly sixty people included in the mission briefing. He was surprised by the scale of the operation until Kaylee leaned over and pointed out the groups that would be providing perimeter support: the witches, some angels, and demons. The more everything was explained, the more he recognized that it was a large, diverse group because they weren’t entirely sure what to expect.

The current state of the world or other AFE activities were barely mentioned at all. Knowing that the human race was past the point of no return made those omissions make a bit more sense, but he wondered what the random soldiers thought of the whole endeavor. They were using some of their most powerful resources on a little side project. He supposed that Dee’s well-known importance was lending some feeling of priority to the mission, even if the soldiers didn’t understand what the full implications were.

“The amount of power necessary to span thirty years will draw some attention. The fact that we're doing this correctly will draw even more. The entire process will take eighteen minutes from start
to finish. Considering he went after Dean last time, we can expect that Lucifer will take an interest in us somewhere along the way,” Kali explained, then turned to Dean. “Once we begin you must not get up off the altar. In fact, try not to move much at all.”

“What happens if I move?” Dean asked, suddenly concerned by what constituted ‘much at all.’

“Either you’ll throw off your trajectory or you could cause damage to time in the immediate area—maybe worse,” Kali answered.

“Damage to time?” Ruby asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Not in a way that we could harness. It’s too unpredictable and dangerous for any of you to attempt to initiate, so don’t even bother. There could be rifts, feedback loops, acceleration or deceleration effects, black holes— Just don’t do it.” Kali didn’t go into any further detail on what everything was, but if black holes were on the list it was a safe bet that the others weren’t good.

Dean could’ve sworn that a few of the angels in the room were taking notes from the expert.

“What if I get attacked?” he asked, with a bit more reverence for his role in this whole mission.

“Try to hold still while bleeding,” Kali advised. “Remember that you disrupting the ritual puts us all in danger. No matter what happens, you stay where you are, even if it means arriving in 2009 with a few stab wounds.”

“Oh.” Dean nodded to hide his growing anxiety. “Okay.”

“What’s the ROE on Lucifer?” asked Miro.

“We’re killing anyone who even looks like they might interfere with the op,” Kaylee announced. “That includes Lucifer. Weapons free as soon as we leave.”

Their caravan drove fifty miles east to another temple deep in the jungle, away from civilians. Dean rode in an SUV with Kaylee, Dylaniel, and Tom. Kali and Ruby each rode in one of the adjacent SUVs, where they were giving lesser briefings to their assistants for the ritual. Ruby had handed out satchels of spell components and magical weapons to each of the witches before they got into their vehicles. Tom was able to identify all of the items after quickly digging through the bag, but Ruby wanted to be able to advise the other, less-experienced witches.

The view out the window was morbidly fascinating. They passed through or by several destroyed towns. In the distance he could see what looked like a sickly blight creeping through the jungle, but no one else found it worth commenting on.

Tom pulled a tiny vial of black powder from his pocket, carefully poured a bit of it on the skin between his left thumb and index finger, then snorted it. He held the vial out to Kaylee and Dylaniel in offering. After a moment’s hesitation, Kaylee nodded and held out her hand. Tom measured out a dose for her while Dean watched.

“Is that that upper stuff?”

“Craebus powder. Yeah,” Tom confirmed, then looked at Dylaniel, who held out his hand in acceptance. “It helps with focus, and I cut mine with a little olmec root to help rein in the combat jitters.”

Dean felt pretty jittery. “Can I have some?”
“I’ll check with Kali once we get onsite,” Tom replied. “It shouldn’t interfere with any of the protective magics we’ll be using around the altar, but I don’t know what calculations were run for the ritual itself.”

Dean nodded, then tried to find a way to calm himself without relying on drugs. He tried to focus on the fact that all he had to do was lie on an altar and in an hour or so he’d probably be home, away from the danger.

“If Lucifer does come—” Dean started to ask about their defensive plan.

“He will,” Dylaniel interrupted, further unsettling Dean. It was hard to tell if the nephilim was feeling pessimistic or optimistic. “Kali’s counting on it.”

“What am I missing?”

“Kali’s partner, Gabriel—he died trying to protect me and my dad from Lucifer. She’s expecting you to act as bait for her revenge,” Dylaniel said matter-of-factly.

“Bait.” Dean had noticed the goddess’s interest in Lucifer potentially dropping in on them, but he hadn’t thought that she might be looking forward to it. “Guys, maybe we should call this off.”

“This is our best chance at getting you back in one piece,” Kaylee assured him. “It’s the precision and power of the spell working that’s going to draw attention. She’s not going to screw you over. She can have ulterior motives, but she’s not gonna betray us—not even you.”

“You don’t believe that if push comes to shove, her vendetta isn’t gonna fuck this up?” Dean asked the three of them.

“We don’t have a choice,” replied Dylaniel. “Going forward in time, you jumped timelines. If we cut corners, you could end up in the wrong place and time, or worse. Even if we had weeks to prepare and dozens of angels working on getting you home, they might not be able to do it. Kali can. We have to trust that she will do the job.”

“Or at least get the ball rolling for us,” added Tom.

“Yeah, but I’m the fucking ball,” Dean groaned.

The temple wasn’t much more that a large stone hall, maybe forty meters long and twenty meters wide, with four side chambers. There were no pews or objects obscuring the floor. Along the walls, large stone statues depicted what Dean could only assume were demons and monsters. A few people were already there, painting runes on the walls.

Dean walked up to the stone altar on the far side of the hall and examined it before sitting down. It had grooves across its surface that reminded him of the blood drainage system in Hell’s dungeons. There were several sets of leather straps attached to the top of the altar, which he suspected were for restraining sacrifices. He hesitated to lie down. There was something deeply unnerving about the altar... or maybe it was just the thoughts it conjured.

Kali and her six subordinates took up positions around the altar and got to work. The assistants began drawing an ornate border in colored sand and their own blood, while Kali looked over Dean and their environment. She considered something for a few seconds, then nodded to herself.

“I’m going to tie you down for this,” Kali informed Dean as she reached for one of the leather straps.
“No way.” Dean leaned away from her. “I’m not going to be laid out like some sort of sacrificial goat.”

“If you end up moving around too much you really might end up like slaughtered livestock.”

“I can hold still.”

Kali stared at him for a moment, then turned to Kaylee. “Kay, try to throw me, but mind the sand.” She pointed to the colored sand around the base of the altar.

Kaylee shrugged, then pushed her hand forward. Kali’s hair and clothing fluttered, but she was unmoved. However, Dean, who was beside the goddess, was knocked back, almost falling off over the far edge of the altar but for a quick save.

“Fine,” Dean conceded.

He lay down and allowed Kali to tie him in place. When she was done he could turn his head, but that was about it. He hated the idea of being immobilized while acting as bait. If something went wrong he wouldn’t even be able to flee, though that could be even more dangerous than dying with some… well, ‘dignity’ wasn’t exactly the right word when you were strapped to a sacrificial altar.

Dylaniel, Kaylee, Kit, Miro, Anael, Jie, and three other soldiers took up positions between the altar and the rest of the hall. Dylaniel checked his dual pistols for at least the fifth time that morning, then started inspecting the fastenings on Miro’s armor. Kaylee attempted to twirl an angel blade, but fumbled it, then handed it off to another soldier who might make better use of it. Kit bounced in spot while sniffing the air for any new insights.

Beyond them, Ruby, Tom, and five other witches got to work on a band of protection wards. Ruby was clearly in charge of the design, going so far as to make two of the witches start over on different pieces. Tom waved his mom over on more than one occasion to discuss ways of possibly improving the potency. Not every suggestion panned out, but several times he was given a proud smile and the green light.

The rest of the group took up positions inside and outside the temple, acting as the first line of defense.

When all the warding and the altar was ready, Kali began reciting a lengthy incantation before the altar. Her assistants knelt around the altar, occasionally parroting pieces of the incantation in harmony. Kali eventually knelt before the altar and closed her eyes.

“Seven minutes down, eleven to go,” Kali said in a quiet, neutral voice. “He should’ve been able to sense that. Be on your guard.”

Kali stayed in the kneeling position with her eyes closed for several minutes. Everyone was silent, trying to move as little as possible, straining to sense danger. Every few minutes Kali would provide an updated countdown. At just over five minutes to go, she opened her eyes.

“He’s entered my domain.” Kali stood up. “Arjun, maintain the channeling. Another minute should be fine, then you all should get ready for combat.”

She picked up a three-foot-long brass staff topped with three skulls, holding it loosely in her left hand. For her right, she grabbed a golden scimitar engraved with the images of many animals eating each other. Holding her weapons in hand, she turned to the temple entrance. She gave Dylaniel a reassuring smile as she passed the interior line of defense, then out beyond the warding. Ruby and Tom moved back into a defensive position around Dean. Kaylee took a few steps
forward, closer to Kali. Dylaniel and Miro’s eyes flashed with blue light.

“He’s here.”

Dean could hear someone whistling a tune in the distance. Within a few seconds he identified it as “Time Is On My Side” by The Rolling Stones. The whistling circled part of the temple. There was a scream and some gunfire, but the whistling continued uninterrupted until it reached the front doors of the temple, then stopped. There was a moment of silence. Dean held his breath, hoping that maybe Sam had redirected Lucifer somewhere else, but the temple doors burst inward splintering from the force.

Lucifer walked in with the air of an honored guest. He smiled as his eyes scanned the room. For a moment his gaze lingered on Ruby and Kaylee, but it settled on the more prominent threat of Kali. Each step echoed through the hall, seemingly increasing the tension. He knew that nearly everyone there feared what he could do to them individually. Their fear of being singled out drew out the standoff, making the anticipation that much worse.

“This is exci—” Lucifer began some opening statement, but was cut off by Dylaniel immediately firing three shots at him.

Everyone was a bit taken aback by the move, yet Lucifer stopped all three bullets with telekinesis. The bullets hung in the air before the archangel. Kaylee raised her hand, establishing a barrier to prevent them from being hurled back at their side.

Lucifer instead plucked the bullets from the air and tucked them into his pocket before saying, “Souvenirs.”

Dylaniel holstered his pistols, then unsheathed his sword. He made it about five feet toward Lucifer before Kali said something to him in Hindi. He stopped, looked back at Dean thoughtfully and resumed a defensive position. Kali moved closer to Lucifer.

“I have to give you some credit, Kali. You're becoming well-versed at holding the leash on those things,” Lucifer purred, then looked around the room. “I’m a little surprised that you went so far as to curse this place just to spite me. Don't you at least want your angels to stand a chance of surviving?”

“They accept the risk if it means hurting you,” Kali answered.

Lucifer's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Anael, Salviel, and several other people that Dean realized must've been angels. They stood resolute to his visible disappointment.

“The desecration isn't as much of a problem as you'd think.” Lucifer raised his arms, showing off his vessel to the goddess and her companions. “There are some perks to having a demon body. In a way your poison actually feels quite nice. Sam was always saying that demons aren't a complete loss. Maybe some….”

Lucifer's eyes drifted back to Kaylee and Ruby, but Kali moved to block his line of sight on them.

“I've killed angels and demons. I killed the first demon army before your God even conceived of you.” Kali took a few steps closer to Lucifer, then swung her staff and scimitar to display her skill with the weapons. “I'll kill you, just like all the others before you. Just like you killed Gabriel.”

“You killed him when you pitted him against his family!” Lucifer yelled in a moment of surprising lack of control.
The archangel gestured at her, intending to hit her with telekinesis, but she raised her hand, deflecting the force to the side. She ran at him, swinging her staff upward. The brass connected with his abdomen and he was hit backward. Lucifer flew into the air, crashing through the stone wall in a display of strength that Dean was not expecting from Kali’s much smaller form.

Lucifer stood up, adjusted his suit, then stepped back in through the hole in the wall. Dean was a little surprised that there wasn’t a group rushing Lucifer, but he had to admit that as a grunt he’d be hesitant to be in the first wave. Ruby, Tom, and Kaylee were holding back to help defend him, while Dylandiel was deferring to some instruction from Kali. This was a family feud and to the extent that it stayed that private tift, hopefully the ritual would be treated as a secondary priority.

“You aren't his family, not after all you've done!” Kali shouted at Lucifer as she continued forward to meet him.

“What I've done? I heard about the spawn you made from him. You stole his grace and defiled it.” Lucifer telekinetically threw several large pieces of stone at Kali, most of which were deflected, but two connected. “What do you even call a nephilim made with a false idol?”

“My daughter,” Kali snarled.

Dean watched the interaction, but couldn’t understand why it was actually being allowed to take place. His side wanted to talk; they were stalling. But Lucifer was incidentally killing a fair amount of time bickering. Maybe the archangel really did have such a massive ego. Maybe he didn’t realize the clock was counting down on him… or maybe he was stalling too. Dean noticed Kaylee, Dylandiel, and Kit scanning the room. He wasn’t the only one expecting company.

“Incoming! Four aces!” Dylandiel called out, on cue.

“Knights!” Kaylee added to the warning, then looked around more hastily.

“You didn't think I'd come alone, did you?” Lucifer smiled as a few dozen angels and demons began entering the temple behind him. There was a loud bang on the back wall, only ten feet away from Dean. Something was trying to create a rear entrance. One of the wards on the wall flickered with green light at the impact.

“Boost the ward!” Ruby shouted to the two witches closest to the wall that had been attacked.

The new arrivals and the scramble to reinforce the warding was enough to destroy the standoff. Several of Lucifer’s followers rushed nearby AFE soldiers, opening the floodgates.

It was chaotic combat unlike anything Dean had ever seen. There were upwards of sixty people fighting in a single large room, and an unknown number outside, with no distinct indicators of who was on which side. Beyond that, it wasn't obvious what species any given opponent was. If you weren't familiar with another person they were probably (but not necessarily) an enemy, and you'd have to see their fighting style and abilities to determine the matchup.

“Anael, watch the knight!” Kaylee called out, unsure if the angel knew how powerful a demon she'd been dealt in the shuffle.

“Sam, we need your help!” Ruby shouted as she withdrew a small gas canister from her bag, pulled the tab, and threw it into the air above the mob. It exploded in a yellow cloud, which started falling onto foe and ally alike. A few of the angels and more powerful demons shielded themselves with telekinesis or tried to redirect the spell. The substance didn't do anything by itself, but Ruby started casting at enemies who were coated in the substance, making them even more vulnerable to...
Dylaniel started making his way toward Lucifer again, but he was quickly intercepted. Despite the fact that as the Sword of Heaven he was particularly dangerous, his death was worth sufficient bragging rights to attract several contenders. Two seraphim and one of Lucifer's knights made straight for him. Under normal circumstances fighting a seraphim wouldn't have been very difficult for him, though it could be time consuming. Two seraphim was a challenge and the situation was made worse by the knight having a completely different fighting style than seraphim. The result was a lot of playing defense and retreating in order to avoid becoming flanked.

Lucifer started raising his hand in the general direction of Tom, Kit, and Miro. The First Light began to shine from his palm, but it dimmed to nothing. While trying again, Kaylee hurried to be closer in order to provide a human shield for her brother and friends. Lucifer's eyes narrowed at the move.

"You can't keep this up forever," Lucifer growled at some empty space to his right.

While he was distracted, Kali swung her scimitar and staff in a scissor pattern across his torso. He blocked the staff, which he saw on its way to connect with his chest, but didn’t notice the scimitar until it started cutting through part of his back. Kali managed to slice a long deep cut just below his shoulder blades before he shoved her away. His angel blade appeared in his hand as he turned his attention back to the goddess.

Tom opted to have his opening move be defensive. He pulled a vial of demon ichor from his satchel, then splashed it across the floor as best he could. With a few quick hand gestures and words, the blood started crawling up the walls. Thin crimson tendrils spread out into the room along a plane, attempting the create a barrier between the bulk of the fighting and the altar. The barrier was by no means impenetrable, but it did have to be cut through, slowing Lucifer's forces down slightly.

After knocking Kali across the room, Lucifer heard Ruby shouting instructions to Kaylee. He indulged, taking a second to look over at Ruby and paused. His eyes involuntarily drifted across Kaylee, Tom, and Dylaniel. He shook his head slightly, while whispering to himself. One of the AFE soldiers swung an angel blade at Lucifer. Without looking, Lucifer twitched and the soldier was torn in half at the waist.

"Stop—stop us!" At first Sam spoke to Lucifer, but when he realized that he was using their voice he shouted for anyone who would listen. Lucifer still controlled their body for the most part. In their conflict, they jerked spastically and one of the stone statues decorating the hall exploded. Sam was able to clutch their head, close their eyes, and cover their ears as he tried to block out Lucifer’s angelic senses.

Kali took advantage of their vulnerable state and swung at their exposed torso. The physical threat was enough to turn the tables, restoring Lucifer to dominance. He tried to block the scimitar, but suffered a deep cut across his right palm. He swung his angel blade down at her head, but she blocked the attack. For a moment their weapons were locked. A small amount of blood trickled down Lucifer’s wrist. Kali quickly licked a little of the blood from his arm as she sidestepped his blade. Her eyes flashed red from the taste, which only enraged the archangel further. Lucifer kicked her hard in the chest, knocking her into a group of his own followers, who started grabbing at her, trying to disarm her.

Ruby picked up a dropped angel blade, then ran to help Kali, but Lucifer intercepted her. He didn’t lift a hand to attack her. She hesitated, unsure of what he was trying to do. Her eyes desperately looked for signs of Sam and her arm holding the angel blade lowered slightly as her
conviction faltered. Lucifer smiled at her. He knew perfectly well the bargaining chip he held over her. In a candid test, he apparently returned his attention to Kali, leaving his back open to her. She gripped the blade a little tighter and tried to convince herself to attack him, but she waited too long. One of Lucifer’s demons tackled her to the ground, fighting her for the blade.

Dylaniel had barely finished with the two seraphim and was cutting the knight into quarters when his eyes flashed once more with blue light.

“Incoming! Three blockers, eight aces—” Dylaniel started calling out, but his voice was cut off by a loud thunderclap outside.

The noise caught the attention of everyone, making them all look around for a new threat.

A group of thirty angels entered the temple, led by a slender man with dark brown skin in a light grey suit. Lucifer and his followers all appeared to be surprised just as much as the AFE forces. Lucifer rolled his eyes, then straightened up to his normal imposing height. Sam wasn't manifesting in the slightest; he was in perfect sync with Lucifer's anger and annoyance.

“Lucifer,” greeted the leader of the new force.

“Raphael, this isn't a good time for me to kill you,” Lucifer replied. “If you could come back in ten minutes—”

“If you stand down, Heaven will spare you.”

“Didn't anyone ever tell you that lying is a sin?” Lucifer smiled venomously.

“You have no rightful business here,” Raphael argued, but it earned an immediate huff from Lucifer.

“I am the only one with a right here.” Lucifer spoke with determination. “Heaven already has a Michaelsword. You don't need these.”

Dean spared a glance at Dylaniel, who seemed to know perfectly well that, like Dean, the number of archangels in the room going after him had just doubled. He was trying to imagine how many minutes it’d been since the ritual had been started. There couldn’t have been much time left until it was complete.

Raphael’s voice turned cold. “You're in no position to say what's in the interest of Heaven.”

“Run back to your precious Michael and tell him to come down and face me himself—if he can.” Lucifer seemed more calm and collected than at any time since he’d first arrived at the temple. With Sam and Lucifer in agreement about killing Raphael, the restrictions Sam had been holding in place were lifted.

“I'll return to Michael with your corpse.”

Raphael had barely finished speaking when Lucifer started firing at him with the First Light. The brawl resumed, but now dozens of Heaven’s angels joined the mix. Miro and Jieshi tried to help free Kali from the grasps of Lucifer’s followers, but Miro took an angel blade to her chest and fell into the mass of inhumanity.

“Blockers: male, black suit, blonde hair; female, blue suit—” Dylaniel started calling out until he was silenced by one of Heaven’s angels telekinetically grabbing him. He struggled against her
power for a moment, then managed to get an arm free. He drew a pistol, shot the angel holding him, then began systematically working through the three blockers who could potentially hinder the ritual.

After dropping the blockers, Dylaniel cut through four angels and demons while making his way to Lucifer, who was standing on Raphael’s neck. Dylaniel took a few quick swings, but Lucifer dodged or parried the blade—except on the last stroke. Lucifer began to dodge, but he was held in place by Sam. Dylaniel's sword began cutting through Lucifer's right forearm. Before he could finish the follow-through on the swing, Raphael let loose a burst of telekinetic force, knocking Lucifer off of him and launching Dylaniel across the hall. The nephilim slammed into the wall behind the altar and hit the ground, breaking several ribs and his left arm.

One of Lucifer's demons swung a double-ball flail at Tom while he was casting a support spell for Kaylee, who was defending the altar’s right side with Kit. Tom managed to dodge twice, but the third swing connected with his right side. The spiked balls pierced his abdomen and fractured the top of his pelvis. He staggered as the demon wound up for another attack.

Ruby cast a spell melting the flail’s chains just as the demon was swinging backwards. The balls flew into the brawl and the molten chains dripped onto the demon, burning her flesh. Before the demon could recover, Ruby lunged forward, stabbing her in the heart. She hurried over to Tom, but he waved her off.

“I'm fine,” he lied.

A loud banging sound made Ruby look around the room. She saw Kit being grabbed by an angel. The kitsune was an agile fighter, but being confined like that made him incredibly vulnerable. Kaylee was fighting two seraphim simultaneously and was having trouble directing her powers in so many directions at once. She saw Kit struggling but couldn’t get to him. He frantically clawed at the angel’s free hand, trying to severe it before he could be smited. Ruby started building up a knock-back spell, but didn't need to use it on the angel fighting Kit.

Lucifer was thrown thirty feet through the crowd. He got up without any concern for the dozen or more lesser fighters that he'd incidentally knocked over, including the angel that had been attacking Kit. When he saw Kali emerge from the burning pile of now-dead angels and demons and come at him with her scimitar, the archangel picked up Salviel by the back of her neck and held her out like a shield. Salviel's boots dangled a foot off the ground as she tried to shake herself free. Heedless of his victim’s struggles, Lucifer started firing rays of the First Light around his living shield at Kali.

Raphael took advantage of Lucifer's distraction and charged him from the side, angel blade drawn. Lucifer dodged the first slice, then shoved Salviel at Raphael, impaling her on Raphael’s blade. Without waiting for her to finish dying, Lucifer shot a beam of the First Light through her chest at Raphael. Raphael stumbled back and was mobbed by a group of demons.

A seraphim near the entrance of the hall sacrificed herself, creating a blast that shook the building. A dozen people were knocked back or to the ground, the closest to her having been killed in the blast. The other victims of the attack scrambled to avoid the roof collapsing.

“Eyes on Raph!” Ruby called out when she saw Raphael raise his arms to the newly-exposed sky.

The rumble of thunder filled the temple. A bolt of lightning struck Raphael, electrocuting the mob of demons around him, then spread outward from his back in a shape that alluded to wings. The electricity crackled ominously around him as he looked for a target.

Kaylee knocked several people out of the way as she tried to get closer to Raphael. She'd never
fought him before and wasn't entirely sure whether her powers would be sufficient at that point to harm him, but she was one of only a few people near his weight class. Once she had a clear shot, she blasted him with the First Light, which hurt him, though he didn't fall. He shot lightning at her, but Anael shoved Kaylee out of the way. Anael was hit instead and fell to the ground, incapacitated.

Tom saw Raphael wield such a devastating weapon, only barely missing his sister thanks to Anael's quick action. His eyes flicked to the caved in ceiling, then his own injury. Hardly noticeable at a glance, his brown pants were becoming damp with blood. With a breath of conviction, he picked up a piece of the stone rubble from the floor, then dragged his knife hard along his left forearm, creating a sacrificial wound. He squeezed the stone, causing the blood to flow faster, coating the hunk of rubble in no time. Despite the pain from his injuries, he managed to make it through the entire incantation. With his hand holding the knife, he gestured at the pile of stone where the ceiling had caved in.

The rocks shuddered before rising to form a twenty-foot-tall golem-like creature. With a wave of his hand, the golem charged Raphael. Lightning cracked and hissed around the construct, but it didn't affect the stone. The golem grappled the archangel, obscuring his view of other targets. When Raphael smashed the rock it merely reformed and continued its attack.

Several of Heaven's angels tried to physically pull the golem apart. It took almost fifteen seconds for some of the angels to realize that the most vulnerable part of the golem was the witch commanding it. Three angels of Heaven charged at Tom, trying to stop the attack on their leader, but Kaylee and Ruby intercepted and quickly dispatched them.

Tom staggered slightly while directing the golem and it began crumbling. Kaylee was too distracted trying to use her telekinesis to reinforce the golem to look back at Tom, but Ruby ran to him as soon as she saw the golem faltering.

In all the chaos of the fighting, Sam saw his son collapse. In his panic he took control over their body and ran to Tom. He knelt down in front of Ruby and their son. Tom recoiled slightly, but Sam dropped Lucifer’s angel blade and embraced Tom. He looked around, trying to find an angel to heal him, but the AFE’s angels were all dead or incapacitated.

“Somebody help him!” Sam screamed, halting the entire brawl.

Lucifer and Heaven’s angels all froze, unsure of what to do in such an odd situation. None of Heaven’s angels cared about a single human life and were scared to approach Lucifer in such an obvious way. Lucifer's angels all knew that his vessel was the one asking for help and didn’t want
to risk siding with the wrong person. Kaylee turned to see her parents holding her brother while he bled out. She took a step toward them before collapsing to the ground in her grief. Dean struggled against his bindings, unable to do more that look on helplessly, heedless of the silent tears ran down his face.  

“Dad?” Tom’s voice was quiet and confused.  

“I’m here, Tommy. Heal him, please heal him,” Sam whispered, begging Lucifer. “Please save him.”  

Sam leaned down and gently kissed his son’s forehead before Lucifer snapped Tom’s neck and dropped him back into Ruby’s arms. She started wailing while clutching Tom’s body. When she looked up all she saw was Lucifer’s completely indifferent face staring back at her. Her right hand searched the floor below Tom, trying to find his knife.  

Dylaniel had tried to run to Tom at the cry for help, but he’d been wounded and was on the other side of the altar. By the time he’d gotten to his feet and started running Tom was already dead. He stumbled and stopped at the unmistakable sound of a snapping neck. He wavered for a moment, then gripped his sword. But before he could charge Lucifer, his target was taken from him.  

Lucifer was hurled across the hall. Dean couldn't tell who had landed the hit until he saw the way Lucifer was pinned to the wall. The archangel dangled a few feet off the ground and he gripped the air right in front of his neck. It was like he was being choked by someone—someone who wasn't there. Lucifer fought against the force, which started shredding his flesh. He used a ray of the First Light, cutting across the room, apparently aimed at someone no one else could see.  

Watching the bizarre spectacle, Dean was struck by Kaylee’s warning from a couple days earlier as they watched the security feed in the bunker. “Don’t let appearances fool you. It's pretty fucking unusual. There are two people in there.” It was Sam, Dean realized, and he was literally tearing into the archangel.  

Kali suffered a hit from the First Light, but continued forward. She swung the brass staff, connecting with Lucifer's head. He fell to the ground. His white suit was tattered and blood soaked. She began bludgeoning him while pulling her scimitar to her from across the room. In a split second she caught the sword while dropping the staff.  

Before she could bring the sword down on his neck, Lucifer turned and leapt at her. He was burning with the First Light, each punch searing against Kali's flesh. She engulfed herself in her own holy flame, literally fighting fire with fire. They grappled and rolled across the floor, igniting anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in their path. Large stones were hurled at them, but it appeared that they were largely directed at Lucifer. When Lucifer noticed Raphael moving toward Dean, he tried to disengage with Kali to defend his prey, but she wouldn't let him go.  

Kali rolled on top of Lucifer, then drew her weapons to her. Through sheer force she impaled the archangel through the chest with her sword, then stood up and raised her staff. Lucifer quickly reached up to snap off the handle and hilt of the sword. He started to push himself off of the broken blade and momentarily freed himself, but the goddess slammed him in the chest with a staff, knocking him down and impaling him again. She went to take another swing, but Lucifer threw her off of him.  

Kaylee crawled to her mom’s side in a slight daze. She reached out to touch Tom’s body, but Ruby grabbed her and rolled her to one side. As Kaylee rolled she saw that an angel had come up behind her. She grabbed the angel blade beside Tom’s body, then stabbed the angel. Ruby lowered Tom to the ground before hurrying to give Kaylee a hand up. She caressed her daughter’s
“Please survive.” Ruby’s voice cracked before she turned to Raphael.

Ruby moved to stand between Raphael and Kaylee, Dyleniel, Kit, and Dean. The archangel paused for a moment, confused by what she intended to do, before beginning to crackle with electricity. She ran at him while whispering a few words. He struck her with lightning, but her momentum carried her forward to him. Her palms connected with his chest—her palms, which were covered in one of the most powerful reagents: the ichor of a child. When she touched Raphael, he started gasping and blood began pouring from every orifice in his body, resisting some catastrophic destruction of his vessel. Ruby fell to the floor.

Kaylee fought her way through a demon and an angel to take up a defensive position in front of the altar beside Dyleniel. With Tom and Miro dead, he and Kit had been the only people solely protecting Dean. She got into position just as a group of angels containing three seraphim managed to bypass the flaming carnage of Lucifer and Kali as well as Raphael. She thrust her arms forward, throwing the three seraphim backwards. Another angel lunged from behind her, stabbing her twice through the chest. Dyleniel grabbed her outstretched arm with his broken offhand, pulling her towards him, and swung his sword above her head, decapitating the angel.

Despite his fragile state, Raphael made to attack Kaylee with lightning. She raised her hand to him weakly. The archangel started shaking violently as his skin split, spilling even more blood and emitting blue-white light. Dean was shocked by the display of power for a second until he realized Lucifer was on the opposite side of Raphael with his own hand raised. Lucifer squeezed his hand tighter and Raphael started tearing apart at the seams. The force of Raphael's death burst outward in several small shockwaves.

Dyleniel struggled to hold himself and Kaylee upright while she tried to telekinetically protect them and Dean from the full force of the blasts. Unmoved by his brother’s death, Lucifer started walking toward the three of them. He extended a hand and the leather straps holding Dean in place started snapping. Kaylee tried to divide her focus to hold Dean in place, but she and Dyleniel slipped backward a foot from one of the shockwaves.

Ruby grabbed Raphael’s dropped angel blade and carefully stood up, using Lucifer for cover from the blasts. She staggered weakly, but managed to move up behind the archangel and surprise him, plunging the blade through his back. Blue-white light escaped from where the blade exited Lucifer’s chest, but he didn’t collapse to the ground as Gabriel had or slowly detonate like Raphael. He staggered from the angel blade spearing his heart, but Ruby held onto him so that she wouldn't collapse herself.

A look of concern spread over Lucifer’s face at the grace emanating from his chest, then Dean thought he saw his brother sigh with relief and anguish. In that briefest moment a tear rolled down Sam’s cheek... before he took Ruby’s hand in his. In that split second of intense vulnerability, Kali swung her scimitar at Lucifer’s neck.

The light was so brilliant that Dean was certain he was blinded, if not dead… but his hair and clothes whipped violently from the force of the explosion. He had just enough time to worry about what that had done to the ritual before the white light faded to black and he realized he wasn’t on the altar anymore. He was falling.

Chapter End Notes
Holy crap, that’s the end of Act 2! I have so much to say about the Act that I couldn’t possibly include it all here.

While writing the fight scene, the song Time Is On My Time came up on shuffle and it was a perfect moment. The whistling is actually a nod to an amazing scene in a movie called Fallen starring Denzel Washington as a cop trying to stop Azazel. I’m not going to spoil the movie, but if you haven’t seen it add it to your list.

I did some research on Kali in order to include a few legit Kali moves. She does fight with the brass short staff or a scimitar. She did kill a demon army. She does feed on the blood of her enemies. She’s pretty much a badass. I wish I could’ve portrayed her better in the fight, but with the three way brawl and all the other considerations I couldn’t have her be the one-shot kill whirlwind of death she’d otherwise be.

If you haven't read the deleted scenes about Sam & Lucifer's relationship, they can sync up. Basically, they share thoughts & feelings to some extent, so if they both feel or think something at the same time it can create a positive feedback loop which will sort of reset their attention while syncing them up on a common objective. For the first part of the fight they were at odds, but their common surprise & hatred for Raphael synced them up, basically resetting all their internal animosity to zero. After Tom’s death, Sam puts up a fight, until Lucifer/Sam kill Raphael for trying to attack Kaylee. That’s not to say that as soon as Kaylee was in danger Sam forgave Lucifer for killing Tom, just that for a moment they were back to working together.

Thank you all for enduring my Red Wedding, I hope I haven’t alienated too many of you.
Dean was lying on the damp, hard ground. It was humid, but not nearly as muggy or warm as in the Indian temple. When he managed to open his eyes he found himself in an alley between brick buildings. It took a few terrifying seconds for his other senses to return. The smell of coffee and gumbo brought him cautiously to his hands and knees. Then the sound of happy voices in the distance told him there were people casually walking the nearby street.

He sat down on the ground, rested his back against one of the walls and cried. This was some place and time better than where he’d come from. Hopefully it was home. Just moments ago he’d watched helplessly as his friends were slaughtered while trying to protect him. Now he was surrounded by peace and it was so jarring that it somehow hurt him. He needed to find familiarity. He needed to take refuge in his family or at least the distraction of progress.

After collecting himself, he went to assess the situation. He quickly found a coffee shop with a television set to the news. It was 9:29pm on December 14, 2009. Right then, across the city, there was another him sewing up Castiel. He was over 16 hours earlier than Kali had been aiming for. Arriving earlier than planned was a small hiccup compared with the potential damage that could’ve occurred. Although he couldn’t help but feel a gnawing doubt that something had gone wrong in a more significant way. More than anything he wanted to be wrong, for it to be some stress-related fear.

Once he’d opened his mind to doubt, it became hard to stop. He didn’t know what to do, what was right. He was supposed to leave everything alone until the other him was gone, sent off to 2039, but that didn’t feel right anymore. He could go to the apartment right then—stop himself from traveling to 2039 and causing everything from going so wrong in that timeline. But then there’d be two of him, wouldn’t there?

Kali had told him that time was some delicate machine and the repercussions of fucking with it could be catastrophic. It was hard to accept that all those people would be cursed because he was sitting on his ass in a cafe. Granted, the whole reason things went wrong was because he’d interfered with something he couldn’t comprehend. If he defied Kali now, who knew what kind of consequences would result?

He sat silently drinking coffee while fighting against a soul-crushing feeling of helplessness until it was almost midnight and the coffee shop was closing down. When he went to pay the bill he noticed that the note Ruby had written him was gone. It shouldn't have surprised him that in all the chaos at the end of the fight it may have been blown out of his pocket. He paid the waiter, then retraced his steps hoping that he was wrong about where he’d lost it. After wandering down the streets for forty-five minutes without success he gave up and tried to decide what to do next. He only had a few dollars and for all practical purposes knew no one in the area.

While walking the streets, he stopped in front of a bar. It was tempting to just dive straight into a bottle of whiskey and fight or gamble his way out of the tab. He licked his lips, thinking of that
emotionally-numbing intoxication, then took a step forward. His foot accidentally bumped
something on the sidewalk beside the bar’s entrance.

There was a little hoodoo altar assembled next to a newspaper dispenser. It reminded him of the
altars he saw around the AFE base. Dean crouched down to look at the altar. His fingers traced the
cleaned chicken bones, then he picked up an intricately carved stone to examine it with both hands.
When he raised his left hand his sleeve fell slightly revealing the bandage on his left forearm. He
pulled off the bandage and stared at the rune cut into his flesh by Tom.

It took about an hour to find a real magic shop. The first three were tourist traps that mostly sold
incense and clothing accessories. But when he showed the rune on his arm to the fourth
shopkeeper the reaction was entirely different. The middle-aged woman’s eyes widened in awe of
the craftsmanship as she lowered her reading glasses to her nose.

For five hours Dean worked with the shopkeeper trying desperately to reverse engineer every spell
he’d seen or heard about over the last few days. Many of the spells couldn't be figured out based on
some combination of his incomplete memory or her comparative inexperience next to Tom or
Ruby. Despite several duds, he was incredibly grateful for her help and for the fact that he was
potentially contributing to the effort.

He traded the basic recipes for as many spell components as he could. He essentially ran them out
of oak ash, sage, and raven's bones. The shopkeeper even telephoned her cousin at 4am to do an
emergency restock on their balsam powder. She laughed when he asked if she had any strong
ichors available; apparently anything above livestock ichors were considered a rare commodity.
The last item on the massive shopping list was a tin box.

When he was done shopping, he found the closest cemetery. There was a calming familiarity to
walking a graveyard, though he wasn't there for a salt and burn. He was there on a different sort of
business. After a few minutes he found an intersection of dirt paths, a crossroads of soft soil in the
middle of the city. The tin box was buried along with his fake ID, some bones, and more.

"Dean, I hadn't expected to see you so soon, and in such a dramatic location." Shola took in their
surroundings, then looked closer at Dean himself. "There's something different about you.”

His heart started pounding. She was the first person he'd interacted with after getting back who
he'd known prior to the jump. If something really had gone wrong with the ritual she might very
well be the first person to recognize it.

“What's different?” he asked her with a sincerity and desperation that made her smile faded
slightly.

“Your eyes, they seem…. You've seen something important.” She studied him for a moment.

He felt exposed, but not fearful of her. Compared to everything else he'd gone through over the last
few days she was a mellow, old friend. It shouldn't have surprised him that she could tell he knew
something. It was her job to dig up value.

Dean cut to the chase. "I need some hard-to-find materials."

The sun was rising and he didn't want to be negotiating a deal when the police did their morning
rounds to scare off the shadier elements that gathered in New Orleans cemeteries at night. He held
up a list of rarer goods that Ruby might need for reconstructing the more advanced spells.

"You're going to have to tell me what you want so that we can negotiate the payment." Shola’s
smile returned to its full enthusiasm. “Your soul is no longer acceptable tender.”

"Telling you what I want is the payment."

She raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the concept. "Excuse me?"

"If I tell you what I want, you'll have incredibly valuable intel. Clever woman like you will be able to figure out the cards in my hand. I'm not giving that up for nothing."

She assessed him thoughtfully. For a moment he worried that she was seeing through him, somehow observing his true value for the first time. He was thankful that she didn't blink her eyes black. With all the wards on him and the time travel, he had no idea what he might look like to a demon. She was a collector of assets, while he was both priceless and vulnerable. After a painfully long silence, she stepped forward and kissed him.

"First of all," he said as soon as their lips parted, "I need holy oil; a lot of it."

“"It is 1:45pm on the 15th. Remember that I will retrieve you at 1:45pm on the 18th," Castiel said as he placed his hand on Dean's forehead.

"2014, here goes nothing," Dean quipped before disappearing in front of their eyes.

Castiel shook his head for a moment before staggering and collapsing on the floor. Ruby and Bobby helped move him onto the bed that Dean had been occupying seconds earlier while Sam held Kaylee. The angel opened his eyes slightly.

"You okay?" asked Sam.

"I am fatigued, but I will recover in time to retrieve your brother."

Bobby peered at him closely. "Do angels sleep, or is there anything we can do to help?"

"We do not sleep, though physically becoming dormant may increase my rate of recovery. The most important thing is that I do not excessively exert myself."

"Just take it easy," Sam agreed. "The rest of us can manage sitting around for a day or two."

Sam carried Kaylee into the living room. He kissed her forehead and held her close for a little extra comfort. He didn't know how to feel about Dean going to 2014. Before finding out that Lilith was busy fighting Lucian, he and Ruby had been planning on going to stay with Ruby’s coven. Then the prospect of Lilith being distracted meant that maybe they could stay with Dean and Bobby a while longer, at least until the baby was born. But with the arrival of angels, things had suddenly taken a bizarre turn. Now they were all holed up together with a strange angel, and nobody knew what the long-term plan going forward would entail.

In a perfect world he would have someplace safe and quiet to live with his daughter. Maybe Ruby would agree to stay in their lives. She’d been attentive to Kaylee so far, which gave him some small measure of hope, despite that it’d been a recurring theme of the pregnancy that Ruby wasn't nearly as comfortable with the idea of being a mom as she was with being his accomplice and lover. It would've been nice to think that she would be around for the long-term, but even if she decided to take off once the dust settled, he'd find a way to make things work as long as he could be there for Kaylee.

He'd like to be somewhere near support, either the coven or Bobby and Dean. The coven was
arguably the safer location even before the angels had showed up in Bobby's study. A hidden camp protected by powerful magics had a lot of advantages over a house that half the hunters in the Midwest knew he used to frequent. Despite the coven's tactical strengths, Sam felt a little sad at the prospect of not being able to raise Kaylee around Bobby and Dean. Granted, the way things were going, Bobby wasn't returning to Sioux Falls any time soon. And Dean, he was a different matter.

Sam hated the idea of Dean going off into the unknown after they'd finally reconciled. Dean still might've had some problems with the situation, but at least he was trying to tolerate Ruby and he actually had seemed pretty taken with his niece. There may have been some tiny foundation to rebuild their relationship upon. To potentially lose Dean now felt like the cruelest turn imaginable.

“You okay?” Ruby asked as she walked up to him.

“I'm just nervous,” Sam confessed.

“He'll be fine. He's a dick, but he's not an idiot and his luck's held up so far.”

“He died. That's not what I'd call lucky.”

“Yeah, but luck didn't—” Ruby cut herself off before she incidentally brought up the circumstances of Dean initial Crossroads deal. The last thing Sam needed was a side of guilt to go with his fear. “Catching a ride out of the Pit without black eyes is luck if I ever saw it. He survived nine months in Hell. I'm sure he can survive three days on Earth.”

“Thanks.” Sam pulled Ruby into a hug with his free arm, then kissed her.

“Your brother has one or two admirable cockroach-like qualities.”

He sighed, caught between mild amusement and disappointment. “You couldn't just leave the conversation on a sweet note?”

“I've never coddled you. I'm not starting now.” Ruby smirked, then looked at her sleeping daughter. “You're good with her; it's really something. I think this dad thing suits you.”

Sam blushed a bit at the compliment. For months he'd been looking forward to having the baby, but he'd tried not to get his hopes up for it coming so naturally to him. It wasn’t that it was easy or that he felt like he knew what he was doing. It was the fact that Kaylee made him unimaginably happy. More than anything he wanted to return the feeling, to care for his daughter. She was one of the two biggest sources of comfort in his life.

He offered Ruby a small smile. “You're good with her too.”

“It's easy for someone to like you when you're their main source of food and you let them play with your tits,” Ruby joked, but her eyes weren't as cheerful as her voice. “If we weren't on lockdown I'd get you a veggie burger, lose the top, and show you what I mean.”

“God, please don't mention real food,” Sam eyed the assorted dried foods that Castiel had fetched for them. “Or you topless. It's like you're trying to destroy me.”

“You wish I'd destroy you. I'm a lot more flexible and stronger than I have been during the last few months.”

Sam pursed his lips and tried not to think about fucking her. They still had to get some contraceptives, but even if they just stuck to oral, the walls in that place were paper thin. Hell, if
he tried pinning her to the wall they'd probably just fall through the crumbling sheetrock.

"You're evil," he groaned.

Ruby said something in Abyssal, then grinned wickedly at him. He was slightly shaken by her using the language of Hell, but not because of its irritating effect on humans. The unsettling thing was the fact that he continued to be unaffected.

“What did you say?” he asked.

She could sense that he'd lost some of his playfulness. “I said ‘It's never bothered you before,’” Ruby translated.

He understood her joke, but it didn't make him feel much better.

“Sam.” She chewed her lip, then said, “You know there's nothing—”

A knock on the front door of the apartment cut Ruby off. Sam held Kaylee in one arm and grabbed an angel blade from the kitchen table with the other, then stood so that Kaylee wasn't visible from the doorway. Ruby took the other blade, then carefully cracked the door just enough to look outside.

Dean was standing on the porch. His hair was a little messy and his eyes were oddly bloodshot. When he saw Ruby’s face he smiled and exhaled a laugh that was somewhat unnerving. His chest heaved as he just stood for a moment, uncertain what to do with himself.

“What are you doing outside?” Sam asked as Ruby urgently ushered Dean into the protection of the warded apartment. “Why didn't it work? You were—”

Dean immediately grabbed Sam and hugged him tighter than he'd ever hugged anyone in his life. Sensing Dean's distress, Sam passed Kaylee to Ruby, then wrapped his arms around his brother and held him for a long while. The embrace had been over a year in the making. After Dean's death, Sam's secret life had kept them from having a reunion of unadulterated gratitude. Sam could feel a few of Dean's tears soak into his shirt.

"Dean, you're scaring me," Sam whispered. When he tried to pull back slightly to look at Dean’s face, his brother wasn't ready to let go, so Sam just continued to hold him. "I don't understand. What just happened? Why were you outside?"

“Did it not work?” Bobby asked as he entered the living room to see what the commotion was about.

“He's wearing different clothes,” Ruby observed aloud.

Despite fitting Dean and being his favored color palette, the clothes were a bit more of an adult cut. Dean’s appearance was different beyond just the clothes. He needed a shave and there was some dirt on his knees. Sam looked over at Bobby in concern. They were missing something; something big if such a significant change had taken place.

Sam guided his brother over to the couch with only minor, indignant resistance, then sat him down. Dean was trembling slightly and his posture drew him into himself anxiously. His eyes darted between everyone in the room. It wasn't clear if he was fearful or just caught up in his probably-troubled thoughts.

“Bobby, can you get that coat?” Sam asked. “I think he might be in shock.”
Dean's skin felt a bit clammy and in the apartment's bad lighting it was hard to tell how pale he was.

"I'm okay," Dean said, but he allowed himself to be wrapped in the trench coat. He covered his face with his hand in embarrassment. "I thought I could keep it together. I thought I could do this, but I just...."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"I don't...." Dean wiped some tears from his eyes, then shook his head. After a few deep breaths he tried again, though he couldn't meet anyone's eyes. "I don't even know where to start. The whole thing was insane—I mean, yes and no. Like I wasn't even in 2014. I was in 2039—"

"What?!" Sam, Ruby, and Bobby all exclaimed at the same time.

"There was some sort of magic aura—like an EMP, they said, in the area that messed it up. Everything was fucked—it was bad news." Dean started talking a bit faster than normal as his mouth struggled to keep up with his mind. “Like so much had gone wrong— They'd been at it for decades. The magic thing sounded like it was a long time ago—sorry, a few years from now—but it was early in the whole mess so it can’t be that far—"

Castiel slowly walked into the room, holding the wall for extra stability. Dean stopped speaking and just stared at him. The angel studied Dean with interest, but didn't take any further actions to interrupt Dean’s attempt to recount what he'd been through. Sam noticed Dean pull the coat tighter around himself while his cheeks darkened slightly.

"Dean, are you okay?" Bobby asked, drawing him from whatever thoughts were plaguing him.

Dean turned away from Castiel, then shook his head. “Everything was so wrong,” he said quietly. “This is fucked, but it was so fucked there that this isn't so bad—except that it could be that fucked.”

“Hey, angel. Is there....” Ruby chose her words carefully for Sam’s benefit. “Something wrong with him? He says he went to the wrong time. Any chance a bolt got loosened on the way?"

Sam furrowed his brow at Ruby’s suggestion, but he couldn't really argue with looking into it. Dean was clearly reacting to something and it was hard to imagine what could make him such a wreck. The guy had been a hunter since middle school, killed all sorts of monsters, and had been to Hell and back. Though, eventually those traumas might very well have taken their toll on him. He'd been through a lot recently with going to Hell. Who knew what the time travel had actually done to him.

“I know I'm not fine, but I'm okay,” Dean hastily said in his own defense. “It's just the world and the death....”

“I should examine you to be sure,” Castiel stated.

Dean nodded consent. He started tearing up when the angel touched his forehead. Sam watched Dean compulsively rubbing the palm of his left hand.

“His adrenals are incredibly high, which could be the result of recalling past trauma,” Castiel explained. “It would account for his nonlinear and repetitive speech. Otherwise there is nothing wrong with his mind. However, he does have extensive carvings over one-third of his skeletal system.... They are very impressive.”
“So he's all there in the head, just emotionally scarred?” Ruby asked for clarification.

“Essentially, but the severity and duration of his distress is yet to be seen,” Castiel replied.

“Sam, can I talk to you for a sec?” Bobby asked. Sam got up and followed Bobby to the other side of the room. “He didn't look this bad coming out of Hell. Whatever happened to him, it's gotta be big.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam agreed. “Back at your place I could see some little tells, mostly him getting antsy around demon stuff, but nothing like this.”

Ruby stood staring warily at Dean while Sam and Bobby whispered across the room. Kaylee woke up and started fussing. Dean's eyes widened as he stared at baby Kaylee. His flesh lost some more color, then he intently looked away from the baby. Ruby’s lips thinned at Dean's reaction to her daughter before appeasing Kaylee with a finger to grab.

“Angel—”

“Castiel, can you draw out those carvings for me?” she asked.

“You said you designed them—some of them at least.” Dean spoke quietly to Ruby. “I don't know what the others do—”

“I designed the carvings on—wait, I said?” Ruby’s eyes widened. “As in, we talked?”

“Yeah,” Dean replied, seemingly unaware how important a detail it was that he'd directly interacted with one of them. Before anyone could pose a follow up question, he started talking again, drawing Sam and Bobby's attention. “I should've asked more questions about it—about the other warding and everything, but I didn't know it would go so wrong so fast. When it did I couldn't tell which way was up. I thought I had some of this shit figured out, but I was just trying to piece it all together and there are so many holes—I even lost your damn note in the fight—God, fuck! We have to stop it. When I left—I think it was literally the end of the world. Everyone was dying.”

“Who was dying?” Sam tried to hone in on some concrete details of that ominous statement.

“Everyone. They were keeping track of the death tolls—it wasn't even the dead, it was the living. I thought it was bad when the numbers came in from Brazil. It must've been millions—it had to be worse in Europe, and the whole continent was just lost. It was gone. The fucking city was burning—we couldn't do anything. I've never seen anything like that. It was this ball of fire and all anyone could do was let it burn….”

Sam hadn't seen Dean rambling like this since he'd had ghost sickness.

“Dean, look at me.” Sam knelt down in front of Dean to make sure he was being listened to. “I get that you're saying important things, but you aren’t making a lot of sense. We need information that we can use, which means details. I need you to take some deep breaths and start from the beginning. Can you do that for me?”

Dean nodded, then took a few breaths. Sam looked up at Ruby, who shifted uncomfortably. They might not have known exactly what Dean was talking about but the mention of death tolls—millions—lost continents, and a burning city had given them a glimpse of why Dean was so upset.
“There was a war. It'd been going for decades when I got there. The first thing I did was I went into the city. There was no one left. The whole French Quarter had been leveled. There was a massive grave—not even a grave, just a pile of bones. There had to have been hundreds, maybe more if they dug out the ground at all. I didn't get close to it. The only thing they left was the fucking church.”

“Who left—” Sam started to ask about the ‘they’ that left a church standing, but Dean was talking too fast again, caught up in the memory.

“There was a warning on the wall, that it was a trap. I didn't really think about it—I didn’t know. I mean, it's not like I checked it out, but it hadn't even crossed my mind what was going on. It was a fucking hot zone—people running around with automatic weapons. I swear everyone in that time was armed—” Dean rambled until he was interrupted by Sam.

“Can you do something to calm him down?” Sam asked Castiel.

Dean hopped up from the couch defensively. “Don't you fucking sedate—” he started to object, but Castiel touched his shoulder and he swayed on his feet. Sam and Castiel caught him and lowered him back down to the couch. “You guys don't understand.”

“We're trying to understand, but you're rambling,” Sam told his brother. “You need to calm down before you have a fucking panic attack.”

“There's just so much.” Dean spoke slower than normal, but he didn't seem disoriented. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, then a tear rolled down his cheek. “And what I've seen, I can't see it again.”

“Whatever it was, I promise that we’ll do everything we can to stop it, but we need to know what you saw.” Sam said, trying to reassure and refocus Dean. “You said there was a war. That ‘they’ destroyed the French Quarter. Who's ‘they’?”

“The Templars.”

Sam, Ruby, and Bobby all looked at each other, then to Castiel for insight. The three of them had heard of Templars in one form or another, but none of them had considered a modern incarnation.

“Heaven called on the service of Templars?” Castiel asked Dean in disbelief.

“Yeah.”

“What are Templars exactly?” Bobby asked.

“They are human servants of Heaven,” Castiel explained. “They have not been in service in centuries. I was not aware that any of the order were still alive.”

“Heaven recruited some more,” Dean replied. “I didn't see any in person, but I saw their handy work. ‘Repent, for Heaven has chosen this land to be cleansed of sin and sorcery.’”

“What?” Sam looked to Ruby for her reaction to the statement. She was clearly alarmed.

“That was on the wall, next to the burned-out buildings and the mountain of bones.” Dean sighed at the memory.

“Sin and sorcery?” Ruby’s face lost a little color. “Like full on witch-killing, holy-wrath Templars?”
“Apparently they killed all sorts of people,” Dean confirmed. “Witches, hunters, civilians, demons, fallen angels—anyone who got on Heaven’s naughty list.”

“Where does Heaven even get those kind of people?” Bobby asked.

“Hunters. They’re gonna go after hunters—what’s her name?” Dean looked at Sam. “The one hunter gunning for you.”

“Clare?” Sam's heart sank. Two of the three groups that wanted him dead were going to team up—or at least they could team up. With the backing of Heaven, Clare's gang of hunters wouldn't just be an afterthought compared to Lilith. Those hunters could be a major threat, just as much as demons or maybe even angels. Angels and demons were powerful, but hunters were resourceful and knew the terrain.

“Yeah, her whole group joined early, but it sounded like eventually there were Templars all over the world.”

“If Heaven called on the service of Templars the war must have been holy in nature,” Castiel reasoned. “Were Michael and Lucifer battling? Was Lucifer freed?”

“Lucifer was out—part of the time. Like he'd been out before, but he was locked up when I got there.” Dean hesitated, then chose his words carefully. “He got out again... while I was there. He was trying to destroy the world. It was nuts.”

“So that was the war you mentioned, Heaven and Hell?” asked Sam.

"No, it was Heaven versus this alliance that was defending Earth—the Army of the Free Earth—versus Lucifer. It was a three-way war between Heaven, Earth, and Lucifer. It got really complicated, but it took a long time for Lucifer to get out. He’d only been around for like a decade.”

“Well, that’s one problem pushed down the road,” Ruby commented.

“Not necessarily. It depends on how long it took for all those seals to break,” Bobby added. “We need to find out what all those seals are so we can start figuring out how soon Lucifer is a threat.”

“Yeah, that’s going on the mile-long list of things to do after we get out of here.”

“It sounded like the carvings on my bones hide me from angels. Cas,” Dean said causing Castiel to raise an eyebrow at the use of a nickname for him, “can you throw them on everyone?”

“Whoa, time out,” Ruby interrupted. “Bone carvings are some serious warding and if I designed part of it there's definitely arcana involved. I should look the designs over. They might take more than just slapping them on some femurs.”

“I can prepare drawings for you,” Castiel agreed.

“How did the other us get out?” Sam asked.

If Dean had spoken with Ruby in the future, it meant that he’d had the opportunity to ask the vital question. The sole reason they’d sent him to the future was to find a way to get back into the world without being jumped by a bunch of angels. Clearly at least Ruby had succeeded.

“We're not doing what they did,” Dean replied.
Sam's brow furrowed at his brother's dodge. It was another instance of Dean dictating rather than discussing. For almost their entire lives their dad had handed undefiable orders down the line and to a lesser extent Dean had done that too. After their argument at Bobby's, Sam had thought that Dean was trying to start a new chapter in their relationship, with better communication both ways, but this was a disappointing bit of backsliding. Dean was hiding something.

Sam tried to press the issue without having to call him out directly. “We might not do it, but we should at least know one thing that worked.”

“It's too high a cost—”

“Too high? To get back out there and be hidden from the things hunting us?” Sam was trying to be sympathetic to Dean’s ordeal, but this kind of stonewalling was counterproductive. “What could possibly be too high?”

“You made a deal with Crowley.” Dean looked anguished at the thought. More than that, he didn't meet Sam's eyes.

“I agreed to impersonate that archdemon?” Sam unconsciously nodded at the idea.

Crowley, an archdemon, was potentially a powerful ally in this mess. Though clearly there was something about the way it had panned out that Dean didn't like. Maybe with a little effort and precautions they could make the whole thing more palatable? He wasn't really a fan of getting roped in with Hell, but if it was a way to keep his family safe he couldn't just dismiss the possibility out of hand.

Dean shook his head. “You can't get involved with Crowley.”

“I get that you don't like demons, but if he has the power to protect us, then I don't see how we can leave that off the table.”

“This isn't about your whole demon thing.” Dean sighed, immediately regretting his lack of finesse on the subject.

This Sam wasn't openly associated with demons and Hell. He had only had a day or so of people speculating about his possible connection to the Abyss. Sam might not have personally taken the association as an insult, but based on the slightly hurt expression on his face Sam might've assumed Dean meant it that way.

“I didn't mean that to come out like that,” Dean apologized. “I'm not giving you shit or putting down demons. It's not like that.”

“Then what's it like?” Sam asked. “The angels and hunters already hate me. Why should I care if they hate me a little more? If I can put in some time helping Crowley in exchange for our safety, then I don't see the problem.”

“But you didn't just ‘put in some time.’ You weren't impersonating an archdemon.” Dean was visibly upset again. “Dammit Sam, you were the King of Hell—not pretending. You were.”

Sam just stared at Dean for several seconds. He wasn’t sure what that meant, but it didn’t sound good. He was willing to do a lot to save them and if push came to shove he might have to take drastic measures. Right then though, it wasn’t clear what the stakes and costs were. Even ignoring what it might mean to act as King of Hell, it was the emphasis that Dean had placed on ‘were’ that was particularly alarming. Impersonating someone was one thing, being someone—something—else was another.
“What?” The word trickled out of Sam, barely audible to the others.

“I don't know how it worked exactly, but you went to Hell to talk to Crowley and came back locked into like a lifetime job. Almost everyone in the future called you a demon without batting an eye.” Dean rubbed his neck. “It sounded like you got roped into serving Hell and then everyone just got used to the idea that you were always on Team Hell. You know those hunters and angels that you don't care about? Guess who thinks they're the most righteous fucks in the world?”

As much as Sam didn’t personally care what some hunters or angels thought of him, to the extent that it endangered him or his family it was a serious concern. The risk of putting any more wind in their sails was a good reason not to reach out to Crowley, but that would potentially lead to some other problems. The most immediate problem being that they’d lose one way out of their current predicament and a potential ally. The other major worry was that, the whole reason Crowley was requesting his help was to fight Lilith. With her left unchecked, Hell might very well become her stronghold.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Ruby commented, thoroughly confused. “I mean for starters, Hell doesn't even have a monarch.”

“It could, I guess.” Dean shrugged, unsure of the political procedure that had changed the form of rule within Hell.

Sam was barely listening to Dean. He was too distracted by the memory of a conversation that they’d had just before the angels had shown up at Bobby’s. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the little black box Crowley had given as a gift to Kaylee. He removed the lid, then stared down at the teardrop shaped pieces of black wood. They were syf, some indicator of demon rank. Ruby had speculated that they were made from a piece of the throne in Hell, but she’d dismissed the idea of a monarch to sit on the throne… though now the idea of Hell having a king changed things.

He cautiously touched one of the syf. It was strangely warm to the touch and seemed to hum with a sweet music just for him. Delicate power radiated through his fingers and arm to his chest. When it reached his heart he felt a bit intoxicated and frightened by the change in him. It started triggering a vision, but he knew it would be of Hell and he wasn't sure he was ready to see the Abyss. He broke the connection just as the image of blood red blossoms started clouding his sight. When he pulled his hand away the syf had turned white.

“What did you do?” Castiel asked in alarm at the sight of the white syf.

“I don't know. I didn't mean to.” Sam was shaking. He’d lost control of himself on some level, doing… he wasn’t even sure. “I just thought—isn't this supposed to be related to their throne? I thought maybe it might have something to do with all this.”

“Why did it turn white?” Bobby asked, leaning in a little closer to see the artifact of the Abyss.

“Because it is no longer dead,” Castiel said in a subtly distressed tone.

“Dead?” Ruby glanced at the angel cautiously. “It's part of a chair?”

“It is part of a tree,” Castiel explained, while omitting any explanation of how a severed piece of wood could be alive.

Bobby opened his mouth to raise the issue, but Ruby interrupted with her own point of confusion. “There aren't any trees in Hell.”
“There is one in the very center of Hell,” Castiel corrected her, then he looked to Sam thoughtfully. “You cannot go to Hell. We do not know what your presence would do to that plane. It could benefit them immeasurably.”

“Is that necessarily a bad thing?” Ruby suggested as Kaylee started fidgeting in her arms. “If we can get Hell on our side—”

“And we’re starting to get back into the Sam-as-King-of-Hell territory. See the problem?” Dean commented.

“Believe me when I say I don’t want Sam going to Hell anymore than you.” Ruby gently bounced Kaylee to try to prevent any fussing. “But in general I’m not feeling too bad about Hell getting a little more power—assuming Lilith doesn’t get her hands on it. I mean it’s Heaven that’s currently enemy number one.”

“Uriel may have put us at odds with Heaven, but you should not necessarily consider them an ideological enemy,” Castiel countered.

“Really? Because the whole them-going-to-war-with-Earth thing is kinda a red flag,” Ruby shot back.

Kaylee whimpered, causing Sam to reach out to take over the attempt to calm their daughter. Once Kaylee was out of Ruby’s agitated arms, she started quieting down. Ruby pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath.

“There is no war between Heaven and Earth in this time.” Castiel continued the argument, but mercifully lowered his voice. “It may be avoidable. Treating Heaven as an enemy may encourage a conflict.”

“And ignoring them as a threat leaves us exposed to their attack.”

An assertive knock on the front door cut off the fight between the angel and the demon. They all stared at the door, holding their breaths briefly, though admittedly it didn’t make sense for an attacker to give them a warning. Sam could sense a demon on the other side of the door, but there was something more. It seemed powerful and strangely familiar.

“It’s a demon,” Sam whispered.

"Dean, are you in there?" yelled a woman's voice, causing Dean to roll his eyes.

“I summoned Shola to get some stuff,” Dean explained as he got up to see what she wanted. Knowing his luck something had gone wrong and there wasn’t any holy oil left in the world.

“Do they know about Kaylee?” Ruby asked before he reached the door.

“No,” he replied. “Or Cas.”

“You four, go in the back,” suggested Bobby.

Dean waited for Castiel, Sam, and Ruby to take Kaylee around the corner into the apartment's hallway before he opened the front door. He was immediately tackled in a hug, which made him stumble backward a step.

"Oh, thank god! We didn't know if you made it through in one piece," said Kaylee as she let go of him, then gestured to Dylaniel who stood behind her.
So yeah, welcome to Act 3: How the fuck do we deal with this knowledge and stop this war?
Dylaniel didn't remember trying to teleport. With the anti-flight warding in place around the ritual site, he couldn't have been able to even if he had tried. He had been holding Kaylee upright while she was trying to shield them against a series of blasts, but she had been seriously injured and her attention was divided in order to defend Dean. At first the two of them had just slipped backward slightly, but in the last blast they were knocked directly into the ritual’s event horizon.

It all happened so fast that initially Dylaniel couldn't comprehend what he was perceiving. Tens or hundreds of thousands of tiny moments in time were forking into many possibilities. But instead of following the natural course of time, they were going backwards, snuffing out potentialities behind them, things that hadn't yet come to be. Angels could interpret the ribbons of time and follow them with only some difficulty. As a nephilim, he could at least somewhat perceive what was happening… though he wasn't sure that was an asset.

The sensation reminded him of drowning, but instead of a single panicked instinct overwhelming his thoughts and senses, it was every kind of external input imaginable. Trying to keep track of everything that was happening around him was essentially hopeless. This was one of those things that came naturally to angels. It was an instinctual process and trying to overthink it would almost certainly work against him. He didn’t try to take in the many details or to wrestle control over every aspect possible, instead he turned his thoughts inward.

Assuming that the ritual was sufficiently completed, Dean would probably end up back in his time. They were likely riding in the wake, accidentally piggybacking on his jump. In theory they might be able to ride the spell farther back than Dean, but Dylaniel wasn’t sure what the point would be or what would even happen to them if they attempted it. They weren’t even supposed to be in the spell to begin with. It was probably a miracle that they weren’t dead. Rather, he wasn’t dead; he still hadn’t gotten a good look at Kaylee. They needed to get out of the spell and 2009 was not only the safest bet, it was also presumably the easiest time to shoot for. He focused on following Dean and hoped that whatever intuition he’d inherited from his xe kept them somewhat on target.

He was still holding Kaylee when they appeared in a small clearing in a forest. For whatever reason they were literally thrown coming out of the jump. They tumbled awkwardly in a two-person barrel roll. Dylaniel tried to wrap his arms around Kaylee to help protect her, but he wasn't entirely successful. A tree trunk slamming into her back stopped them both. Somehow they'd managed to avoid being impaled by either his sword, which he clutched in his right hand, and the angel blade that Kaylee had been holding while entering the jump.

Kaylee's limp body fell on him, pinning half of him to the ground. After a moment’s hesitation, he reached up to check her for a pulse. When he felt her heartbeat he sighed with relief, then gingerly crawled out from under her. Carefully rolling her onto her front he examined her injuries. She had two severe stab wounds in her back and three fractured vertebrae. He healed her and cleaned up the blood from the scene, but refrained from healing his own broken ribs and arm.
Their arrival was hasty and unplanned. It had undoubtedly caused a blip of some sort on Heaven’s radar. There weren’t any angels there yet, but that was most likely because in 2009 Heaven lacked a proper sense of urgency. Heavenly angels would come to investigate eventually and when they did he and Kaylee couldn’t be around. Dylaniel decided to conserve his powers and teleported them to somewhere quieter.

Everything had changed. They needed to regroup.

Kaylee woke up to the smell of the ocean and the sound of waves crashing on rocks. When she opened her eyes, she saw Dylaniel sitting cross-legged on the white, sandy beach next to her. Her cousin’s favorite light grey armor was brown with old blood. His sword was unsheathed and stabbed into the ground next to him, ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. Beside the sword was an angel blade, also ready to be used in a pinch. He stared straight ahead at the ocean.

“Where are we? What happened?”

The last thing she remembered was being stabbed in the temple in India. Based on the warmth and humidity they might still be in India, but something must be very wrong for their surroundings to be so calm. The world was ending. Dylaniel wouldn’t be meditating on the beach unless things were completely fucked. Even then, she’d have expected him to go out swinging.

“We were caught in the spell. We’re in 2009.” Dylaniel spoke so neutrally that she wondered whether she’d heard him correctly.

“What?!"

“It’s December 14, 2009.”

“We have to go back!”

She sat up and looked around trying to get her bearings. Her heart started pounding and her mind raced with thoughts of things she needed to do. They must’ve left right in the middle of the battle, when they were needed most. She had to find out if her mom was okay, if Kit was alive—what was happening with Lucifer? If Raphael was really dead, what did that mean for Heaven? Was anyone —

“We can’t,” Dylaniel said, interrupting her train of thought.

The word ‘can’t’ struck her painfully, but she didn’t stop to consider what it actually meant.

“We need to —”

“Kay, we can’t.” Dylaniel turned to face her and she could see the finality in his eyes. Despite the tropical setting, the world suddenly became cold and dim. “I’m sorry.”

Kaylee pulled her legs to her chest, then pressed her face into her knees. She cried for several minutes before collecting herself enough to begin processing the situation. She interpreted Dylaniel’s lack of reaction to be his standard form of grieving. He wouldn’t been capable of providing any comfort to her beyond the mere fact that he was alive and with her. In that moment, more than anything she wanted to be held, but she didn’t know anyone else in the world—she looked around desperately at a thought.

“Did Dean make it through?” she asked. “Is he alive?”
“I’m fairly certain he made it through. I don’t know if he survived.” Dyaniel didn’t look at her while he spoke.

“We have to find him.”

“He’s not your uncle.”

Kaylee could almost hear the pain in Dyaniel’s voice

“I know.” She nodded in solemn acknowledgement of his point. “But he's our friend. He’s our only friend left. We need to make sure he's okay.”

She watched Dyaniel for a few minutes. He was trying to decide where their priorities were just as much as she was, though he had a different sort of relationship with Dean. Dean was some strange alternate version of her uncle. She'd loved her uncle, but he'd never been her idol the same way he'd been to Dyaniel. She'd had her own dad to look up to, even when he was possessed. The idea of seeking out Dean after the loss of Dyaniel's dad felt somewhat perverse.

The kid had been through so much, but what if Dean needed their help? For all they knew he could be hurt somewhere and the rest of his gang was trapped, unaware of what had happened. To the extent that the two of them were functional and knew he might need their help, they had a responsibility to at least make sure he was okay…. But they needed to be functional first. She noticed that Dyaniel looked pale and his left wrist was slightly swollen.

“You're hurt.” She reached over to inspect his injuries more carefully. When she moved to touch his chest he leaned away from her. “Dyl, can you heal yourself?”

“I should conserve my powers, in case we need to fight or run.”

“You need to take care of yourself,” she countered. “You can't fight in this kind of shape and I can't heal or move you if you pass out.”

Dyaniel closed his eyes in concentration for a moment, then swayed. Kaylee stabilized him until he recovered. His wrist was back to normal, but she stared at his blood-stained clothes.

“If we’re gonna fit in, we need to get some different clothes,” she observed aloud. “Stay here. I'll go get us something new to wear.”

“I should go with you.” His voice was soft from fatigue.

“Dyl, you’re covered in blood and wearing armor. This is a different time. Not to mention you look completely tapped out. I don't want you jumping like this. Please just let me take care of this. You focus on getting your strength back.”

“Be careful,” he conceded while lying back on the sand.

“I'll be right back.” She tried to make something resembling a reassuring smile. “I promise.”

Kaylee teleported to New York City… or at least where she thought New York City was located. She’d visited it once in 2034 and found it to have an impressive number of goods for sale, but she’d forgotten just how much the borders had changed between 2009 and 2034. She initially found herself on the outskirts of the city. After getting directions to the heart of Manhattan, she teleported in and began her search for some new clothes.
Thankfully her preference for black clothing worked to her advantage and concealed the blood stains fairly well, so it only looked like she had a few holes in the back of her top. She found a clothing store without too much difficulty. Despite taking a few extra minutes, she spent some time to find Dylaniel some clothes that were in line with his tastes. She found a faded grey AC/DC shirt that reminded her of one he’d had as a child. Somehow it seemed important to give him something familiar, even if it was just a t-shirt.

She’d never actually had to pay for goods before. As long as she could remember, anything that she’d wanted went on Hell’s tab. When she saw the price tags on the items, she knelt down between the clothing racks and teleported out of the store. The tan plastic security devices on the clothes were quickly removed by some very precise melting with the First Light.

Before returning to Dylaniel, she stopped by a grocery store to get them some food. She almost didn't know what to take. Never in her life could she recall seeing such a variety of food in one place. Multiple cuts of beef, pork, chicken, lamb, different types of fish, and what looked like large red bugs were all displayed in the same long, clear cabinet. The produce section alone was larger than most grocery stores in 2039. She hadn't even realized that apples were available in the color green. As fascinating as the grocery store was, she grabbed a few easy meals and hurried back to check on Dylaniel.

He was still lying on the beach when she returned, but at least he seemed more alert. For a split second he rolled to grab his sword, only to realize it was just her. He sat up when she placed three bags of supplies next to him. Instead of looking through the bags, he waited for her to start unpacking them at her own pace.

“I brought some food. You can pick: a sandwich or a salad.” She dug through one of the paper bags, then held a plastic-wrapped roll and a plastic bowl of leafy greens out to him. He glanced at the options, but didn't move to accept either. “Take one.”

“I'm not hungry.”

She hadn't been around to see if he'd eaten breakfast before the ritual at the temple. If he was like everyone else, the only thing he had in his system during the fight was some chai and a whole lot of artificial stimulants. “When was the last time you ate?”

“30 years from now,” Dylaniel said coolly.

“It's been awhile.” She shook the sandwich at him. “Dyl, just do this for me, okay?”

He grabbed the sandwich and started unwrapping it. After a quick sniff and inspection of the bread’s contents he took a few bites. Once she was satisfied that he was alright, she started dressing and eating her salad.

Dylaniel finally broke the uncomfortable silence. “How are we going to find him?”

“Well, we have his blood,” Kaylee said as she looked at Dylaniel. “Now we just have to figure out how to use it.”

Once they had eaten, washed up as best they could, and their changed clothes, they traveled to Lebanon, Kansas, then walked a few blocks while trying to find their target. Kaylee told the first woman they met on the street that they were new in town and needed to find a man named Thomas Carry. The woman seemed thoroughly confused, but mercifully helped them. Dylaniel watched the woman pull a cell phone from her bag and somehow give them the man’s address without
making a call to anyone. After thanking her, the pair continued on their mission.

They briefly considered stealing a car and conducting their search on wheels, but the idea was quickly scrapped. Both of them knew how to drive cars and ride motorcycles, but Kaylee was the only one who had experience with human traffic laws and that was only on two occasions fifteen years earlier… later. One of the last things they needed was to interact with the human law enforcement representatives.

Neither of them were particularly familiar with residential neighborhoods full of single-family homes. The AFE’s bases mostly housed soldiers and their families in barracks or apartment buildings. They had both seen abandoned towns and suburbs in their travels, but seeing occupied houses was something else. It took them some time to discern the numbering system of the houses, though they eventually located the correct house without drawing too much attention to themselves.

A man with nearly white hair answered the door and looked them over. Despite Dylaniel's apparent appreciation of the AC/DC shirt, Kaylee was glad that she had insisted they bundle up in wholesome wool jackets. They were trying to charm a man from two generations prior to their dads. Propriety could easily be an issue.

“Excuse me, sir. Are you Larry Ganem?” Kaylee asked hopefully. She made her voice a little higher pitched than normal and spoke softer, trying to portray herself as non-threateningly as possible.

“I’m sorry. I think you’re confused.” The older man looked a bit concerned. “My name is Thomas Carry.”

“Please, may we come in? I’m Deana and this is Sam. We believe you knew our grandfather.” Henry Winchester.”

Five minutes later, the three of them were sipping Earl Grey tea in the cozy living room. Dylaniel struggled to relax his posture, though it wasn't obvious thanks to the plush couch he sat on. For the first time in recent memory he was essentially unarmed. It made him feel naked and vulnerable. Kaylee made them temporarily leave his sword and the angel blade on the beach while they were looking for Larry Ganem. All Dylaniel was able to conceal on his person was a four-inch-long paring knife, which Kaylee had taken from the grocery. He didn't like the idea of being in someone else's domain without ample means to defend himself. This wasn't just some elderly human, he was a Man of Letters.

“How did you hear about me?” Larry asked while offering a plate of shortbread cookies. Kaylee accepted a cookie, but Dylaniel declined the offer.

“We inherited our grandpa’s journal a few years ago. It contained a symbol and some mention of training, so we started trying to research it,” Kaylee lied. The truth was that her father had sold his soul for sanctuary and they had ended up in a Men of Letters bunker. During one of Cas’s sleepless nights digging through the bunker’s records, he'd found mention of Henry Winchester, who had, by chance, belonged to the order. “There were things in his diary that seemed…. Well, your name was in it and we were hoping that you knew about some of this. We're a bit out of our element.”

“So your mother gave you Henry’s journal?” Larry’s eyes narrowed subtly as he watched Kaylee for something.

“Our dad, Henry’s son,” Kaylee corrected, earning a smile from Larry.
“John was a good boy,” the elder replied. “I really wish I had kept better track of him. After he was drafted in the war I lost touch with him. I could’ve sworn both his kids were boys.”

“It’s an understandable mistake,” Dylaniel commented, earning a sidelong glance from Kaylee.

“I know this is asking a lot, but… the things we read…. You’re going to think we’re crazy.” Kaylee feigned distress, which wasn’t hard. She was running on emotional fumes. “We’ve been looking for something… more like hunting it.”

Larry sat up in his armchair, curiosity piqued. “It?”

“We shouldn't be talking—” Dylaniel started to warn Kaylee, but she cut him off. He was grateful that Kaylee had volunteered to play the part of the optimistic novice hunter while he played the skeptical companion. The prospect of faking any sort of hopeful outlook was too much for him, but wariness was completely in his wheelhouse.

“We need help.” Kaylee didn't even have to pretend to have her voice crack. She took a moment to collect herself, then looked back to Larry. “I know this sounds crazy, but do you believe in monsters; like real monsters?”

He gave them the key to the bunker, his phone number, the phone number of his niece, who was a police captain in Seattle, an antique silver dagger, and a tupperware container of the remaining shortbread cookies that his caregiver had made. He spent almost two hours telling them about the Men of Letters and their great-grandfather. They’d both read many of the records of the Men of Letters, but it was another thing to meet one firsthand. For his part, Larry seemed relieved to have passed on the bunker’s key to legacies. Kaylee offered him a parting hug before she and Dylaniel walked down the street and disappeared into the night.

They both stood silently at the top of the stairs just inside the front door of the bunker. It'd been 15 years since they'd seen the place in its current condition. Dylaniel had forgotten the… it wasn't exactly disrepair. Everything was functional, yet nothing was being used. The whole place had been left in a strange stasis, waiting for a Man or Woman of Letters to come along and wake it. Someone had abandoned their game of chess and partially-drunk coffee 50 years earlier. Most of the utility systems were shut down entirely, not just in the mild standby mode their family had left it in when Sam and Lucifer were the only ones inside. They quickly powered up the bunker, then got to work.

In their quest to find a spell capable of locating Dean, Dylaniel went to the personnel archives looking for the Men of Letters’ most promising students of the craft while Kaylee started looking through the library for divination spellbooks. Kaylee's search may have been limited to a dozen books, but they were densely packed and in four different languages. Dylaniel's search involved sorting through several hundred card catalog entries, then pulling twenty individual files, but each file was uniformly organized and in English. After finding two candidates for scryers, he went into the first level basement to pull the boxes containing their work and personal effects.

He started carrying four promising notebooks up to the library when he passed by the parlor where his xe had died. The furniture was all wrong. The room had been where their family ate meals when a significant number of them were available, but now it was little more than storage space. He entered the parlor then placed the files on an old desk before walking to the center of the room. Dylaniel moved a stack of chairs aside to clear the floor where Cas had fallen. He touched the cold concrete surface and tried to sense anything beyond the painful void.

After a few seconds he looked up at the doorway that his dad had been thrown through. It was the
last time he had seen him. By the time Dylaniel had returned to the bunker after evacuating Tom and Dean, his dad had been taken. Ruby had been incapacitated under a bookcase. He’d fought to reach her, and managed to heal her before they went to look for Kaylee.

Kaylee had been in the basement, standing frozen in shock at the sight. It wasn't the roughly sixteen bodies—he couldn't be sure how many people Lucifer had killed. Their bodies were dismembered beyond recognition and the many ashen wings on the walls and floor had overlapped confusingly. But she wasn't even looking at the bodies. She was looking at the absence of her own father, the loss of someone she loved and was responsible for. Dylaniel had been blinded by profound sympathy when the third wave of angels had arrived.

“I think I found a spell that'll—” Kaylee's words shook him from the memory.

She came down the hall and turned the corner to see Dylaniel kneeling on the floor of the parlor. She hurried over to him, scared that he'd collapsed, then she took in their surroundings. Her mouth opened, but she couldn't find the words to express her own loss, let alone discuss his. This was the room where everything had gone wrong. This was where she'd lost both her uncles; where Dylaniel had lost his parents.

She wanted to comfort him somehow, but she wasn't sure what to do. His parents, her mom, and Tom had always been the people he’d confided in. They were his confidants in a way that she hadn't been able to be with all of her responsibilities. She loved him and they got along well enough, but now she was the only person in the world looking out for him, and she wasn't sure how to care for him on an emotional level. With anyone else, she would just hug them and let intuition guide her from there, but she couldn't recall the last time she’d seen anyone hug Dylaniel—aside from his parents or Sa'dah's special version of a hug—

“I need to get something,” she told him suddenly, causing him to furrow his brow slightly at her sudden retreat. “I’ll be back in two seconds.”

Kaylee teleported back to the residential neighborhood where Larry lived. After a few seconds of searching she found a red cyclamen plant. She plucked a single petal from one of the flowers, then returned to the bunker. Dylaniel stood up when she held it out to him.

"It's a hug," she explained, hopeful that he would appreciate the sentiment. “I remember Sadie used to—"I thought...."

He stared at the petal for a long time without moving. To accommodate his aversion to physical contact, Sa'dah used to give Dylandiel flower petals in lieu of hugs. A mason jar of her petal-hugs had rested on his nightstand for as long as he could remember. But they were gone. A tear rolled down his cheek, the first tear she'd seen from him since Alex's death.

"Ah, fuck. I'm sorry." Kaylee's voice wavered. She wasn't sure if she'd accidentally made the situation worse or if she'd managed to pierce his shell for the better. "Can I give you a real hug?"

Dylaniel nodded slowly and she embraced him. Unable to stop herself, she began crying softly on his shoulder. After a few seconds he wrapped his arms around her, returning the hug. The uncommon gesture of comfort from her cousin made her break into audible sobbing.

"I... don't know if they're dead or if they just weren't...." Dylandiel spoke in a whisper. Kaylee stopped herself from continuing to cry in order to listen to him. "If they don't exist anymore, is that better somehow? To just not be instead of being dead. Like Alex, he was just gone. He didn't suffer in Hell or Heaven.... They aren’t suffering somewhere if they just don’t exist, but I remember them: Dad, Xe, your mom, Tom.... If I can remember them, that means they
existed…“

Kaylee had never heard Dylaniel express a crisis of faith or existence like that before. She got the sense that some nuances of what he was saying were lost on her. He had a different relationship with time and the variant timelines than she did. To her it seemed clear that they came from a real place, but he was struggling with processing something.

"You’re overthinking this, Dyl. They existed. They did incredible things,” Kaylee assured him. “They tried to save the world.”

“That timeline is lost. It doesn't mean anything.”

“Don't think like that.” She let go of him and took a step back in order to look him in the face. “It means a lot.”

“It only means something to us. Everything they were, everything they did only lives on in us. When we die their impact will be nothing.”

“Then let's make an impact for them,” Kaylee suggested. “This world stands a chance of making it. We'll find a way. We can help save this world.”

“We shouldn't disrupt the timeline,” Dylaniel warned.

“I hate to tell you, but we already did.” Kaylee pulled the key to the bunker from her pocket and held it up. “We can try to be subtle, but I’m not going to be some fatalist. If we don't have hope... well, then you're right, and they all died for nothing. I'm not ready to just let that happen.”

Dylaniel considered her for a minute. He wasn't sure that he could bring himself to be hopeful. There was too much wrong with the world. There had always been something critically or even terminally wrong with the world, but this was different. They’d never faced such unknowns and it was terrifying… though Kaylee seemed to be fairly well composed despite her occasional emotional lapse. She was a natural leader and he just wanted some sense of direction.

“What do we do first?” he asked, earning a weak smile.

Kaylee mixed the spell components and recited the incantation while Dylaniel watched. It’d been years since she’d done a spell on her own aside from the occasional talisman or charm activation. Her mom had taught her the craft, but she hadn’t taken to it as much as Tom or Alex. For the most part it came back easily, though she periodically worried that she wasn’t executing the spell in its finest form.

When it came time to collect some of Dylaniel’s blood for the spell she suggested that only a few drops would be sufficient, but he cut the inside of his arm near the elbow producing an ample supply. She felt a little sick at the sight. Historically, seeing blood hadn’t been a big problem for her—it took a strong stomach to comfortably move through Hell. Now, though, she had to look away for a moment. She didn’t want to think about the new development too much; they had more important things to worry about.

“We have a roughly fifty-percent match in New Orleans!” Kaylee exclaimed after activating the spell on the tactical world map covering the table in the entry hall of the bunker. The map’s continents had turned into a spectrum of red-blue based on the similarity of bloodlines. In theory Dylaniel would appear as a prominent red dot, but he was located in a heavily warded bunker and thus he didn’t appear on the map. A purple mark over New Orleans indicated that someone sharing half of Dylaniel’s DNA was in New Orleans and not in a warded environment.
Dylaniel pointed to a second purple spot. “There's also one in Glasgow.”

“It's probably just Hael's vessel. Mom said that I was born in an apartment in New Orleans. My money's on that one being Dean.” Kaylee started packing up some supplies. “Now we just need to go hunt him down.”

Both Kaylee and Dylaniel had visited New Orleans before, but neither of them recognized it. The whole area had been free of magic after 2013, which had severely altered the city's character. The residents who were aware of the change tried to compensate by becoming more outspoken against the more conservative human factions. Then in 2018, the Templars razed the French Quarter and executed 3,500 people living in the city center. It had been a turning point in the war, when the humans couldn’t ignore the conflict any longer. Kaylee and Dylaniel had each visited the ruin as part of a history lesson, but by the time they were old enough to go there was no life in the city's bones.

In 2009 though, the city was full of people going about beautifully mundane activities. It seemed likely that most of people were human. They moved about taking for granted the charming shops, lighthearted passersby, and the simple troubles of their lives. If they weren’t under a time crunch to find Dean, Kaylee would’ve explored the whole city—she might do that later…. She still wasn't sure what to do after they confirmed that Dean was alive.

Dylaniel watched the people casually walking around. There were more than he'd even seen outside of major operations, but unlike the ops he'd run, he had no idea what to expect. He wasn't sure who any given person was or what business they were currently going about doing. On base he'd been apprised of most personnel rotations, so at a bare minimum he knew when the waves of soldiers taking leave would occur. He knew the layouts of most North American bases, which meant that he could usually guess where people were walking. Here though, he was completely at a loss.

“How about we go somewhere with fewer people?”

They went into a cafe on a quiet side street to perform the shorter range locator spell. Kaylee decided to order some lunch for them after instructing Dylaniel to find a table for them. She waited until the register was opened while the person ahead of her was paying, then telekinetically pulled out a few twenty-dollar bills while distracting the cashier with a question about the menu. After sneaking the money around the bottom of the counter, she pretended to drop something and collected her bounty. When she was done ordering their food, she turned to see her cousin standing around waiting for her.
“Weren't there any tables?” she asked, then glanced around spotting at least three small, unoccupied tables.

“I wasn't sure if there's a standard protocol for claiming a table.”

“We just sit down,” she said, a little surprised that he needed that to be clarified. She eyed him as he followed her to one of the tables and sat with his back to the wall. “Do you….”

“What?” Dylaniel asked when Kaylee didn't finish whatever she'd been considering saying to him.

“Do you remember ever going to a human city? Like, one with people.” She felt a bit guilty for not being able to recall whether he'd been on any diplomatic missions to the human city-states. He never took any personal leave, so she doubted he'd have gone to one for recreation. She couldn't remember if Dean and Cas had risked taking him to a human city as a child, except for a few cricket games, but those stopped after Sa’dah— Kaylee's stomach dropped. The most prominent association Dylaniel had with human cities was also the most defining moment of his youth: when his best friend was killed in Los Angeles by a mob of humans.

“I went to a few outposts,” he replied, but his eyes were too busy scanning the room to look at her.

“Dyl, if you don't feel comfortable you can go back to the bunker,” Kaylee suggested.

“You shouldn't be alone.”

“I'd be fine, but if you want to stay with me that's okay too.” She wasn't sure what to do with him. As calm as he might appear on the surface he had to be distressed on many levels; their emotional interaction at the bunker was evidence of that. Letting him grieve in the safety of the bunker had some appeal, but leaving him alone in a place full of memories could be harmful. “I just want to make sure you're okay, whatever that takes.”

After thinking about her offer for a long while he replied, “I'd prefer to stay with you.”

A server dropped off their food. She watched Dylaniel's eyes follow the man back to the kitchen, then settle warily on the food in front of him. He used a fork to sift through the plate of jambalaya, but didn't take a bite. She knew he had a security mindset normally, but the stress of the entire situation was making him so anxious that it was bordering on paranoia.

“No one knows who we are,” Kaylee reminded him. “No one's out to get us or hurt us.”

He didn't acknowledge her accurate guess as to his fear, but cautiously tried the jambalaya.

It was frightening to see how incapacitated Dylaniel was by the situation. All things considered, it made sense. If she stopped for any significant amount of time she could easily be crushed under the full realization of the loss. She could keep moving, finding goals to carry her through the immediate pain, but he wasn't like her. He was completely out of his element, profoundly lost in a world without the structure he'd always taken comfort in. No wonder he was so scared.

Kaylee decided to switch over to speaking Latin in the hopes of making Dylaniel feel like their conversation was more private. “Are you still worried?”

“Of course,” he replied in Latin.

“Talk to me. Tell me what's worrying you.”

“If they're using an alarm effect for either demons or angels we'll risk—” he began, but she cut him
“There is no ‘they’ right now. Heaven isn't looking for us—”

“I meant anyone,” he corrected.

“No one is looking for us. No one besides Heaven knows that angels are real. No one uses alarms for angels in this time. Maybe some hunters might alarm against demons”—She saw Dylaniel open his mouth to speak and quickly continued, cutting him off before he could voice his concern—“but hunters aren't gonna be alarming random buildings. They don't have the resources for that large-scale kind of stuff.”

He shifted slightly in his chair. “This isn't right.”

“I know it's weird, but the people around us, they all think we're make believe. If I flashed my eyes at them, they'd probably try to convince themselves it was a trick of the light,” Kaylee explained. “To them you're just a human—some kid. At a glance probably nobody’ll take you serious in general let alone see you as a potential threat. Hell, you'd probably get carded trying to buy alcohol.”

His eyebrows rose subtly. “Carded?”

“Asked for an identification card to confirm your age.” Kaylee translated the foreign concept.

“How do we get identification cards?” Dylaniel asked, having been given a new concern about being caught as an outsider.

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I think we make them.”

“If we make them ourselves, how can they confirm anything?”

“I don't know. I'm guessing,” she sighed. It was exhausting trying to be the expert on all this stuff when her own knowledge was fragmented. “Years ago I found a box of your parents’ identification cards, blank cards—stuff like that.”

“Neither of us know. We don't fit in here,” he pointed out. “Something will go wrong and the humans will figure it out.”

“They'll just think we're idiots. 'Idiots' is a lot easier a conclusion to jump to than 'half-angel' and 'half-demon' from the future,” Kaylee said as she withdrew a small handful of components for the spell and a compass from her jacket pocket.

“There are so many humans,” Dylaniel commented while keeping an eye out for anyone who might be watching what she was doing.

“You like humans.”

“Individually they have good qualities, but in homogeneous groups…. ” His lips thinned.

She glanced up at him, troubled by a new thought. “You know in this time they aren't just limited to the metropolitan areas, right?”

“Yes. They live in the outlands, at all the normal ruins—well, they aren't ruins now.” Dylaniel looked out the window facing the city street. “There are literally billions of them and you wonder why I'm concerned.”
“Listen, I know it’s intimidating and everything is confusing and messed up. But I’m almost done with the spell, and then we can go sneak a peek at Dean really quick and get you back to the bunker. Just hang on for another hour. Simple, okay?”
Introductions Of Sorts

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my beta-reader, Lastarael, for helping with this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam, Cas, and Ruby went around the corner into the hallway to hide while Dean and Bobby got the door. The two hunters had dealt with Shola the Crossroads demon before, but news of Kaylee's birth or the presence of an angel had unknown consequences. Shola worked under the Archdemon Crowley, which made her a potentially ally. Yet with all this talk about the other Sam getting caught up with Hell, it became all the more important to keep their guard up when it came to all things Abyssal.

“Oh thank god! We didn't know if you made it through in one piece," said a woman with a half laugh of what sounded like relief.

Sam had never actually met Shola and had no idea if that was her voice or not. The statement felt a little strange coming from someone who had theoretically seen Dean just minutes or hours earlier, but she was undoubtedly familiar with him.

"I thought you two were dead." Dean spoke in a tone that failed to hide his surprise. "I saw you get stabbed."

Ruby looked back at Sam with a raised eyebrow. He shrugged helplessly at her, unsure of what his brother was talking about. They didn't have enough background to tell if he was referring to something that had happened before he went to 2039 or after he had gotten back.

"Dyl healed me," the woman replied.

Ruby mouthed ‘healed?’ to Sam, who mouthed ‘angel?’ then glanced at Castiel. Castiel stood beside them, also listening to the conversation with a furrowed brow.

“Did anyone else come through?” Dean sounded horrified about something. “He didn't follow us, right? He didn't touch me. What the fuck is going on?”

Curiosity got the better of them. Ruby and Sam cautiously stepped back into the living room to see what was going on.

There was a woman with pale skin, long brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a scar across her right cheek. She wore dark skinny jeans, a White Zombie t-shirt, a black leather jacket, and functional black boots. Sam was certain she was a demon, a powerful one.... There was something more, though. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place her.

Just outside the apartment’s front doorway was a young man with messy blonde hair in grey jeans, a partially-faded AC/DC shirt, and a light grey leather jacket. His bright blue eyes flicked between the street and Dean. Based on his rigid, withdrawn posture, he wasn't particularly happy to be there. The guy also triggered a strange feeling of déjà vu, but he wasn't a demon.

"Yeah, I think the rest of us need some catching up too," Ruby commented, drawing the others’
She stood in the doorway to the hall. Sam stayed behind her, looking over her head to see the visitors. He held their daughter, carefully hidden behind Ruby’s back.

The strangers looked at Ruby and him for a few moments. The woman opened and closed her mouth several times, unsure of what to say. She seemed to instinctively inch toward the door. As much as Sam was unnerved by the new arrivals, she appeared even more concerned to see him and Ruby. Sam spared a quick glance to make sure that the sleeping Kaylee was safely obscured by Ruby.

“What are they doing here?” The woman spoke quietly to Dean even though she didn't take her eyes off Ruby and Sam. “They're supposed to be in an apartment, not a house.”

Sam didn't like the idea of someone knowing so much about them—or at least knowing enough about them to speculate on whether they should be in any given place. Dean must have told someone about their hideout and that had some frightening implications.

He noticed that Ruby had planted her feet and was unconsciously maintaining a defensive position between Kaylee and the strangers. Dean seemed to trust them, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. Though Sam had to admit that there was something about the woman that he found disarming, which didn't really make sense.

“This is a fourplex, a house converted into four apartments.” Dean informed the woman.

She closed her eyes briefly, apparently mentally kicking herself.

“What's going on?” Sam asked Dean or anyone else who could explain.

"Dean, do they….” The woman started to ask about something, but she wasn't sure exactly what to say. She leaned closer to Dean, then whispered, “I don't know if this is a good idea.”

“Whispering does not prevent me from hearing you,” Castiel warned while entering the room.

Dean and the woman both glanced at the blonde guy, whose lips thinned subtly at the sight of Castiel. Sam looked to Castiel for any tells that the angel might give, but there wasn't anything obvious.

"Yeah, I know,” Dean told the woman, acknowledging some concern that she had.

“Dean, they shouldn't be seeing—this is dangerous,” she added.

Her voice shook, maybe with fear or some other emotion. She seemed to watch Ruby and him anxiously. It was unnerving as hell, especially when her eyes flicked down to where his arms were obscured by Ruby. Sam frowned a bit at the thought that Dean had told someone about Kaylee.

“Dangerous?” Sam asked, certain it was true but unsure of which way the woman meant. Nearly every day of his and Ruby’s lives for the the last year and a half had been dangerous in one respect or another. Now something new was entering the mix and it had to be bad.

“Fuck.” Dean pinched the bridge of his nose. “I need you guys to not ask questions and trust me for a sec.”

“Why?” Ruby asked pointedly.
Sam was also a little peeved by Dean suddenly trying to cut off communications, especially with the unexpected and unexplained development.

“Stop. Jesus. It's like you're wriggling in quicksand.” Dean's voice was exasperated.

“You getting upset isn't helping,” the blonde guy noted in a clinical tone. “The mere act of bringing attention to the situation is problematic. The two of us should just go and you shouldn't tell them.”

“Whoa, wait.” Dean stepped toward the strangers, but stopped short of grabbing their arms. “You two can't just leave, please.”

“Dean this is messier than we signed on for—right now especially.” The woman's expression was almost sad as she glanced at Sam, Ruby, and Castiel. She spotted Bobby, who’d been quietly standing in a darkened corner of the living room and just stared for several seconds before turning back to Dean. “Dyl and I should go.”

“I get that this is strange, but so is this whole 'Mirror Mirror' thing. At least you know you can trust us to help you. As for the other stuff, they've already seen you guys.” Dean gestured at the group. “I don't know how we get a take-back on that. They aren't idiots. They're gonna keep asking questions. We already started burning down the house; might as well get something for it. You two can fight. We need you.”

Sam recognized Dean's reference to the Star Trek ‘Mirror Mirror’ alternate universe—the strangers were from the alternate timeline. They were scared of something and about ready to bolt, but Dean was trying to get them to stay. Sam wanted to know what they were so scared of… and why Dean was claiming that they could trust everybody in the room. Castiel and Ruby had seemed on the verge of coming to blows over whether to ally with Hell or trying to appease Heaven. It was hard to imagine what kind of a situation could make all of them trust the newcomers and vice versa.

“They're from 2039?” Sam guessed.

“See?” Dean told the woman, having had his point made for him.

“Yeah,” the woman answered for Dean, then rubbed the back of her neck anxiously. “We tried to help him—we helped get him back here.”

“Thank you,” Sam told her, sincerely grateful that someone had helped get his brother back home safely.

“You really don't have to….” Her cheeks turned pink, but her eyes quickly evaded his.

"There was a battle while he was being returned to this time,” the blonde guy explained. “Due to a complication, we were accidentally brought back too.”

"So that whole fuss was about some sort of wrinkle in time?” Bobby asked, trying to better understand the strangers’ concerns.

“In theory, the two of us should be interacting with others as little as possible in order to prevent time-space complications,” he replied. “But that might not be possible or practical at this point.”

“Can I talk to these two outside for a second?” Dean asked Sam and the rest of the core group. “Out of earshot. There's a paradox question that if you guys even hear it—”

“We get it.”
“He's keeping stuff from us,” Ruby commented as soon as Dean and the others had stepped outside of the apartment. “Important stuff.”

“This sounds complicated. He's probably just trying to do what he thinks is right,” Sam replied, trying to justify Dean's behavior, but it didn't really make him feel better about the situation.

“Yeah, well. Sorry, but after he tried to exorcise me I'm not feeling too trusting of his judgement.” Ruby looked back at Kaylee, checking to see that she was okay. Rationally she knew that Dean hadn't meant to endanger his niece. He hadn't even known about his niece at the time, but she still resented him for it.

“What do you think is up with those two?” Bobby asked while peeking out one of the windows.

“The woman's a demon.” Sam reminded them of the only real information they had on her.

“That only narrows it down to about a million people.” Ruby thought better of her assessment. “I'm sorry. She's a demon from the future, so that's probably more than a million.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “There's something strange about her.”

“She's a time traveling demon that can somehow stand Dean. There's a lot strange about her.”

“I mean…. It's something else.” Sam hesitated, unsure of how to describe the sensation. “It's like déjà vu or... I don't know what.”

“Have you sensed her before?” Ruby asked with newfound, sincere concern.

“Maybe. She seems familiar.” Sam couldn't figure out anything more substantive to say about her, so he turned to something he could handle. “The guy isn't a demon.”

“He seems kinda stiff,” Ruby commented. “Hey ang—Castiel, is he an angel or just a human-variety tight ass?”

“He does not appear to be an angel,” Castiel replied. “I actually do not know what he is.”

Dean, Dylaniel, and Kaylee went outside and half a block down the street before they risked talking candidly. Dean's brain was racing, trying to sort through all the possible problems that might be coming up. The three of them needed to get on the same page. He might not have all the answers—hell, even collectively they might not have all the answers—but at least if they helped each other out they could get something vaguely resembling a plan. But before he could get into a plan of attack, Kaylee derailed him.

“Are we really gonna hang around?” Kaylee asked Dylaniel while pinching the bridge of her nose.

“We're fighting such an uphill battle,” Dean pleaded, suddenly realizing that their presence wasn't a given as he'd imagined. “I can't just let Heaven, Lilith, the Templars—whoever—trash this world. I can't let Sam say yes to Lucifer—”

“Dean…” Kaylee's voice wavered as she gestured at the fourplex. “I look at them and they aren't them. They're my parents, my uncle, my grandpa—but they aren't. They aren't dead.”

“I'm sure this is hard. I can't imagine how hard it is, but—” He'd been about to tell her to just pull herself together, but hearing the words in his head made him hate himself a little. The shock
stopped him from focusing on the terrifying what-ifs and instead he looked at the people standing in front of him. Kaylee's eyes were watering and she was trembling slightly. He pulled her into a hug. “God. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, about everything.”

“We want to help save this world. We do,” she told him. “But being so close to them…. I just think about our family, my dad and mom…. The last thing she said to me, what she wanted was for me to survive, and somehow I did. Now we're here and there are those people and I don't know how I'm supposed deal with this.”

“The morning before the fight I asked your mom if there was anything I could do for her. She made me promise to keep Sam, you, and Tom safe.” Dean could feel Kaylee's tears soak into his shirt at the mention of Tom. Dyaniel watched the interaction thoughtfully, but he didn't attempt to engage in any way. Dean managed to fight through some tightness in his throat to say, “She may not have been expecting there to be two of you in this time—or Dyl—but the gist of a promise is good enough for me. If you two leaving is what you need to be okay, I get that. I can deal somehow if this is just too much.”

“What would you do?” Dyaniel asked.

“We're still working on that,” Dean admitted. “We’ll figure something out. We’ve got some time —”

“Tom is six years old,” Kaylee said quietly, drawing the attention of Dean and Dyaniel, but she wasn't really speaking to them. “Right now he's somewhere, with his other dad, Belda, and the other kids, all the ones who died—and Heaven is trying to decide when to kill them.”

“Tom was saved—” Dean started to try reassuring her, but she cut him off.

“This isn't that time. We’ve changed things and we don’t know what that means.” Kaylee wiped her eyes. “Fucking hell—he’s gotta live. I need to know he's gonna live. I need to know they're all gonna live. Family or not, whatever they are to us, I can't just not know.”

“You're staying?” Dean asked, releasing her from the hug enough to look down at her. “Are you sure you'll be okay?”

“I'm staying long enough to make sure you all are okay—whether I'm okay…. I think not knowing would somehow be worse.”

Dean looked to Dyaniel for his reaction. “Dyl?”

“I'm always prepared to assist in a fight,” Dyaniel commented. “Especially when accompanying people I trust.”

Kaylee turned to her cousin in surprise. “Dyl, that's a pretty big vote of confidence.”

“I'm not saying that I automatically trust them, but they have to be better than an average person of comparable demographics.”

“That's good enough for me.” She smiled a bit and Dean noticed some of the pinkness in her eyes diminish.

“They're gonna ask you guys questions about who you are.” Dean ventured into the next obvious point of tension. “We need to figure out what all you tell them.”

“I don't know how long we could pretend to be someone else,” Kaylee said weakly. “I mean, I
look kinda like my mom, not to mention there aren't that many half-demons around. And Dyl looks a little like you.”

Dean looked Dylaniel up and down for a moment. The AC/DC shirt that Dylaniel was wearing didn't help disguise him. Granted, Dean had stopped wearing band t-shirts nearly a decade earlier. There were a few common features, but if they weren't too close together it was possible that nobody would jump to that conclusion immediately.

“Can Cas tell you're his kid by looking at you?” Dean asked.

“The warding obscuring me as a vessel from my angel also works against him. I need to want him to recognize me in order for him to sense me for what I am,” Dylaniel replied. “Or he would need to examine my grace or see its physical manifestation in my wings. Why?”

“I know this is kind of a dick move, but I don't think we should tell him about your parents being me and him.” Dylaniel's eyes narrowed, but he didn't object outright. “At least for right now. I'm still trying to get my head around all this—and this Cas, I don't even know the guy. There's no telling how he'd react to this kinda thing.”

“We can't keep him in the dark,” Kaylee said, shocked at the idea of concealing something like that.

“I'd known you,” Dean told Dylaniel, “for like a day and a half, and I had a complete fucking meltdown when I found out you were my kid—”

“I'm not your kid,” Dylaniel corrected.

“You know what I mean.” Dean waved his hand in Castiel's general direction. “He's known you for like five seconds and he can just teleport the fuck away.”

“It's Cas,” Kaylee said. “He'll be fine.”

“I won't tell him,” Dylaniel agreed. “For now.”

“You two idiots can't be serious. Cas is—”

“He's not my xe,” Dylaniel said coldly. “He's just a newly-fallen angel.”

Kaylee stared at her cousin for a moment, then nodded. She'd met hundreds of newly-fallen angels, each with his or her own personal baggage. By the time she was old enough to get to know her uncle Cas, he was a free thinker in a romantic relationship. The Castiel she'd just seen had to be someone else entirely and she couldn't begrudge Dylaniel for being wary of that.

“Once we get settled a bit we can feel things out and figure out how to deal with this,” Dean assured them.

On one level he was glad to have some time before Kaylee and Dylaniel revealed the other Dean's same-sex relationship, but at the same time he really was worried about Castiel leaving suddenly. He was their lone angel and that had to count for something. Also, in some strange way Dean just needed to know Castiel would be okay the same way Kaylee needed to know her alternate family would.

“What if he asks who your xe is?” Kaylee asked.

“I'll figure something out,” Dylaniel answered.
“So we’re trying to hold off on explaining Dyl’s xe, but if his dad comes up that's cool, right?” Kaylee looked at Dean apologetically. “I mean, I don't know how long you two can manage to stay across the room from each other.”

“Let's just see how it goes. The less my hypothetical personal life gets dragged into this the happier I'll be.” Dean turned to Dylaniel. “No offense.”

“I'd actually prefer that they don't accidentally conflate you and Castiel with my parents.” Dylaniel’s eyes avoided Dean and Kaylee. “It's unpleasant.”

“Sorry about that,” Dean said, trying to recall how many times he must've just verbally walked all over the independent memory of Dylaniel's parents. “I didn't mean—”

“I know.” Dylaniel acknowledged Dean's faux pas, but didn't exactly forgive him.

“When it comes to me, should we wait and see or just tell everyone?” Kaylee asked. “I mean, my parents having me isn't going to be a shock to anyone. It might be easier for everyone to wrap their heads around.”

“They’ll probably be more trusting of you once they understand who you are,” Dylaniel suggested, then turned to Dean. “How much do they know?”

“Not much. I barely started telling them about the war and the fact that Sam was King of Hell when you two showed up.”

“Do they know about Lucifer?” Kaylee’s expression turned grave at the thought.

“I…. They don’t know about the vessel stuff, Lucifer or Michael.” Dean rubbed his neck. “I know we have to tell them.”

“You're damn right we have to tell them.” Kaylee’s tone turned a little harsh.

“I'm not arguing. I just wish things were different.” Dean briefly chewed his lower lip. “Sam’s gonna have a heart attack.”

Dean and the two strangers came back into the apartment after about fifteen minutes. Castiel and Bobby were both fully in the living room, but Sam was still reluctant to bring his daughter into a space where any potential excitement or conflict might occur. Ruby maintained her casually defensive position while waiting to see which way the situation was going to go.

The woman held her elbow anxiously as she stepped forward from Dean and the blonde guy. Her eyes jumped from watching Sam and Ruby to compulsively avoiding them. She took a deep breath to gather some courage.

“I need to tell you all something and there's no simple way to say this….”

"That's not ominous,” Ruby whispered in a move that made Dean cringe, but the woman actually huffed a laugh, breaking some of the tension.

"My name's Kaylee." Everyone stared at her. "Like, my birthday was two days ago."

Sam gawked, completely dumbstruck by the discovery. She did look a bit like Ruby, but with lighter hair, a pointier nose, and about half a foot taller. The idea of knowing what his daughter might look like as an adult was unexpected, but actually interacting with some fully-formed
Dean had been in 2039 and he'd interacted with Ruby; he was talking about Sam; it made some weird sense that he'd have bumped into Kaylee. He’d expected to hear about the future, some secondhand tales, but she was a living, breathing piece of that future. Sam couldn't tell if he wanted to quiz her for every piece of information she knew or if he wanted to take his baby and retreat from the bizarre complication. It was too much. The situation was so far away from the simple existence he'd wanted for her.

“What?” Sam could barely get the word out.

"You're... our daughter?" asked Ruby, who turned to look back and forth between the two versions of Kaylee.

When Ruby turned around, Kaylee got her first look at the much younger version of herself. She was swaddled in a lavender blanket with sizable amount of light brown hair topping her head. It was a dizzying feeling to so vividly see what she'd looked like as a baby. If they didn't have a world to save, she expected that she could've stared at the baby for the rest of her life with equal fascination. But the world did need saving. Tom needed saving in just a few short hours. So, she pressed on.

"I... I guess, in a way. I mean, this whole timeline thing doesn't make sense. I'm not her," The adult Kaylee nodded at the newborn Kaylee. "But I kinda am."

"We're from an alternate timeline," the blonde man suggested. “The two of you were only the same person for two days at most. Once the timelines diverged, so did you. You're two different people, just with an incredibly high number of commonalities."

"This is so weird." Kaylee looked at Dean. "How could you even talk to yourself?"

"It gets easier," Dean replied.

Sam raised an eyebrow at the realization that Dean had also interacted with his alternate-timeline self, but the thought paled in comparison to everything with Kaylee.

"I hope so." Kaylee shook her head. “This was so much funnier when you were the odd one out.”

“'Funny' isn't how I'd describe this,” Ruby said.

“Yeah, tell us about it,” Kaylee replied.

"So, Kaylee." Dean paused, then looked between the newborn and his fellow time-traveler. "We're gonna have to figure out a naming scheme or else this is gonna get real confusing, real fast."

"Everyone could just call me Kay. Dyl already does." She nodded at her companion.

“Dyl?” Bobby asked for confirmation.

“'Dyl' is my nickname. Dylaniel or Dylan are also fine,” Dyelianel explained.

Castiel studied Dyelianel with a slightly furrowed brow. Dyelianel eyed the angel, but didn't give any physical display of his own discomfort.

“I have so many questions.” Sam was struggling to think of where to begin. “I mean, there were a
ton of questions before you—where do I even start?”

“I spent days asking questions and it was nowhere near enough,” Dean said. “And we don't have
days to sit around and talk right now.”

“Dyl and I unlocked the bunker. We could relocate everyone while we figure out a better long-
term location for you,” Kay suggested. “Since this timeline is already screwed up beyond
recognition we might as well take advantage of some safety.”

“Bunker?” Sam was imagining a Cold-War-era fallout shelter, little more than their current
accommodations, but with less decaying wallpaper and wood.

“It's one of the safest locations on the plane,” Dylaniel explained.

“I saw it while I was in ‘39,” Dean told the others. “It's bigger and nicer than it sounds.”

“It isn't stocked or fully furnished at this point, but it's a starting point,” Kay corrected Dean, then
looked to Ruby. “There's a large collection of books on arcana as well as a lab. I can pick up any
fresh reagents you might need in order to get all the personal warding figured out.”

“Speaking of magic supplies,” Dean injected. “I have Shola putting together a bunch of stuff for
Ruby.”

“What kinda stuff?” Ruby asked, a little surprised by the gesture.

“I don't remember the list. There was some balsam, cat bones, I think some kind of mushroom. I
asked for some kind of strong ichor, but I didn't say what kind exactly. The witch that was helping
me put together the list thought I was nuts when I brought it up.”

“What witch?”

“She works at a nearby magic shop.”

“There's your problem. Shops don't really sell heavy blood-magic mats like strong ichors,” Ruby
explained. Her eyes assessed Dean in mild confusion, but she didn't make fun of his ignorance.
“Most witches need to harvest ichors themselves, but I'll definitely be curious to see what Hell’s
finest pulls together.”

“God, I hope they aren't draining a virgin or something,” Dean muttered, realizing that there
probably weren't just stockpiles on hand.

“Thanks for trying to get supplies, but maybe you want to leave the blood magic to the
professionals.” Ruby shrugged. “So you don't have to see the sausage get made.”

“What’d you give Shola for the reagents?” Sam asked.

Bobby had mentioned that Hell was no longer accepting Dean's soul, which begged the question of
what Dean had that Hell had wanted.

“She knows the list of materials I wanted a stockpile of. She knows we're preparing to defend
against angels,” Dean said. “It was confirmation that there are angels making moves.”

“How does that benefit Hell?” Castiel asked. “It has been almost nine months since my siblings
and I assaulted Hell. They should know Heaven took action against them.”

“They didn't know what you were exactly. The first time I met Shola she was shaking me down
for intel on this mysterious thing that pulled my ass out of Hell.” Dean shook his head. “Cas, you scared the fuck out of them.”

“So how did she react to the news that it was angels?” Bobby asked.

“She seemed a little quiet for being upset, actually.” Dean frowned. “I mean, I'm sure it's a shock to find out that angels bust into your plane and killed some of your people.”

“Shola always had some personal issues with angels and Heaven. She's not the right barometer of Hell’s response.” Kay pursed her lips at the thought. “Hell should have its defenses against angels up pretty soon, if not already. As long as I can remember, Hell was always the last place an angel wanted to go.”

“So Hell’s already fortifying,” Ruby mused aloud. “For better or worse.”

"Cas, back in our time we threw some Enochian carvings on Dean's bones. If you could duplicate them for D—” Kay stopped herself mid-sentence, then took a moment before trying the sentence again. “If you could duplicate them for anyone who doesn't have them already, that'd be great."

Dean wondered if it was obvious to everyone else that she'd almost referred to Sam as ‘Dad.’ Granted, the others probably didn't realize how similar this Sam and her dad were in physical appearance. Dean had been surprised to find that Kay's dad only looked to be in his mid-thirties, undoubtedly thanks to some sort of magic or being an inhabited vessel. Though, maybe the entire reveal of Kay was too fresh in everyone's minds for them to begin imagining her actual parents or even the possibility of the rest of her family.

“Are the carvings customized?” Ruby asked Kay, hoping to find someone with a better understanding of the situation. “The carvings might work, but if they're at all unique I need to compare the designs before we accidentally misassign them.”

“I don't know,” Kay admitted. “I didn't work on the designs at all.”

“We could jump directly to the bunker,” Dylaniel suggested. “Once there you could do your analysis.”

“I've never been to this ‘bunker.’ It would be difficult for me to transport everyone there without a preliminary visit,” Castiel commented.

“I could take everyone in two jumps,” Dylaniel volunteered, causing Castiel to fully turn toward him and stare.

“You're an angel?” Sam asked. He looked at Castiel, who had seemed confident in his assessment that Dylaniel wasn't an angel.

“No.” Dylaniel spared a glance at the angel in the room. “I'm a nephilim.”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed at Dylaniel with newfound interest, but there was something more. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. It was almost like he wasn't sure what to do with himself. Castiel scowled reflexively, then turned away as he struggled with the revelation. Dylaniel stood up a bit taller in determination.

Dean’s stomach dropped at the realization that Castiel was completely unfamiliar with nephilim in general. He'd been told that Heaven’s loyal angels, and even some fallen angels, hated nephilim. The other Cas may have been fine with nephilim, but for all Dean knew it had taken years for him
to come around to the idea.

Dean moved between Castiel and Dylaniel. He faced Castiel and held his hands up. The gesture was meant to be non-threatening, but also served as getting him ready to grapple the angel if things took a bad turn.

Kay picked up on the same concerning possibility and grabbed Dylaniel's sleeve. She tugged at it slightly, causing him to reluctantly take a step backwards and relax his posture. He wasn't looking to start a fight, but she knew Dylaniel well enough to suspect that he'd stand his ground in a confrontation with anyone. If she thought it wouldn't risk aggravating her cousin more, she would've held his arm to try calming him down.

"Cas, are we okay or is this going to be a problem?" Dean asked in a firm, yet calming voice.

Castiel was quiet for a little too long as he considered the situation. Dean felt sick at the thought of what Dylaniel must be going through in that moment.

"We are okay," Castiel finally replied, turning his gaze from Dylaniel to Dean.

“What’s the drama?” Ruby asked. She, Sam, and Bobby were completely baffled by whatever had just happened.

“Angels in the service of Heaven are supposed to kill nephilim on sight,” said Dylaniel in a tone that Kay and even Dean could tell was pained. “His instinct is to kill me.”

“I no longer serve Heaven,” Castiel stated in a not-particularly-comforting gesture of neutrality.

The fact that Castiel didn't acknowledge the impulse to fight Dylaniel hung in the air ominously. He may have indicated that he wouldn't try to kill Dylaniel, but that was a far cry from civility. Dean briefly humored the idea of warning Castiel that fighting Dylaniel would almost certainly be an exercise in self-harm, though he decided it was probably best not to bring up the fact that Dylaniel had been known for fighting angels.

“What's a nephilim?” Sam asked, breaking the awkward silence.

“The offspring of a human and an angel,” Castiel stated plainly.

“We're abominations in the eyes of Heaven,” Dylaniel elaborated.

Sam’s eyebrows rose at the concept. In a weird way he could relate to the abomination talk. Also, the half-human aspect suddenly made the nephilim's apparent friendship with Kay make a bit more sense.

The nephilim continued, “It is a mortal sin for an angel and human to become intimate.”

“You're a half-angel?” Bobby toyed with the concept.

Castiel intently avoided eye contact with everyone, adopting a policy of omission.

“Yes.”

“Can you heal people too?”

“Yes. I have many of the lesser angelic powers,” Dylaniel explained. “Though I can't use my powers as frequently as an angel.”
“Speaking of, are you doing okay?” Dean asked as he turned back to look at Dylaniel. Aside from Kay, he was the only one who knew Dylaniel well enough to know that he wasn't unbreakable. The kid had been through too much in the last few days, emotionally and physically. “You weren't doing great going into the fight and that plus time travel had to take something out of you.”

“I'm fine,” Dylaniel said, earning an eye roll from Kay.

“You're doing better than when we first got here, but you shouldn't be tapping out your powers,” Kay advised him. “Have you ever tried running so low on juice for so long before?”

Dylaniel evaded the actual question. “I've had longer stretches of moderately-low reserves.”

“Yeah, I thought so. You're gonna hold off on doing anything fancy until you can recover some more,” Kay dictated. “Let's take Cas over and he can shuttle people.”

“Are you feeling up to that?” Sam asked Castiel. “You just threw Dean through time an hour or so ago.”

“I should be able to manage teleporting the two times necessary, but after that I should take at least an hour to recover,” Castiel replied.

“Yeah, well until we get the bone carvings on us, I don't think half of us are gonna be going anywhere,” Ruby commented.

“Bone carving sounds painful,” Sam said while gently rocking the sleeping Kaylee.

“It is, but it fades after a few minutes,” Kay explained.

“What about Kaylee? Our—” Sam held up baby Kaylee to make it clear he was asking about his daughter. “Is it safe to do anything to her bones? I mean, aren't they kind of soft still?”

“I know you can carve kid’s bones, but I'm not sure how early.” Kay tried to remember when Alex, Dylaniel, or Sa’dah had gotten their carvings, but she hadn’t actually been notified at the time. “I got mine when I was about 18 months.”

“A year and a half?” Ruby said in disbelief. “Keeping her cooped up in some bunker for over a year—that's great.”

“If it’s safe….” Sam struggled to find the positive, but Ruby looked up at him, clearly not thrilled with the idea.

“It’s a temporary solution, but the ash warding might work on her in an emergency,” Dylaniel suggested to Kay.

“She isn't part angel,” Kay replied.

“I think the feather is the more operative part,” Dylaniel countered.

“What are you two talking about?” Ruby asked, trying to recall any warding spells involving ash or feathers.

“Nephilim have a few natural cards up their sleeves when it comes to not being killed by angels. One is a form of warding,” Kay explained.

“It’s fairly effective, though it doesn't work against advanced divination spells,” Dylaniel added. “The protection requires ash from the angel’s own wing to work.”
“I have heard of that spell, but it is a legend,” Castiel said. “Angel wings cannot be burnt. They are not corporeal.”

“Angel wings aren’t, but nephilim wings are,” Kay corrected.

“I expect that most angels in this time do not understand the intricacies of nephilim.” Dylandiel watched Castiel for any sign of offense, but both of them were unreadable. “It could work to our advantage.”

“In theory, but like I told you, she’s not part angel. It’s the angel’s ‘own wing’ so yours isn’t gonna cut it,” Kay told Dylandiel. “I’ve never intentionally burnt a feather, let alone to test out some warding.”

“Okay, drop the angel feather part,” Ruby interrupted, suddenly drawn in by the discussion of spell mechanics. “Tell me the rest of it.”

While Ruby, Kay, and Dylandiel engaged in some incomprehensible discussion about burning feathers, Castiel subtly walked over to Dean.

"May I speak with you privately?" Castiel asked Dean in a voice that was unusually quiet.

Dean noticed that Castiel and Dylandiel continued to eye each other as he followed the angel to the other room. Sam watched, unsure if he should follow his brother or stay with Ruby and the others. Dean shook his head to indicate that Sam shouldn’t follow. Castiel had said privately after all. Dean’s first thought was that Castiel had figured out who Dylandiel was, but the reality of the situation was both better and worse than that.

"I know that you have a familial bond with Kay, but associating with her and Dylandiel is dangerous. If we are trying to avoid starting a conflict with Heaven we should limit our interactions with them to the extent it is visible." Castiel's lips thinned. "Especially with the nephilim."

"I get the whole 'being careful' thing, but you can't be serious about Dyl.” Dean tilted his head in disbelief. "You're telling me that you'd rather be caught hanging out with demons than a nephilim?"

"Despite their undesirable elements, at this point demons are part of the greater ecosystem of the planes. Angels are not instructed to pursue demons, only kill them at our convenience. Nephilim are actively hunted—"

"Like fallen angels." Dean tried to draw the comparison in the hopes that Castiel could start to relate to Dylandiel on some level.

"Nephilim as a populace do not exist," Castiel said definitively.

"That's funny, because Dyl wasn't the only one I met in 2039." Dean's comment gave Castiel pause. "He's a good guy and an asset."

"I am… I am not trying to imply that he is inferior, or…" Castiel considered his wording. "Or that he is a bad person, just that he has a stigma associated with him that you cannot fully understand."

"He told me that angels don't like him."

"It is beyond dislike." Castiel thought for a moment. "Angels see nephilim as the corruption of
their divine purpose. Consider a demon: a human soul corrupted into something else—"

"He's not corrupted," Dean said, proximately offended by the analogy. By that line of reasoning, the other Dean had been some sort of sullying force.

"That is not the point I am trying to make. He is not a good creature turned bad through corruption. He is the physical embodiment of the corruption of God's most powerful creations. He is a scar on the collective grace of Heaven," Castiel clarified.

"Angels can learn to accept nephilim. They need to learn to accept them. Nephilim are just normal people. They try to make the world a better place. If you guys can't accept someone like that just because of how they were born, then I don't know how there's any hope for dealing with Heaven at all." Dean gestured at the other room. "None of us are perfect. Most of us are fuck-ups, even angels. If Heaven is so insecure and caught up with some idea of perfection, well I've got some bad news, because 2039 was a complete shitshow."

"Perfection exists in Heaven. It is understandable that my brothers and sisters would resist accepting anything less," Castiel warned.

"Yeah, well, some things are more important than perfection," Dean countered.

"What can be more important than perfection? More important than the height of God’s creation?"

"Comic books," Dean replied defiantly. "The paper’s thin, the ink sometimes stains your fingers, and there's always a cliffhanger, but they're awesome. And that scar on Heaven’s collective grace loves them, I love them, and I'll bet there's at least one angel in Heaven that would love them too if they weren't so damned scared of getting their fingers dirty."

Castiel stared at Dean for several seconds before nodding.

"I will try to be accepting, but regardless of their concern’s validity, the presence of a nephilim on Earth is going to alarm Heaven considerably. We should be cautious." Castiel spoke more softly, making some effort to show Dean he was not being hostile. "Just remember, mere interaction with him puts us in danger."

"Some things are worth the risk; like loyalty."

"You really are loyal to them? Even him?" Castiel looked in the direction of the others.

"Yeah."

"I trust your intuition, and in this case I will trust your judgement," Castiel conceded. "But please consider my advice regarding my siblings. You may have seen a world with more than one or two nephilim, but the angels in this time do not know that world. They fear it and many would die to prevent its existence. Do not underestimate the seriousness of his presence."

"Okay, I hear you." Dean nodded solemnly. "And thanks."

"You never have to thank me for my input."

"Actually, I was thanking you for trying."

Chapter End Notes
I wrote the first draft of this chapter about a year before posting it. Oh what a naïve thing I was back in those days. My early draft of the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3 was pretty unrealistic. I wanted everyone to be so badass, but it came off as cartoonish. One of the things I've learned while writing J&F is that shooting for a realistic story/characters/feel makes smaller achievements so much more powerful. Thank god I learned lessons like that along the way.
They traveled to the bunker in two groups. Dylaniel took Dean and Castiel in the first group while Kay stayed to assist Sam, Ruby, Kaylee, and Bobby should a problem arise. After taking a moment to get his bearings, Castiel returned to the apartment to transport the others to their new refuge. Dean took the moment alone with Dylaniel to quickly assess him. Before the jump Dylaniel had seemed his normal composed, quiet self. Now he lightly leaned against one of the tables in the library and Dean could see him breathing a bit deeper.

“You okay?”

“I will be,” Dylaniel answered without bothering to smile or give any other physical showing of reassurance.

Dean continued to press the subject. “That's not what I asked.”

Dylaniel thought for a moment about whether he’d allow himself to be engaged on the unpleasant subject and all its natural implications. “I've been burning more power than I've recovered,” he admitted, before adding, “If I rest for a day or two I'll be in a much better state.”

“Go crash somewhere.” Dean waved his hand in the direction of the wing containing the bedrooms. “You deserve a break, for once.”

“The next few days will probably be critical. I can't get too comfortable.”

“Can you at least sit down?” Dean pointed to one of the chairs. “‘At ease’ or whatever you need to hear in order to relax a little.”

Dylaniel sat down, but he didn't seem to lose any of the tension in his body. His eyes intently scanned the room while managing to avoid settling on Dean for more than a few seconds. Dean leaned against a bookcase and crossed his arms. After a long stretch of silence, Dean started anxiously tapping his fingers on the edge of a shelf.

Dylaniel looked up at him in annoyance. “Do you need to do that?”

Dylaniel’s question made Dean suddenly self-conscious of the tic. He shifted, then asked, “Shouldn't they be here by now?”

“It's probably nothing,” Dylaniel said. “Cas might need a moment to recover before transporting the others.”

Dean sighed as he ran his fingers through his hair. “How are we supposed to save Tom and the other witches with you and Cas running on fumes?”

It wasn’t just Dylaniel and Castiel who were exhausted. He hadn’t slept more than a few hours in the last two days, and that had been an incredibly stressful two days. From the state of her unused
quarters at Kali’s headquarters, it looked like Kay hadn’t slept in even longer. Sam and Bobby had barely eaten in the last day or two and who knew how much sleep they were actually running on? Not to mention that Ruby had given birth a few days earlier—however that factored in. None of them were in prime shape to be fighting, let alone fighting a bunch of angels.

“It’s called triage.” Dylaniel leaned back into the chair more, making some greater effort to rest. “We’ll set the priorities early, try to save as many as we can, and hope for a lucky break.”

“You don’t think we can save them all?” Dean didn’t feel particularly optimistic himself. He didn’t know why he’d expected more from the jaded nephilim.

“The coven is mostly families. I doubt they’ll have more than a handful of combat-trained witches. It will be whatever they have and half a dozen of us trying to defend civilians while soldiers of Heaven assault us. If luck is with us, then initially Heaven will only send a few angels.” Dylaniel met Dean’s eyes in order to emphasis his next point. “The scale is going to suddenly tip against us. When it does, make sure you’re near either me or Cas.”

Dean studied Dylaniel’s face for any hints of doubt in his own prediction, but the only read he could get was the vague impression of unsurprised disappointment. He wondered just how many fights Dylaniel had walked into knowing that victory still meant at least a partial loss. Before Dean could think of how to respond, the others arrived.

Sam, Ruby, and Bobby were immediately awed by the library they had been teleported into. Cas took a seat at a different table than Dylaniel.

Kay eyed her cousin for a moment, then turned to address everyone. She didn’t waste any time with a tour. “How do we get rolling on this bone-carving stuff?”

“I know there’s an apocalypse somewhere on the horizon, but what’s the rush?” Ruby asked. “Our angel-and-a-half both look like they could use some sleep or whatever they do. Dean, well, he was on the verge of hyperventilating until Castiel— What the fuck did you do to him anyway?”

“I impaired his fight-or-flight response,” Castiel replied.

“That’s gonna be great in a fight,” Dean muttered while rolling his eyes. “Cas, I’m going to need my combat reflexes pretty soon. Is this gonna mess me up?”

“I can restore your full functionality, but I do not recommend it before either you have become accustomed to your situation or you need those reflexes.”

“Again, I ask why we’re talking about fighting immediately?” Ruby asked, a bit agitated that she was being rushed without receiving any answers.

“The coven is gonna get hit in probably only a few hours—” Kay started to explain.

Ruby looked between Kay and Dylaniel in alarm. “‘Coven’— my coven?”

“Jesus, you think it’ll be that soon?” Dean asked Kay.

“What’s ‘hit’ mean?” Ruby stepped forward, physically inserting herself right in the middle of the conversation. “What is going on with my coven?”

“Heaven’s opening move was killing anyone they thought you might flee to in an emergency. The coven was a major target. Heaven might already be watching them,” Kay explained. “In our timeline only a handful made it out of the main camp, along with three ex-pats.”
“You knew that Heaven is gonna kill my coven and it fucking lapsed your mind?” Ruby glared at Dean.

Sam shifted Kaylee to his offhand, then wrapped his right arm around Ruby, both hugging her and holding her back.

“A lot’s going on.” Dean threw up his hands slightly at the difficulty of the circumstances. “Cut me a break.”

Ruby nearly growled as she said, “Witches not high on the priorities—”

“You know what, I couldn't give less of a fuck that they're witches,” Dean replied, a little annoyed at Ruby’s assumption that he didn't care—though he caught himself from escalating the situation. From her perspective, a few days earlier he'd been all about actively massacring that very same coven of witches. “I met some witches in 2039 and they're alright—”

“Wait, did you say anyone we might flee to?” Sam's question to Kay derailed the potential argument as everyone processed the implications.

“There were some hunters that were killed too. I'm not sure who all was on the hit list, but Tamara dodged the bullet… and um….” Kay chewed her lip trying to recall something. “There was another hunter, Bobby's friend Ralph or—”

“Rufus?” Bobby asked, earning a nod of confirmation from Kay. “Friend' is a bit of a stretch.”

“I met him maybe twice,” Kay said in her defense.

“Witches and hunters on the same hit list. Heaven’s just full of equal opportunity dickbags, isn’t it?” Dean commented. “Okay, so we go pick up the coven and whoever we can find from the hunters network.”

“Pick up?” asked Bobby. “I know we have more space here than in that apartment, but how many people are we talking about?”

“The coven's a few dozen people, high forties more or less,” replied Ruby.

“Our network of hunters is maybe thirty that we can track down,” Dean added.

“Who knows if we can get any of them to believe us long enough to rescue,” Bobby pointed out.

“I’m sorry.” Sam paused for a moment trying to find the right words, but settled for blunt honesty. “But I don't want a bunch of hunters being around my daughter.”

Ruby nodded in agreement. “Or my coven.”

“They aren't just ‘a bunch of hunters.’ They're old friends,” Dean said.

“They're your old friends; a lot of them I've never met,” Sam countered. “I don't know who's going to draw the line in the sand on the demon issue and you honestly can't say, either. I just don't trust them.”

“Sam, if I can learn to work with demons, they can.” Dean gestured at Ruby, then to himself. “They've never even been to Hell.”

“I'm not talking about working with them, I'm talking about them being around my family. They don't have a personal interest in getting along with demons. You do.” Kaylee stretched in Sam's
arms until he offered her a finger to grab. Once she was appeased Sam turned his attention back to Dean. “What's to stop them from turning Templar on us?”

“Heaven wants to kill them too. It'd be suicidal to go running to the angels.”

“No.” Sam shifted slightly to bring himself to his full height. “Last time I checked Heaven wants to kill Kaylee and me. Those hunters are just a means to an end. If they turn us in and earn some points upstairs, all the better.”

“They're good people.” Dean was struggling not to turn the disagreement into a full blown argument.

“They're good people to humans. When it comes to everything else, what's the track record?”

“I agree with Sam,” Dylaniel stated, interrupting the brotherly tiff. “We shouldn't let hunters loose in the bunker.”

“Seriously?” Dean stared at Dylaniel. “What makes the witches any better than the hunters?”

“A lack of skepticism,” the nephilim replied. Ruby opened her mouth to object to the implication that her coven was gullible, but he continued talking. “Hunters are more likely to presume someone of a different species is a threat and six out of eight of us aren't pure human. The witches will likely only be wary of hunters and possibly angels after the attack.”

“You're making this a numbers game,” Dean said in mild disbelief. “Well we need all the help we can get, including hunters.”

“I'm not saying that we can't work together,” Sam corrected. “I just don't want them near my daughter.”

“Well, where are they gonna go?”

“Catch and release?” Bobby suggested. “Keep them apart from the witches and Kaylee. If Ruby and Cas can figure out that whole bone-warding thing, slap it on them, then drop them off far from here.”

“If you and Dean can keep them under control long enough—” Sam started, but Dean cut him off.

“You're talking about them like they're animals.”

“You put anything in a cage, don't be surprised when it starts rattling and growling,” Bobby conceded.

“First step is the coven,” Ruby insisted and refocused the conversation. “We know where they are and more or less what to expect. So what do we need to get ready? How equipped are we to fight angels?”

“We have two angel blades,” Bobby observed aloud.

“Three.” Kaylee withdrew the blade from her belt. “I snagged one before we were thrown here.”

“So, we have three melee weapons for seven people,” Ruby summarized with a small frown.

“Six people. Someone has to stay with Kaylee,” Sam corrected. He chewed his lip slightly at the idea that he might not be the right choice to stay with her. “You said they're gonna be massacred?”
“Last time it was just three of you and you guys were late to the fight.” Kay tried to frame the rescue mission in its full context. “But you can bet this isn’t gonna be pretty.”

“Alright, Cas and Dyl are obviously going. We need them for transporting people.” Dean started laying out the roster. “Ruby needs to tell them to trust us.”

“You couldn't stop me from going,” Ruby confirmed.

“I'm going,” Kay said, then looked to Sam and Bobby. “So that leaves….”

“I can go,” Bobby volunteered.

Sam stared at Kaylee for several seconds, before looking at Ruby. “No, I'm going,” he said solemnly. “I've had more combat experience lately and the coven knows me.”

“So Bobby will hang back and take care of mini-me.” Kay tried to break the tension. “Cas, Dyl, how good are you two for transporting people anyway?”

“The fewer the people we have to carry the safer it’ll be,” Dylaniel answered. His eyes widened at a thought and he turned to Ruby. “How long would it take to prepare teleportation-piggybacking talismans?”

“Teleportation talismans keyed to this location should take—” their resident witch started explaining, but he cut her off.

“They can't be keyed to the bunker. If one of them is lost we’ll be exposed.”

“But— Jesus.” Ruby’s eyes went wide, shocked by what he was proposing. “You're talking about a human catching a ride on a demon jump?”

“It wasn't a popular trick, but we did it in our time somewhat regularly in a pinch,” Kay confirmed.

“I've gone on that ride. It's awful, but it works,” Dean added.

“Depending on how stocked this place’s lab is and how complicated those bone wards are….” Ruby thought for a few seconds. “I could make maybe three or four. But a talisman following a demon port is all theoretical. They won't be tested. A human riding one could take some serious damage.”

“Transportation of last resort,” Kay suggested. “So you and I will focus more on defending.”

“That still leaves us with four people fighting and we only have three weapons,” Sam pointed out.

“Dyl and I don't need angel blades to fight,” Kay replied.

Ruby stared at the pair, curiosity piqued by the thought of new ways to kill angels. “How's that?”

“I'm better at fighting with powers and Dyl uses his own weapons.”

The mention of Kay, and implicitly Kaylee, having powers shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone, but the incomplete explanation of Dylaniel's situation drew the bulk of the confused expressions.

“What kind of weapons aside from those blades kill angels?” Bobby asked.

“Weapons blessed by my hand,” Dylaniel answered as if the statement made any sense.
“Dyl is the Sword of Heaven,” Kay added in the hopes of clarifying.

Sam, Ruby, and Bobby exchanged uncertain glances, but they quickly joined the others in looking to Castiel for his reaction to the statement. His eyes were unusually wide and his skin had lost some color. He opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, then looked at Dean with surprisingly visible concern.

“I'm a possible vessel to the Archangel Michael,” Dyaniel translated for Sam, Ruby, and Bobby. “Michael is the Commander of the Heavenly Host. The trace amount of his grace that I carry allows me to use other weapons against angels and, incidentally, other creatures.”

“You can kill angels with a gun?” Ruby asked, intrigued by the idea.

“Yes, but guns are not as practical as you'd think. All choirs can teleport and several can block bullets with telekinesis.”

Dean recalled watching Dyaniel unload several rounds at Lucifer. Thinking about it, the move had been reckless in a way that didn’t seem like him. He suddenly had an appreciation for how an outburst of anger might look for Dyaniel.

“Dyl’s weapon of choice is a sword,” Kay interjected.

“Friendly fire is harder with melee weapons,” Dyaniel added.

“I'm sorry.” Ruby was helplessly smiling at a mental image. “I'm just trying to picture the teen straight out of a boy band hacking through some angels with a claymore.”

“I prefer a bastard sword and I'm not a teenager,” Dyaniel corrected, then furrowed his brow. “What's a boy band?”

Kay shrugged at him. Nobody stopped the briefing to explain the reference before Bobby continued.

“There might be some fighting, but if you're one of our only people that can evacuate the coven I think you might have your hands full.”

“I understand,” Dyaniel acknowledged, though Dean thought he sensed a hint of disappointment from him at the prospect of not being able to fight.

“Bring a weapon just in case,” Sam suggested.

“I always do,” Dyaniel assured him while pulling a knife from his jacket’s interior pocket.

Ruby nodded in approval. “I like this kid.”

“What's this coven camp even look like?” Dean addressed Ruby and Sam. “What should we expect?”

“Here, I'll draw the layout,” Sam offered as he shifted Kaylee to his offhand, then grabbed an ancient pad of paper and pencil from the center of the table.

“While you're briefing them,” Ruby turned from Sam to Castiel, “could you help me figure out this bone carving stuff? The fewer ways we're standing out the better.”

“Certainly,” Castiel agreed and followed her to the other end of the library to work.
“A demon and an angel working together. I'm not sure that’ll ever get old,” commented Bobby with a small shrug.

“It will,” Kay confirmed. She leaned on the table to look closer at the diagram Sam was drawing, but spared a quick glance back at Castiel and Ruby. “Hopefully.”

After explaining the general layout of the camp, Ruby called over Kay and then Dean to have Castiel get a look at their different carvings. Sam had occasionally noticed Dylaniel staring at him, but tried to dismiss it as his imagination. But when Sam reached across the table in the nephilim’s general direction, he shifted in his chair to move away from Sam.

“Do you have a problem with me or something?” Sam asked, somewhat frustrated by his inability to get a read off the guy. It was unnerving to know almost nothing about someone and suddenly be trusting them with the knowledge of his daughter. Granted, Kay seemed to trust him, but Sam barely knew her any better.

“I had a difficult relationship with someone you remind me of,” Dylaniel explained in his usual cryptic fashion.

“Difficult?”

He considered Sam's question for a moment before finally answering. “We tried to kill each other repeatedly.”

“Oh.” Sam nodded with the sudden understanding of why Dylaniel might be cautious around him. “The other me—”

“We were on good terms,” Dylaniel assured him flatly.

“Ah, okay. Good.” Sam pursed his lips, unsure of how exactly to react.

They both turned to watch the others in an awkward attempt to not interact with each other. A minute later they were spared further uncomfortable silence by Ruby calling over Dylaniel in order to document his warding.

Once the warding designs of all three time travelers were laid out Ruby was quickly able to extrapolate the foundational protection. She took a brief look at the unique portions of the patterns, trying to make any sort of educated guess at their significance, mentally noting that Dylaniel and Dean had a reasonable number of common elements, but she didn't waste time on the extracurricular achievements. They had a coven to rescue.

The basic model bone wards were placed on Sam, Ruby, and Bobby. Dean held Kaylee as he anxiously watched both of her parents writhing in pain. Castiel offered to knock them out, but everyone agreed that he needed to start conserving his powers in preparation for saving the coven. It took each of them several minutes to recover from the painful procedure. When it was done, they gathered to discuss the potential fight.

Ruby began the tactical discussion. "You said that they might already be watching the coven, so as soon as we touch down the clock could be running. At most, Heaven is expecting that they'll be facing a single rogue angel, Sam, and me. No offense, Dean, but you weren't really getting anywhere in that fight with those two angels at Bobby's.”

“I didn't have a real weapon,” Dean said in his defense, then offered a positive spin: “Hopefully that means they'll underestimate us.”
“Their learning curve is gonna be pretty steep, so we don't want to be taking our time,” Kay said. “Dyl can see incoming angels and call out warnings, but we’ll only have like a second or two to react.”

“When you guys were fighting,” Dean turned to Dylyaniel. “You were calling out slang: blockers, paces...?”

“Aces, as in the highest playing card in a deck,” Dylyaniel corrected before addressing the practice more generally. “Different angelic choirs have different fighting styles or abilities. It’s-it was protocol for nephilim or angels to call out any enemies of significant threat.”

“So what are we gonna be listening for and what do we need to know about them?” Ruby asked.

“About half the combat-proficient choirs don’t have special powers or training. They’re like Cas: stronger than humans and able to teleport. They can only be killed with an angel blade or Sam and Kay’s powers.” Dylyaniel’s words caused Sam to look between Kay and Kaylee.

“Don’t forget you cutting them down,” Kay added. “And Hell itself can also kill most lesser and mid-level angels with enough exposure.”

“Heaven doesn’t know you two are here right?” Ruby asked.

“They shouldn’t know about us,” Dylyaniel confirmed.

“Is there any reason for us to expect that Heaven’s already broken out the big guns?” Ruby looked to Dylyaniel, Kay, and Castiel. “I mean, we did kill two angels.”

“I always got the impression that it took a while before Heaven started using specialty units,” the nephilim replied, earning a nod of agreement from Kay.

“What are the ‘specialty units’?” Bobby asked.

“Should we just do action items instead of a full catalog?” Kay asked Dylyaniel, who nodded. “Blockers—”

“I'm not familiar with that choir,” Castiel interjected.

“Sorry, our side had nicknames for all the types of angels. Some of the Enochian names are hard to pronounce. It’s what Dyl and I are used to,” explained Kay. “The grapen choir, otherwise known as blockers, can prevent teleportation. These are a high-priority kill because they’ll prevent a quick retreat and some of the more complicated attacks, assuming you can blink. You might think that leaving them up will prevent Heavenly reinforcements from arriving, but with a little practice blockers can get pretty good at stopping just long enough to let in their own.”

“When I left Heaven, the grapen were indisposed in the inner garden,” Castiel commented. “It may take additional time for them to become combat-ready.”

“They eventually became common in most high-stake ops,” Dylyaniel added.

“Nova.” Kay ticked off another type on her fingers. “They cleanse areas, otherwise known as letting out a mostly-lethal shock wave. The good news is that they need to hold still for awhile, which means if you can get to them fast, then they aren’t so bad.”

“What counts as fast?” Sam asked.
"The fastest that I've ever seen was ten seconds. But they tend to average fourteen seconds," Dylaniel replied.

"So if Dyl calls out a nova, you better take note," Kay said, then reassured the others. "Luckily, Heaven doesn't like deploying them because the friendly fire rate is pretty high and angels hate killing their own."

"Shades won't be in this fight." Dylaniel preempted the next item on Kay’s list. "There's no way Heaven would use them."

"I highly doubt that we're gonna see any, but I'm still gonna mention the shades because their fighting style is just so different," Kay countered. "They're the much more dexterous-assassin type. They traded strength for speed and guile. Never try to engage them in melee combat. If one of them ends up on the scene, I am the first choice to fight them, followed by Dyl. But it's incredibly unlikely any will be sent in."

"Why's that?" Bobby asked.

"The whole choir rebelled against Heaven when Lucifer fell. They should all be imprisoned right now."

"There was a prison break from Heaven in 2019. Nearly the whole choir escaped and fell," Dylaniel clarified, then smiled subtly at a thought. "The sceadugenga were a valuable asset."

"Next category is aces, which are seraphim. They are just all-around tougher angels. Don't try to fight them," Kay warned them. "If an ace ever shows up, either Dyl or I will take care of them."

"You have fought a seraphim before?" Castiel asked in surprise.

"Not including our last fight, I have ten seraphim kills under my belt and Dyl has... I want to say twenty-nine?"

"Thirty-one," Dylaniel corrected. "There were two during my op in Nebraska last month. I didn't finish writing my report."

"It's not as difficult as you would think to kill seraphim," Kay confided. "The trick is that they all use the same underlying technique, so you just have to learn the counters to it—and it helps if you fight dirty. Seraphim generally can't imagine a cloud of dirt in the eyes until it's too late."

Dean noticed Ruby nodding with appreciation of the technique before unconsciously shifting her stance to be closer to Kay's posture. He could start to see the similarities between them even more, which made him suddenly aware that he was standing a little too close to Dylaniel. He tried to casually move away from the nephilim while Kay finished up the briefing.

"And the last type to worry about is archangel—Raphael to be exact. Gabe, Michael, and Luci aren't on the board right now. If Raphael shows up, you leave. No stopping to save anyone else. Just go."

"Without knowing about Kay and myself, his top priorities would theoretically be Cas and Sam," Dylaniel added. "But he'll kill anyone that might pose an inconvenience to him. Archangels don't understand moderation."

"Are you gonna fight him?" Sam asked, unsure just how powerful any of the newcomers were compared to the unknown strength of an archangel.
"Not at this point." Kay shook her head. "If he shows up Dyl and I are hauling ass too."

"I expect we might have to fight him eventually, but that's not a fight to enter unprepared," Dylaniel explained.

They touched down in the center of the coven's buildings, in the clearing beside the community center. Their arrival caused the handful of bystanders to either stare in surprise or flee to get others. Luckily, Ruby and Sam were immediately recognized and Gabin was fetched in hardly any time.

"Rubahnali—" The coven leader began to greet her warmly, but she cut him off.

"Get everyone together. We're evacuating right now," Ruby instructed, causing all the delight in Gabin's face to disappear. "No time to pack."

"Sound the alarm," Gabin yelled to a teenage boy watching nearby. "Bring them in!"

The boy ran for the community building, almost slamming into Pascoe before disappearing through the doorway. Pascoe hurried over to the group. His eyes immediately took in the fact that both Sam and Ruby were armed.

"Pascoe, we're expecting an attack."

"How soon?" he asked, quickly surveying their surroundings for both threats and vulnerabilities.

"Now," Ruby replied.

Pascoe nodded solemnly and pulled a thin, red cylinder from his leather satchel. He snapped a small cap off it, pointed it to the sky, then whispered something.

"Castiel, can you see the red sparks?" Ruby asked while watching what appeared to her companions to be a clear sky.

"What red sparks?" Castiel replied.

"Good."

"How are we traveling?" Gabin asked after directing a few of the witches around them to gather the others.

"The two of them." Ruby pointed at Dylaniel and Castiel. "They can teleport groups of three and four, but we don't know how many jumps we'll get."

"The kids are the first priority." Gabin made the call on how to prioritize their efforts, then looked to a woman standing behind Ruby. "Find Belda."

"The two of us—" Ruby indicated Kay and herself "—can teleport two each, but it's gonna be a rough ride. Nobody in bad health or children if we can avoid it. How many people are on site?"

"We have forty-nine people, fifteen kids," Gabin answered as a bell started sounding from the roof of the community building.

Ruby leaned in close to Gabin and Pascoe so that she could speak to them alone. "We can evacuate maybe half. After that, who knows." Ruby spoke quietly, but could tell by their expressions that both men had heard her.
“We need to get the kids together right now!” Gabin yelled to the adult witches, who'd started moving with more purpose at the sound of the alarm.

“Also, arm up! Groups A and B—and anyone else!” Pascoe added to the instructions, then he turned back to Ruby. “What are we fighting?”

“Angels.” Pascoe and Gabin both stared at her, dumbfounded by the idea. “Normal weapons won't kill them, but they still need bodies. Taking them apart can buy us time—”

"Some of the kids are playing in the eastern woods!” shouted Belda as she ran up to the group.

“How many kids?” Pascoe asked while waving over a man and woman who were already armed with long knives and reagent belts.

“Four or five. I don't know if Nickie was with—”

“Bel, stay here and figure out who we're missing,” Gabin instructed. “The kids are our first priority for evacuation.”

“Check the eastern woods for the children,” Pascoe ordered the two combat-ready witches. “Find them.”

“Fuck,” Dean exhaled, then gripped his angel blade. “I'm coming with you.”

“Dean—” Dylaniel started to warn him about getting separated, but Dean was already going.

“I've got a blade,” Dean yelled over his shoulder as he ran after the witches into the woods.

"Where's Tom?” Gabin asked Belda.

“He was in the classroom with Millie and Lonnie earlier,” Belda replied, while she queued up a two-year-old girl to go with Dylaniel's first group.

“Incoming!” Dylaniel yelled as his eyes flashed blue. “Six-eight!” He instinctively reached for his sword, but hesitated. A group of children and an adult guardian was being assembled for him to take. It would be easier for him to teleport with him literally carrying the kids, but he would settle for touching their shoulders with his hands.

“We'll get the kids. You organize,” Ruby assured Gabin while directing him to his best utility in the crisis.

The sound of flapping of wings came from a little ways off in several directions, including the barn. Sam started running for the classroom while Ruby blinked straight there. She found Tom standing between two angels and the younger children. He held a kid's baseball bat uncertainly.

"Hey, angels!” Ruby shouted, drawing their attention. She blinked her eyes black and held up the blade of their dead brother. "You wanna fight a demon?”

One angel charged at her. While dodging the attack, the second angel teleported behind her. Ruby parried a swing, then tumbled to the side, trying to avoid becoming flanked. The two angels lunged at her simultaneously. She blocked one strike, but took a long, shallow hit to her left shoulder. Just as the blocked angel raised his blade to take another swing, he was hurled backward across the room into the wall.

Sam was running into the barn. The angel that Sam had thrown said something in Enochian to the
other angel. The two angels looked concerned about something. The angel closest to Ruby spared a glance at Sam, just long enough for her to thrust the blade into the angel’s chest.

The other angel rushed at Sam, who raised his hand, slowing the angel but not stopping him. Sam tried to remember what he had done to kill Uriel, but the memory was fuzzy. He could feel himself faltering, so he hastily moved forward and stabbed the angel while it was partially immobilized. His fingers reflexively checked for a nosebleed as he ran to Ruby, who was getting Tom and the other two kids ready to move.

Dylaniel teleported his first group to the bunker, then returned to the coven. When he arrived he noticed an angel a hundred feet away was staring at him. Her eyes searched him for something familiar, then slowly faded into a mixture of doubt and loathing. She disappeared and he waited for her to attempt to ambush him, but she didn't. He felt her presence fade to nothing—she'd returned to Heaven.

“Reinforcements incoming soon!” Dylaniel yelled. “We’ve got to move faster!”

“How many jumps can you perform?” Castiel asked him as Belda rounded up the next sets of kids and an adult to help Bobby. Dylaniel could see the fatigue from his first delivery creeping into Castiel’s eyes.


“Three, maybe four.”

At three and four passengers per trip, the two of them could only save seventeen more people at most, including Sam and Dean. But they were under the gun and the question was whether they should wait to try to get those groups filled with the coven's children. Taking anyone in arm’s reach could potentially condemn half a dozen children, who might not survive a demon-teleportation piggyback or even have the opportunity to jump with Ruby or Kay. If the remaining ten kids weren’t located quickly, they’d be forced to either continue waiting, with each moment putting everyone in more danger, or begin shuttling groups containing mostly adults.

Dylaniel grabbed his second group of two kids and an adult and delivered them to the bunker. For the brief moment that he was standing in the library he could see Bobby bandaging a large cut on one of the kid’s chest. The three adult witches were trying to calm the crying children. It was sickening to witness that sort of scene in the place he considered his home, but he pushed the thought from his mind and teleported back to the coven.

When he landed in the camp, Cas was gone on a delivery and a new wave of angels was attacking. He saw a nearby angel drop the body of an adolescent girl. Her corpse fell into dark mud that smelled of blood. Dylaniel drew his sword, then started cutting down the angels, starting with the one who’d killed the girl. Killing had never particularly bothered him. In that moment he would've been perfectly content to kill every angel of Heaven that had the poor luck to cross his path. But he didn't have that luxury.

“Dylaniel!” The sound of Castiel's voice calling for him was jarring in its familiarity. He looked back to Castiel, who had just returned from the bunker. “Keep evacuating them!”

Dean and the two witches ran through the woods yelling for the children. The camp’s buildings were no longer in sight and with every additional yard he felt more lost. Just when he was debating whether to suggest circling back towards camp, they heard children in the distance calling for help.
He wasn't sure he'd ever run so fast in his life.

The unmistakable sound of flapping wings moved on both sides of him. He tried to stop in order to evade them, but his boots slipped on the damp, leaf-covered forest floor. Instead of landing face first in the mud, he managed to somersault forward while the angels attacked the empty space he'd just occupied.

When he stopped rolling, he could see the group of five children about ten feet away. The oldest kid was probably only seven or eight years old, and the youngest was maybe five. Four of the children were trying to drag a young boy away from an angel standing in front of them. Dean recognized the hollow, burnt eye sockets of an angel's victim from the battle at the temple.

“Don't let them touch your head or chest!” Dean shouted to the witches as he scrambled to his feet.

He charged the angel that was going for the children. The angel turned and parried his attack at the last second. Somewhere in the background he could hear the two witches engaging the two other angels in a hopeless round of melee. One of the witches said something in a language Dean couldn't identify, then a wave of heat hit his back, but he didn't look to see what was going on. His main priority was getting the angel away from the kids.

The angel he was fighting went to strike at him with a lethal blow, then saw his face and diverted her swing to miss his neck. Dean grabbed her wrist with his offhand before stabbing her in the chest. White light shone from her eyes as he pulled her angel blade from her hand. He looked back to see that the female witch had somehow caused her angel to collapse to the ground gasping, but didn't know how to finish him off.

“Use their knives. They can kill them,” Dean said handing his second blade to her, before rushing to help the male witch finish off his angel. Once the immediate angels were dead, they turned their attention to the children, who were huddled around the boy with the hollow eyes.

“Come on, we've got to go,” the male witch said as he pried the youngest child’s hands off the dead boy’s arm, then picked her up. The other kids hesitated to leave their friend. Dean wasn't sure if they even knew he was dead.

“We're gonna get you all out of here first, then we’ll come back for Kyle.” The female witch lied to the children, but it worked. She took the hand of one of the kids, then started leading them back in the direction they'd come from. “Watch your footing, but we're running.”

Dean brought up the rear. When one of the kids stumbled, Dean caught her and carried her through some of the rougher terrain. He could hear a howling screech ahead of them which he instinctively wanted to avoid, but the witches kept moving toward the sound. There wasn't time to hesitate so he just followed them toward the unknown.

Ruby grabbed the smallest kid in the classroom while Sam picked up Tom and the third child. They carried them back to the evacuation site. Castiel was temporarily gone, but Dylaniel was holding position ready to make a jump as soon as he was given the go-ahead. The nephilim’s grey jeans were more than half-soaked with blood and he leaned against the side of a building. Around him Pascoe and Kay led a dozen adult witches in trying to defend the evacuation site while Gabin and Belda sorted through trying to organize those that might be saved.

Sam put down the other child near Dylaniel, but before Tom let go of his neck, one of the attacking angels hit Sam with a blast of telekinesis. Sam dropped his angel blade in order to support the back
of Tom's head and neck and unconsciously tried to protect them using his own powers. They
glaciously hit the ground twice before slamming into the side of the barn. A group of angels
swarmed them, so Sam rolled to put the boy between himself and the barn, trying to shield Tom
with his body as much as possible.

"Don't look," Sam instructed him.

One of the angels swung her blade down at Sam, but it stopped just short of him. She leaned
forward trying to push through the telekinetic protection. The two other closest angels tried
unsuccessfully to stab and kick him too. He could feel the strain of trying to prevent the attacks
with his powers. Warm blood began trickling from his nose and he thought that he might pass out
from the effort. But Tom was huddled with him, counting on him.

Ruby, Kay, and Gabin ran to help Sam, who’d become surrounded. A handful of angels were
physically attacking him while another half dozen moved to intercept anyone trying to aid
Heaven’s true target in this operation. Kay telekinetically threw several angels out of the way,
which drew significant attention to her and away from Sam. Ruby used an angel blade to fight her
way through two angels, clearing the remainder of the angels not actively attacking Sam. Gabin
cut his palm with a dagger, then spoke a quick incantation causing three of the angels to convulse.
With most of the angels in the scrum distracted, Ruby and Gabin started killing the ones attacking
Sam.

Gabin picked up his son, then started running for the evacuation zone. Ruby helped Sam to his
feet, then handed him the angel blade he’d dropped. She went on ahead to make sure the path was
cleared for them while Sam looked around for Kay.

Kay had grabbed an angel blade from the ground in case her powers started waning in the grossly-
mismatched fight. She tried hitting each of the five angels coming at her with telekinesis in order
to take them one at a time. Unfortunately, they started blinking to flank her, so she abandoned her
more subtle approach. She lunged forward, blocking one attack with her blade while reaching out
and smiting another angel with the First Light. Two of the angels immediately fled, leaving only
two for her to fight. She managed to dodge one attack, but the second angel struck her, cutting a
long gash across her right upper thigh. She slipped on the mud and fell backwards, saving her from
another hit.

Sam came up behind one of her attackers, stabbing him in the back. When the second angel turned
toward Sam, he grabbed her neck. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing, but he could feel
intense light burn the angel to death. He recognized it as that light weapon Castiel had told them
about. After dropping the angel, he pulled Kay up and started carrying her towards the evacuation
zone.

“I can still jump,” Kay told him through gritted teeth. “Hand me off. Go help.”

Sam transferred Kay to two nearby witches. She handed them each a talisman, grabbed them
tightly, then disappeared. Sam looked back to see four angels standing between the evacuation
zone and Ruby, Gabin, and Tom. He started running for them.

Ruby was immediately engaged in melee by one of the angels, leaving her unable to help Gabin.
Gabin rotated his body to keep the arm holding Tom away from the angels. He pulled a leather
pouch from his belt and made a sweeping gesture while saying a few words. Massive roots broke
through the earth, then began piercing through all four angels’ flesh, weaving in and out of their
bodies up to their chests. The angels struggled to move but only succeeded in coughing up blood
for a few seconds. Gabin ran around the entangled group, but one of the angels managed to
teleport free from the spell.
Sam saw the angel disappear and felt a split second of terror as he waited to see where he'd reappear. He gripped his blade and glanced at Ruby for fear that the angel might attack her. Instead, white light shone from Gabin's eyes as they were burned away.

Tom fell to the ground. He scrambled on his hands and knees trying to get away from the angel. The angel grabbed his ankle and began dragging him backward through the mud. Ruby charged the angel, parrying one of his attacks, then stabbed him in the face with her blade. Sam scooped up Tom and they ran the rest of the way to Dylaniel.

“Get them out of here,” Ruby instructed the nephilim before grabbing a passenger of her own.

Dylaniel could feel an oppressive resistance throughout the jump back to the bunker. Despite feeling like he was wading through a waist-high mire, he managed to get Belda, Sam, and Tom back to the bunker. He tried to grab both a table and a bookcase but only managed to slow his descent to the floor. His head bobbed dizzily as he looked around the room to see who had made it. Kay hastily limped over, then knelt down to check on him.

“Are they here?” Dylaniel asked.

She knew he was asking about Castiel and Dean. “No.”

Dylaniel started pushing himself up, in a feeble attempt to stand, but Kay held him down.

“Cas was going after him,” she told her cousin.

“I can't just—”

“Yeah, you can. You look like the jump there would just lay you out entirely,” Kay said while adjusting the large improvised bandage on her thigh. “We aren't gonna be able to fight all their battles.”

Ruby returned to the camp with her single remaining talisman, looking for any survivors. Dylaniel hadn't returned, which meant that he'd probably been too low on power to make another trip. Sam and Tom had been with him, so at the very least they were safe. Kay had been limping severely the last time Ruby had seen her and was presumably out of the fight, but at least she was capable of teleporting on her own. Castiel was fighting an angel a few yards away. She hurried over to him, stabbed the enemy angel, then continued assessing the battlefield.

“Who're we missing?” Ruby asked Castiel.

“Dean has not returned,” Castiel said.

“Fuck.” Ruby touched her pocket containing the talisman while weighing the risks of staying behind for him. She could sense that there were a handful of witches still alive, but couldn't get a read on where they were or how injured they might be. While Castiel may have been the first choice for getting people out, she was still capable of saving one person—possibly Dean, should something happen to Castiel. “Any idea where he is?”

Castiel started guiding Ruby towards the edge of the forest where Dean had disappeared earlier. They didn't know if he was still in that direction, but it was the best lead they had. Just before they reached the forest, a high-pitched howl emanated from the camp nearby. Ruby turned to see Pascoe summoning a creature that seemed to be pale smoke sculpted into sharp edges.

“One sec,” Ruby shouted ahead to Castiel, who stopped to look back at her.
The smoke construct tore through a lone angel’s body quickly, but it began evaporating before their eyes. Pascoe had at least a dozen minor-to-moderate injuries and was barely standing. Ruby wasn’t surprised to see that he was one of the last survivors in camp. He’d stayed behind trying to defend anyone he could, yet the attacks from all sides had left him unable to protect those who couldn’t begin to protect themselves. She ran for him just as more angels appeared, surrounding Ruby and Pascoe, blocking Castiel from the pair.

Ruby intercepted an angel trying to attack Pascoe. She slit the angel’s throat with her blade, but suffered a deep slice to her abdomen. Despite being hit by an angel blade, the wound wasn't fatal, though she started bleeding profusely.

Pascoe caught her as she collapsed from the sudden blood loss. For a split second she hesitated, looking at Castiel and the forest beyond him. She pursed her lips, slapped her last talisman into Pascoe’s hand, then hooked an arm around his neck.

“Hold tight,” she whispered before jumping back to the bunker.

“Wait.” The leader of the newly-arrived angels held up her hand, stopping the others from attacking Castiel. She stepped forward until she was only twenty feet from him.

He considered fleeing. With so many angels dead in the last few minutes he had no doubt that the grapen had already been called back to service. Very shortly there might be reinforcements capable of preventing his flight… but the group Dean was with was still unaccounted for. It had been reckless for him to risk his life for those coven members, but arguably it was similarly reckless for Castiel to risk his life for Dean.

“Castiel, you don't have to be condemned. The high choirs will be lenient,” Lemiel, the leader, said as something akin to a greeting.

He didn’t understand why she wasn't simply trying to kill him. “I have killed our own.”

“You will face punishment, but you can still repent. Michael may let you live….” She took a step forward. “If you help us.”

“Help you?” Castiel's brow furrowed. It was guaranteed to be a steep price, but he listened to the offer, hoping to buy a little more time for Dean.

“We have reason to believe that there's a demon child.” Lemiel spoke with an intensity that bordered on sinister. When he didn’t react to the earth-shattering news, she asked, “You've seen it, haven't you?”

Castiel could hear hurried footsteps coming from the forest. He slowly stepped backward, towards the forest’s edge. The other angels stepped forward, ready to rush him if necessary.

“Uriel meant to kill the child,” Castiel said as a noncommittal response to keep her talking. “Is that what Michael would ask of me, for me to return home?”

“Don't harm it,” she replied, but her eyes widened at the sound of Dean and the witches running through the woods.

She looked at Castiel, trying to discern his loyalties. Her eyes narrowed before she disappeared. Castiel ran into the woods, scared to waste his last teleport on such a short jump. He could hear blades clashing and children crying. Hurting over a fallen log and down a short slope, Castiel saw Dean and one of the witches fighting Lemiel. The second witch lay dead on the ground. Four
children whimpered and huddled, immobilized by fear. Castiel threw himself at the group and, as soon as he was in range, tried to teleport with them back to the bunker.

He felt the foreign and unpleasant sensation of exhaustion. The experience was less an act of gentle, imperceptible flight and more a desperate attempt to hold onto his charges while crashing. There was no way he was going to complete the jump with six passengers; it didn't matter that two-thirds of them were children. He dropped the adult witch mid-jump, undoubtedly tearing her apart over a twenty-mile stretch of the central United States, but it allowed the others to reach their destination safely.

Dean and the four children appeared in the library of the bunker. They were positioned exactly how they had been when the jump had begun, seconds earlier. To them the jump had been nothing, a blink of an eye, but Castiel had been in the middle of a literal jump entering the teleportation. When he appeared in the library his momentum carried him forward. He hit the top of a table, rolling off the corner, then slumped to the ground. Dean crawled across the floor to the angel. He was unconscious, but the body was still ticking.

Kay and three witches hurried over to help the new arrivals. She looked Dean over while the witches collected the children. He only had a few cuts and a bruise was forming on his right cheek. They didn't have anywhere to move Castiel to at that moment, so the two of them simply repositioned his body into something that was more comfortable.

“How many did we get?” Dean asked.

“With the kids you got, twenty-three,” Kay said while holding her own injury.

“Tom?”

“Sam's got him.”

Sam looked around the library, which had been cleared of half its tables, creating a large landing zone. Bobby and two of the witches were patching a few injured survivors, but there didn't appear to be anything life threatening that he needed to jump in to address. Kaylee was swaddled and sleeping, nestled in a blanket on one of the few tables. He sat down on the chair next to her and held Tom. The boy was trembling and wouldn't let go of Sam's shirt, so Sam just hugged him.

He wished that Tom hadn't seen Gabin's body. The image of Sam’s own dad crumpled on the hospital room floor was vividly scorched in his mind, and he didn't even get along with John. Sure, he’d loved him. Sure, he’d felt helpless to save him, but there was some small disconnect. Tom was only a kid. He'd grown up in a sheltered environment with a dad he loved. Now that peace had been horribly shattered.

Ruby arrived shortly thereafter and was laid out on a cleared table. Her lower body was covered in blood. Sam started to get up to rush over to her, but she waved him off, pointing to Tom and Kaylee. Rationally he knew that she'd be able to survive any physical injuries that weren't instantly lethal, yet it was hard to sit by the sidelines while someone else patched her up.

About ten minutes after Belda and another witch got the bleeding stopped, Ruby had herself carried over to the chair next to Sam. She carefully picked up Kaylee, trying to avoid busting her forty brand-new stitches. If Sam had been alone, she would've given him the baby to hold. He took such comfort in holding his kid, but at the moment he was holding Tom. So instead she just brought their daughter into Sam's line of sight.
Sam saw the large, bloody bandage around Ruby’s lower torso. He reached out toward it, but realized there wasn’t anything he could do to help her in that moment. She may have been uncomfortable, but aside from being a little weak from the blood loss, she wasn’t in that bad a shape. His hand gently touched her arm instead.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked Ruby.

“I'm fine.” Ruby’s voice was softer than normal. She looked down at Kaylee before adding. “I'm glad you decided to get out when you did.”

Sam's stomach dropped at the realization that Ruby had been sliced open right where their daughter had been just a few days earlier. Throughout the pregnancy, one of his greatest fears had been that Ruby might sustain an injury just like that. Rationally, he knew that things were different now, but it made his paternal instincts flare. He was feeling overwhelmed by the realization of how much his daughter meant to him when he felt Tom shift a bit on his lap to face the newborn.

"Is that your baby?” Tom spoke for the first time since the attack.

"Yeah. Her name is Kaylee," Ruby answered while moving the newborn a little closer to Tom.

"She's really small."

Sam couldn't tell if Tom was merely making an observation or was concerned for her. He told the boy, "That's normal. She's just a few days old."

“Does she know what's going on?”

Tom’s question made Ruby glance across the room at Kay before replying, “No.”

“Good.” Tom rested his head against Sam’s chest, then looked up. "Are we safe here?"

“Yeah.” Sam rubbed the boy’s shoulder reassuringly. “You kids are going to be fine. I promise.”

Dean watched the interaction between Sam and Tom for a few seconds. He felt disoriented. It reminded him of watching a movie and halfway through beginning to suspect that he'd seen it before. The coven had been attacked, killing many of the witches, but not as many as before. Now Sam was comforting the little boy that would’ve grown up to be his son. Dean walked over to where Kay was checking on Dylaniel.

"Is it happening again?” Dean nodded subtly at Sam and Tom.

"I don't know." Kay shrugged, but he could see the concern in her eyes.

"Things are supposed to be different this time around," he said. “We just took a beating and what's different?”

“About fifteen people,” she replied, causing him to raise his hands in acknowledgement of the point. “But I get what you mean.”

"According to one theory of temporal physics, some occurrences may carry more causal significance in time and therefore are harder to alter," Dylaniel suggested as a possible answer.

"You're talking about predetermination. Come on, Dyl. We aren't buying that fatalist crap, are we?” Kay asked with growing discomfort.
"I said 'harder to alter,' not impossible," Dylaniel corrected. "Or it could just be chance that Tom's dad died and he's currently being comforted by Sam."

"Did anyone tell Sam or anyone else that Tom was"—Dean lowered his voice—"his son in your timeline?"

"Not us." Kay rubbed her neck. "That could do it, couldn't it? Planting an idea like that, and they all think it's supposed to happen or something."

"It could," Dylaniel agreed. "The power of suggestion or the illusion of fate could be enough to push them toward or away from outcomes."

"We're not playing the game like that. If we don't have our free will, we don't have anything." Kay chewed her lip and cringed at a thought. "But can you imagine how fucked it'd be to cut them off from our intel because we don't trust them enough to make their own decisions or futures?"

Kay and Dean both looked at Sam. They both wanted to spare him from the suffering that her dad had endured. She wanted to protect him from the harm, but she trusted Sam's ability to carry the burden. Dean wasn't sure what the harsher path would do to Sam. In 2039, Ruby and Dee had both told him that he'd have to learn to trust his brother. That included both the burden of power and knowledge.

"We gotta tell him about Tom, don't we?" Dean asked without taking his eyes off Sam. "We'll have to tell them everything."

"When it comes to Tom, it's probably best to give things a few hours. Let the combat chemistry calm down a bit," Kay suggested. "Let them all get some sleep."

Ruby lay in the bed while Sam slept next to her. Somewhere in the months of traveling together they'd gotten used to sharing a bed. In theory they didn't have to; Ruby didn't sleep anymore. There wasn't even really a reason for her to be in the bed except for sex, but they weren't yet ready to try figuring that out again.

Sam had improvised a crib out of a small wooden crate, which he screwed to the top of the bedroom's desk, then lined with a soft, thick blanket. It wasn't pretty and didn't provide line of sight on Kaylee from the bed, but it was the best he could manage.

Ruby had been walking through the hallway when she'd overheard Sam singing "Stay Alive" by Jose Gonzalez to Kaylee as some sort of attempt at putting her to bed for the first time. She secretly listened to him sing from just beyond the door, letting Sam finish before she went in to check on them.

She wanted to stay in Sam's claimed room for that night. The whole ordeal with the battle had shaken them both, seeing their would-be sanctuary destroyed. They were both desperate to have the familiar comfort of each other readily available. For so long she had watched for threats while Sam slept. Now she was watching over him and their daughter. It didn't matter that they were supposedly safe. Being able to see Sam and Kaylee, to hear them breathe and shift in their sleep, it gave her a strange sort of peace.

The pain and grief of the day permeated the bunker, but she felt it in a way unlike everyone else. Thanks to the soul link that she maintained with her adult coven members, she could profoundly feel their loss. It was a gnawing ache in her very core. Yet she could feel them because they were alive. At least they had that.
After an hour or two, the bedroom door slowly opened and she watched as Tom crept into the room. Her hand checked under the sheets to make sure that she and Sam were wearing something akin to pajamas. The boy circled around the bed until he was between it and the improvised crib. He peeked in to see Kaylee, then lay down on the concrete floor next to the bed.

"You okay?" Ruby whispered to Tom.

"I had a bad dream," he confessed. "I wanted to make sure the baby was alright."

Ruby smiled, touched by the sentiment. "Well, that was brave of you."

"I'm not brave," Tom said sheepishly.

"Cause you're scared?"

He sat up to look her in the eyes. After a moment of thought he nodded.

She sighed silently, pulled back the sheet and blanket in front of her, then told him, "Come on up here."

He crawled up on the bed next to her. She tucked a thin pillow in front of her chest, then wrapped an arm around him, pulling him to her. A quick adjustment allowed them to share her pillow.

"You know it's okay to be scared. That doesn't stop you from being brave," Ruby whispered to the boy. "Only idiots go through that kind of stuff and aren't scared."

"Do you have bad dreams?" Tom whispered back after a long pause.

"I don't sleep, but back when I did I had bad dreams every night," Ruby replied, then she leaned a little closer to Tom. "Sam has bad dreams sometimes. That's why he likes to hug me when he sleeps."

"Why are you talking about me?" Sam's voice was groggy and muffled by his pillow.

"Tommy had a bad dream. I was telling him that he's in good company."

Sam lifted his head enough to see Tom lying on the other side of Ruby. He blinked a few times at the discovery, then dropped back down into his pillow. "Ruby's got our backs," he said in reassurance, while burying his face in her hair.

"Yeah. You can go back to sleep," Ruby whispered to Tom while hugging him. "We've got you."
After the initial chaos died down a bit, Kay went into one of the bunker's dozen bathrooms to wash her face. Before she could even turn on the faucet she froze, morbidly transfixed by a pile of bloody gauze spilling out of the trash can. She thought of the battle: watching the angels’ vessels pierced by dire roots, Dyaniel's clothes soaked with blood, Ruby—who looked so much like her own mom—bleeding on the library table.…

She stumbled towards the toilet and managed to not throw up until she was safely positioned over the bowl. As long as she could remember the only time blood had ever bothered her was her first few trips to the Pits. Starting when she was ten, at least twice a week she'd visit the dungeons. Understanding the nature of Hell was part of her education. Discipline, torture, retribution, death—they were all deeply familiar. She had been the Devil, like her father before her, and that meant a certain amount of blood on her hands, figuratively and literally.

Her body was shaking and her stomach ached by the time she finished heaving. Gingerly, she dragged herself to the shower and started it up. It had been too long of a day for her to be thinking clearly. She stepped into the hot shower while fully dressed. The water made her clothes cling heavily to her body in a way that reminded her of a hug. Within seconds the large bandage on her thigh turned into a pink sponge, peeled from her leg, then fell to the floor, clogging the drain.

When she looked down to check her now-exposed stitches, she noticed the water pooling around her feet. It was nearly red from all the blood and dirt that had washed from her, previously hidden by her black clothing. The sight reminded her of Tom, her brother Tom, lying in their mom’s arms, in his own blood.

She frantically kicked the bandage away from the drain, trying to get rid of the water. In her haste she nearly slipped, but clutched the shower head to stop herself. The hot water poured over her face and she tried to think of it as some cleansing force that might penetrate to her soul. When the heat became too much, she leaned forward, resting her forehead on the cool shower tile.

Kay pulled the two necklaces from beneath her t-shirt. One was the pendant that her dad had given her as a birthday present just days earlier. The other had been one of a pair that she shared with her brother Tom. Their matching necklaces had been made after Alex's death, from the angel blade that had killed him. If there was any trace of their brother's soul left in existence, maybe it was on the cursed metal that had stolen him from them. She kissed the necklaces, then clutched them in her hand.

“You're the First Light to Illuminate Existence, Harbinger of the Second Season,” she whispered to herself. “You can do this.”
crawled over to be next to Castiel's unconscious body on the other side of the room. His back rested against a concrete pillar and his left hand lay on the angel’s chest.

“Are you trying to heal him?” Dean asked, unsure if that would be a sign of Dylaniel's improved health or his recklessness.

“I can't, not right now,” Dylائيل admitted. “I just wanted to make sure he's still in there.”

“You need to go rest.”

“I can't—”

“Yeah, you can,” Dean countered. “You can't teleport. You can't heal. You probably couldn't punch me in the face if you tried.” After realizing that he’d nearly set up a challenge for the rather spiteful nephilim, he suddenly pointed a finger at Dylaniel, adding, “Don't try. Just go get some sleep and then you can go back to feeling like shit about the world tomorrow.”

“No, I mean it's hard for me to sleep after combat,” Dylaniel clarified. “There's a cupboard on the far side of the room, third one from the right. There might be—”

“Oh, I know what you're talking about,” Dean said as he went to gather a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He poured some in both glasses, one more liberally filled.

“Which one's yours?” Dylaniel asked, causing Dean to raise the fuller glass. “Make mine the about a finger more than what you poured for yourself.”

“Does alcoholism run—” Dean glanced around the library for anyone who might overhear “—in the family, or what?”

“I suspect it's my angelic side showing,” Dylaniel commented as he accepted the glass, then pounded a quarter of it. “It's very difficult to get angels drunk.”

“I'm trying to picture drunk angels.” Dean smiled at the strange mental images.

“They tend to break furniture, accidentally. They lose a lot of the finesse necessary to interact with the material world.” Dylaniel threw back another quarter and Dean tried to keep up.

“Do you have to use finesse?”

“No. I don't have superhuman strength.” Dylaniel touched Castiel's chest again.

“He's gonna be okay, right?” Dean asked as he sat down on the floor across from Dylaniel.

“He isn't injured. He just needs to get his energy back before he can operate his vessel.”

“Can he hear us?” Dean suddenly regretted making the comment about family traits.

“I doubt it.” Dylaniel finished his drink while repositioning his palm above Castiel's heart. “It'll probably be another hour before he can access sensory input.”

“How can you tell?”

“I've run hundreds of ops with angels. I'm not the first choice for medic—I wasn't—but I've seen enough situations like this to at least guess.” Dylaniel kept one hand on Castiel’s chest, then used the other hand to snap his fingers next to the angel’s ears. “He's not reacting to sounds.”
“What is he?” Dean asked between his last sips. “Like, what's an angel actually like?”

“I’m not sure what they think they look like. To me they're all fuzzy, shimmering clouds of grace.” Dylaniel actually gestured with his arms in a swirling motion. “Their wings, they don't even look like wings to me. It's more like wispy tendrils or ribbons... pulsating with different colors and... I guess 'vibrations' is as good a word as any. But if you ask angels, they see real stuff. ‘So-and-so has three heads and eight arms, with silky green and orange wings.' I can't see it.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at the bizarre description. “Three heads?”

“Supposedly Abner has a penis.” Dylaniel’s head drooped slightly. “If there was ever proof that God has a cruel sense of humor, that's it.”

“You're drunk,” Dean said with a small chuckle at the sight.

Dylaniel looked up at Dean like he was an idiot. It was an ominously familiar expression. “Stating the obvious doesn't benefit the conversation.”

“Come on. I'm finding you a room.” Dean grabbed Dylaniel's wrist, ducked under his arm, and lifted Dylaniel into a standing position.

“At least grip my sleeve,” Dylaniel said. His face was surprisingly readable. He was nearly cringing.

Dean adjusted so that he wasn't making contact with his skin, which seemed to help a little bit.

They staggered down the hall until they found a bedroom with an open door. Dean wasn't sure whose room it had been in Dylaniel's time, if it had been occupied at all. Maybe Dylaniel or Kay would have strong feelings about getting their old rooms, but for the moment it would do.

Dean dropped him back onto the single bed, then lifted his feet onto the bed. He stopped short of taking Dylaniel's boots off. It reminded him of the rare occasion when he'd have to drag Sam back from a bar. Taking Sam’s shoes off had never been a problem, but he got the feeling that doing anything to make Dylaniel more physically exposed would result in a swift kick to the head.

“You aren't an asshole,” Dylaniel muttered without opening his eyes.

“Thanks... I guess,” Dean replied as he started leaving the room. He looked back at the nearly-asleep Dylaniel before closing the bedroom door. “Goodnight.”

Dean wandered around trying to find another bedroom for himself. To his immense discomfort the first free room he found was the same one that Dee and Cas had shared. He looked at the undecorated interior and debated how much of a problem he’d allow that to be. While he was considering the issue Kay walked up to him, pulled him into the bedroom, and shut the door.

“What's up?” he asked, eyeing her less-than-composed demeanor.

Her hair and clothes were slightly damp for some reason. She looked pained and fatigued as any of them, but she moved with energy that seemed suspiciously like tension.

“We need to talk about Dyl.” She paced a few feet.

“What about him?”

“He’s having a hard time.”
“I’ll bet.” Dean rubbed his neck. “We just had a drink. He hit it pretty hard. I mean with everything that happened at the coven and with your….”

Maybe giving a massive amount of alcohol to the guy whose family had just died had been a bad move? Dean made a mental note to not drag Dylaniel into his own vices. Granted, the kid had been the one who had suggested a drink in the first place.

“Actually, it's worse than just that,” she replied. “He's also having trouble with the environment.”

“Environment?” Dean looked around the room, expecting to see something like a source of allergens.

“He's not used to, well, a lot of stuff.” Kay looked meaningfully at Dean. “He grew up after everything went wrong with the world. He's never seen peacetime. It was kinda freaking him out while we were trying to find you.”

“How does peace freak someone out?” He was having trouble getting his head around the concept. After everything he'd been through in the last week, Dean was ready for a nice, long stretch of quiet.

“He's waiting for something to go wrong.”

“That's not necessarily the worst thing.” Dean gestured toward the library. “I mean, things just went pretty fucking wrong.”

“No, like I'm worried he's gonna… overreact isn't the right word.” Kay chewed her lip. “But until he can get used to things, I don't think he should go out around people without one of us to keep him thinking clearly. I don't know if he'd hurt someone, or what.”

Dean's eyebrows rose. “You think he’d lose it on some civilians?”

“I'm saying, I don't know if he knows how to spot civilians. People have been trying to kill him his whole life. He assumes strangers are threats until proven otherwise.” Kay shrugged. “Before yesterday he hadn't been in a real human city since he was six. I know he’s generally solid on the outside, but he’s just as emotional as anyone, and the mundane stuff that you guys all take for granted, a lot of it scares him. And he’s stubborn as hell. He’s not the type to ask for help.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that impression.” Dean was all too familiar with the technique of keeping up a strong exterior while internally buckling. “Okay. I'll help keep an eye on him.”

“Thanks.” Kay opened the door to leave, but Dean put his hand on her arm to stop her.

“Take this room. Get some sleep,” he suggested.

“I already claimed a bed down the hall. I promise I'll get some rest. You should do the same.”

After she walked out of the room, Dean looked at the queen-size bed and tried to remember which side Dee had slept on. He tossed one pillow to the floor, then moved the second into the middle of the bed. It took less than a minute for sleep to overtake his exhausted body.

Neither Sam nor Tom got much sleep. Tom had woken up four times in the night thanks to nightmares. Sam didn't have nightmares as much as dreams intermixed with the occasional vision of bodies hanging upside-down with carved foreheads. And doing her part, Kaylee demanded some sort of attention every two hours. Despite the frequent interruptions, there was still
something restful about waking up to find themselves somewhere safe and in good company.

Eventually, Sam resigned himself to getting up for real and facing their current circumstances. The room didn't have any natural light and the clock on the wall had stopped keeping time decades earlier, but he suspected that it was probably the morning—for whatever that mattered. He rolled over to find Ruby gingerly changing Kaylee's diaper on the desk. Tom was also starting to shift on the far side of the bed.

“There's gotta be a spell to make her shit less,” Ruby quietly mused aloud.

Tom pulled the blankets over his head in disgust. Sam quickly held the sheets down in front of him so that the boy’s movements didn't expose the fact he was sleeping in only his boxers.

“Please don't turn her into a guinea pig,” Sam told Ruby after sufficiently covering himself.

“Naysayer,” she replied with a shrug followed by a small smile over her shoulder. “You okay down there, Tommy?”

“Is it still gross out there?” His voice was cautious.

“It's all cleaned up,” she replied, causing him to peek his head out of the bed. “You know, casting spells can be gross. Lots of stuff can be gross. But if you do the gross stuff, then you get nice stuff, like a happy baby.”

Ruby finished buttoning up Kaylee's onesies, then picked her up and brought her over to the bed. Sam propped himself up on his arm and watched them for a minute. For an instant he forgot about everything that they'd been through over the last few months—over the last 18 hours. Watching Ruby showing their daughter to Tom... maybe it was wishful thinking, but her smile seemed sincere. When she looked up and noticed Sam staring, she held out Kaylee.

“You want to tag in?” Ruby asked.

He wanted to, but he couldn't help noticing that the smell of sweat and blood lingered on him.

“Actually, do you mind watching her while I go find a shower?” His happy moment was cut short by some minor guilt at making the request.

“Don't take too long.” Ruby allowed the request with a small shrug. “I want to explore a bit more; see what we have to work with. There were so many crates across from the alchemy lab. I'm betting there might be extra supplies.”

“You could take her with you,” Sam suggested.

“Breaking open a bunch of dusty crates full of unknown and possibly magical goods with a newborn right next to it—sounds great.”

He felt a bit embarrassed for not thinking of the risks. “When you put it like that....”

“I could help,” Tom volunteered. “I could watch her on the other side of the room. She wouldn't get all dusty and I could see what's in the boxes too.”

Sam considered whether he trusted a six-year-old to be capable of watching a baby. Ruby would be in the same room, but it still was a responsibility. Although Dean had started taking care of him when he was only four years old.
“Do you know how to hold a baby?” Sam asked, but Tom shook his head. “Here, let me show you.”

The boy had a reverence for his tiny charge that warmed Sam’s heart. As Kaylee’s dad, he had loved her immensely as soon as he saw her. But Tom was getting to know the newborn for the first time. It was possible that Gabin had told Tom that Sam and Ruby had planned on returning to the coven with a baby, so maybe the situation wasn’t as unexpected as he had feared, though none of them could’ve known that they’d end up together like this.

After instructing Tom on how to interact with a baby, Sam threw on some clothes and went off in search of a bathroom. It was a strange feeling, finally sort of being safe in a hospitable environment. He wasn’t entirely prepared to accept the possibility that they were safe. The idea of a place they didn't have to imminently flee had been a long time coming. For less than a day Bobby's house had seemed like it might be a long-term option, but those hopes had quickly been dashed.

He found Dean waiting by the door of one of the bathrooms. Judging by his bleary eyes, he hadn't slept particularly well either. Granted, the older Winchester probably had plenty of reasons to have a restless night. He’d been a nervous wreck before the battle at the coven, which couldn't have done any benefit to his mood. To his credit, Dean smiled weakly when he saw Sam.

“I never thought I'd be sharing a bathroom with thirty people,” Dean said as a greeting.

Sam could smell a little alcohol on his breath, though Dean seemed sober enough. Maybe he had gotten some sleep after all?

“You've never lived in a dorm,” Sam observed aloud while taking up position in line next to his brother.

“Yeah, but I've spent the night in more than a few.” Dean couldn't help but smirk at a couple memories. “How're you doing? I didn't really get to check on you before you cleared out.”

“I’m… I don't know, managing?” Sam shrugged. “Sorry I didn't stop to talk. I wanted to get all the kids out of the library. Belda and I got them sorted into rooms, then I had to go make something like a crib.”

“You made a crib?” Dean’s mind boggled at the idea of making furniture right after a fight.

“It's more of a soft box, but it worked. Big surprise: a secret bunker doesn't have a lot of baby supplies.”

“You thinking of going on a supply run?” Dean lit up slightly at the prospect. “I'd like to peek outside and see where the hell we are. Supposedly there's a garage in here somewhere. Maybe I can get a car running.”

“It’d be nice to get some more clothes, diapers, things like that.” Sam looked down at his slightly blood-stained clothes. “The other kids need some new clothes too. Tom, one of the kids, slept in the same dirty clothes we rescued him in. I'm guessing it's the same for everyone else.”

“You already saw Tom this morning?” Dean asked, as he leaned to look down the hall where Sam had come from.

“Yeah. He had a nightmare and slept in my room. Ruby offered to watch—” Sam’s brow furrowed. “How do you know about Tom?”
Dean shifted anxiously. His eyes scanned Sam's face while somehow avoiding direct eye contact. Before Sam could ask what was going on with him, Dean spoke.

"Hey, Sammy, can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Sure, what is it?" Sam agreed, and was immediately dragged into a large supply closet.

Dean closed the door behind them in an ominous move. "I'm not really sure the best way to explain this...." He started pacing in the cramped room. "It's another one of those weird timeline things."

"Oh, god. This can't be good."

"I met Tom, like adult Tom." Sam's eyebrows rose at Dean's words, but before he could think of a question Dean continued, "He was an amazing guy, smart, funny, brave... great big brother."

"I think you're confused," Sam replied. He spoke slowly, unsure how Dean seemed to be mixing up two different people. Maybe Dean wasn't as sober as he had initially assumed? "This Tom doesn't have any siblings and both his parents are dead. He can't have siblings in the future."

"Not biological." Dean offered the distinction with an awkward tilt of the head. "The other Tom, his dad died in the other coven attack too. You two ended up adopting him."

Sam had to sit down on a step ladder. He felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Ever since he'd met Tom they'd had a strange sort of friendship that he'd treasured. Getting him to safety during the attack on the coven had been a top priority. And seeing that the boy had come to Ruby and him when he was frightened hadn't felt too unusual. But the thought of really becoming his guardian—his parent....

It was a staggering amount of potential responsibility. He'd like to think that he would be there in whatever way Tom needed, but being confronted with the possibility so directly, even if he wasn't being forced to say yes or no that instant, it was daunting. Tom was already bonding with them after a severe trauma. Sam didn't need to be a psychologist to see that the immediate future would have a huge impact on the kid. He hadn't thought about it until then, but by providing what he thought of as a reasonable amount of care for Tom he was unconsciously filling the role of a parent.

"Why are you telling me this?" Sam asked in a daze. Honestly, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. He wasn't sure he wanted to face the massive implications of taking care of the boy in that moment. It seemed like a choice... but how could he ever turn his back on a kid that had just lost his only family? "Why did you have to tell me this?"

"There are some things that I saw when I was there that were... things I wish I never had to tell you. But how fucked up is it for me to watch you comforting him after the fight and not tell you? I know this time is different or whatever, but how am I supposed to keep that from you?" Dean gestured toward the library. "It's like, I saw you hugging him and he was scared. I could see it; you were both scared. And I was thinking about Tom, the adult one—he was an incredible guy and at one point he was some scared six-year-old kid. I'm sorry about his dad and everything he's going through—hell, everything you're going through. I know it doesn't make sense, but I get that pain. But it's like, I needed to tell you that he's going to be okay. Tom was probably the most lighthearted, kindest person I met while there."

Sam sat for a long while, trying to process Dean's revelation. Tom had ended up gentle and happy in a world that sounded horrific based on the small glimpse he'd heard. Somehow, the other Sam
had helped nurture those precious qualities. Without him in the boy’s life, who knew what might happen to Tom?

“What happened to him?” Sam eventually asked.

“At the end…..” Dean hesitated, but Sam stared up at him expectantly. He swallowed hard and his voice shook slightly when he spoke. “There was a big fight…. He was protecting a lot of people, including me.”

“From what?”

“Raphael.”

Sam nodded while trying to imagine Tom all grown up and battling an archangel. “An archangel killed him?”

“Yeah.” Dean exhaled the answer. His face lost some energy at the memory. For a moment it looked like he might say something more, but Sam interrupted him after rerunning the scenario over in his head.

“Two?” Sam blinked up at Dean. “You said ‘you two’ adopted him.”

“Yeah, you and Ruby.” Dean answered as if it was obvious.

“She stays?”

Sam's heart started pounding as the prospect of learning more about his relationship with Ruby temporarily pushed aside any internal conflicts or concerns. The two of them had continued to be together in some respect going forward. They'd even stayed together enough to adopt Tom as a pair. And Dean had spoken with the other Ruby, so she may have been there for the long-term in one way or another. He felt a bit jittery just trying to piece together a picture.

“Whoa.” Dean put his hands on Sam to stop him from rushing off to do something half-cocked. “Calm down. Things aren't going exactly the same way. She stayed that time. I don't know if she stays this time. I'm not telling you this stuff so that you can take a bunch of stuff for granted. I just—I don't want to not tell you. It's hard because there's so much stuff to sort through. Half the stuff… part of me wishes I could forget it. It's like, really intense stuff and I don't know if any given thing will happen or not. I don't know if knowing what might happen makes it more or less likely to happen. Some of this stuff I really don't want to tell you.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Sam said, a little hurt, but also resigned to the normal limits of his relationship with Dean. Try as they might, they both knew that neither side adhered to a strict policy of honesty.

“Yeah, well, we're both idiots.” Dean shot down Sam's attempt to excuse him. “I need to learn to trust you more—with the truth, your choice in women… with your powers. I know I'm not 100% there yet, but I'm trying…. I'm trying to trust you.”

Sam contemplated Dean’s confession. It was a bittersweet gesture. Dean had been up-front about their damaged relationship, but at least he was continuing to try improving it. The hesitation when mentioning Sam’s powers didn't go unnoticed, yet he pushed that thought aside to focus on the immediate crisis.

It remained to be seen whether knowing about the other Tom and Ruby would be helpful or harmful. That sort of knowledge did carry a strange burden to it. He wondered how Ruby would
react to the news that the two of them had been together for some time, in some capacity, and had adopted Tom. They were already taking care of Tom. It had started without him even realizing it.

He felt a bit dizzy at the sudden creeping doubt of whether it was predestined or not. There was something about feeling like they were caught in a series of dominoes that tarnished even something he wanted. It was hard to tell exactly how he felt about anything, let alone everything.

“Ruby and I were together.” Sam ran his fingers through his hair. He was mostly talking to himself, trying to untangle his confused mind. “How am I supposed to process that? I mean it's like, that's what happens between us and I guess that's…. I mean, it’s good—”

“I mean, it’s good?’” Dean repeated, voice bordering on a verbal slap to the face. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I want her to stay with me—” Sam paused, trying to parse what exactly was bothering him. “—with Kaylee and me, because she wants to, not because that's how it's supposed to happen.”

“Wait, no.” Dean grabbed Sam's shoulders, ready to shake some sense into his brother. “Don't tell me you're thinking about fighting this?”

“Fighting, no. But if you found out you were going to be more or less married to someone, wouldn't you be kind of freaked out?”

“Listen, I met the other me. He was married,” Dean replied, making Sam raise his eyebrows at the thought of his promiscuous brother settling down. “You know what he told me about fate?”

“No.”

“That he doesn't buy it.” Dean gestured to himself. “My whole deal is a future that may or may not happen. Meanwhile you're neck deep in an actual relationship. Don't spite this, Sammy. This isn't about fate; it's about you being happy.”

“Our lives are so messed up right now, and the world was fucked up in the future too. How am I supposed to know whether this is—”

Dean raised his hand to silence Sam, then took a breath. “You know how much I hate being wrong. Well, I'm saying it: I was wrong. You two are actually good for each other. Even before I went to the future, I could see it. I didn't want to admit it, but you look so happy with her. I don't remember the last time I saw you that happy and it was in spite of how much shit? You two fucking love each other, so why are you gonna throw that away over, well, over anything?”

Sam stared, dumbfounded, at Dean. He'd never heard Dean talk about love except with respect to cars, pie, and rock music. All those times it had been just a casual use of the word, but this carried a very different weight to it.

“Wow, I…. Huh.”

“What?” Dean suddenly became very self-conscious, trying to figure out what he’d just done to surprise Sam.

Sam cautiously broached the subject. “It's just, you said 'love' like, the love.”

“The other Ruby told me.” Dean redirected the blame for throwing around such a big word. Sam started blushing as a goofy smile spread helplessly across his face. Dean realized the new can of worms he'd just opened. “But she hasn't figured it out yet!”
“Okay.” Sam barely knew what he’d just said. He tried to compose himself, but was too caught up in the excitement. The other Ruby hadn’t just stayed out of convenience or a sense of responsibility to their kids; there had been something more. She was capable of loving him.

“Shit, Sam. Don't go falling all over her and proposing. It's complicated. Just play it cool.”

Sam struggled to quell his smile and shifted awkwardly. “I can play it cool.”

“Oh, my god. Please don't go scaring her off. I actually got along okay with the other Ruby,” Dean groaned. “I'd like to get back to not worrying about waking up hexed.”

“I can do this.” Sam’s word were more encouragement to himself than reassurances to Dean.

“Jesus, don't 'do' anything. Just be natural. It worked out fine the other time,” Dean said. “Don't clutch defeat from the jaws of victory.”

Some of Sam’s nervous energy escaped him in a sarcastic laugh. “You just told me things weren’t set in stone! You don’t know how this works either, so don’t—” He took a breath that was less calming than he’d hoped and started over. “How do you know that it's all coasting from here on out? You just told me that I'm teetering on the edge of having a real relationship with Ruby, adopting a kid—oh, and I’ve only been a dad for like three days. 'Just be natural.' No pressure.”

“And there's the whole apocalypse thing,” Dean added as a joke, but neither of them actually found it funny.

“No pressure.” Sam nodded in agreement, then buried his face in his hands. He had no idea how to juggle all his feelings and fears. Inevitably things would become clearer as he was forced to act, but in that moment he just wanted to avoid any causally-significant choices. That wasn’t an option, though. “Why can't something be easy for once? It's like, can't one area of my life just be simple? I know the world is on the brink, but can't my personal life just be clear-cut?”

“Hey, you're surrounded by people who care about you. That's better than a month ago,” Dean replied with a reassuring smile, which turned a bit pensive. “I've tried the whole going-it-alone thing. I don't think that's the right thing anymore. We’ve got your back, no matter what happens. You can do this. I've hung out with two of your alternate-universe kids. If you spend five minutes talking to Kay you’ll see that she's one of the most capable people you’ll ever meet. Also, the other you was King of Hell, so as a parent you probably have a leg up on him already.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Real reassuring.”

After taking a quick shower, Sam went to go find Ruby and Tom. He wasn't sure exactly what to tell her about everything that Dean had just explained. His mind could barely wrap around any of it and he'd heard it firsthand. Part of him wanted to tell her all of it, yet at the same time he could picture her fleeing from the commitment. He'd been the one who had wanted to be a parent, while she had always treated it more as being his accomplice. Their relationship, whatever it currently was, was still new and while she might be capable of loving him, it wasn’t a given that she was ready to even consider the possibility.

Ambushing her with talk of the long-term and a second kid made the stakes even higher. In the end he'd have to tell her, but he wanted to make sure the timing was right. He didn't want to just lay it on her out of nowhere, first thing in the morning… though he had to be mindful that the longer he waited, the more Tom might bond with her, only to potentially risk losing her if she wasn't interested in a family life.
After a few minutes of searching, he located the storage room where the pair were examining crates. Tom was perched on a heavy oak desk about fifteen feet from Ruby. His lap was covered with three large pillows, which helped him support Kaylee without his arms getting too tired.

“How's it going?” Sam asked as he slipped into the room. His hand lightly touched Ruby’s back while passing behind her to sit down next to Tom.

“There's a lot of stuff in here. Half of it doesn't seem magic-related, but I've found a few good apothecary boxes,” she replied, barely looking up from her current crate.

“We found a frog skeleton. It's a lot bigger than the frogs around my house—” Tom stopped himself in the middle of his enthusiastic explanation. His face dimmed a bit as he was drawn back to his new reality. “Will I get to go back home?”

Sam wrapped his arm around Tom, knowing full well that it was sending them that much further down the path of child and parent. He wished that he could say yes, but it seemed likely that Heaven would keep watch on the site for some time. On a personal level he wanted to give Gabin and the others proper funeral rites. As it was, the bodies would be left to rot for days, weeks—months?

Ruby stopped digging through the crate and wiped her dusty hands on her pants. She took a seat on a pile of boxes a few feet in front of Tom and Sam.

“We don't know,” Sam admitted. “Right now it's still dangerous there, but eventually it might be safe again.”

“What attacked us?”

“Angels,” Sam answered. He and Ruby watched the boy trying to process the information. “No one at the coven did anything wrong. Just because they're angels doesn’t mean they're the good guys.”

“But they don't like demons.” Tom didn't look up at them while he spoke, instead he watched Kaylee holding his finger. “They don't like us because the grown-ups have pacts?”

“We don't know if that's part of it.” Sam hesitated for a moment. He looked to Ruby for any insight as to her feelings on how much to share with Tom.

“The angels were looking for Sam and me,” she added in a particularly soft tone. “They wanted to kill us and Kaylee. We didn't know that they would come after the coven until it was too late. If we’d known—we didn't mean for this to happen.”

“They want to kill a baby?” Tom whispered after a long time. “They killed my dad… and….”

Ruby moved to be on Tom’s other side and wrapped her arms around him. He turned so that he was fully embraced in her hug, nearly sitting on her lap. Sam gripped his shoulder in gentle reassurance.

“We're gonna stop them, right?” Tom asked.

“We're going to do everything we can to keep the coven, you, and Kaylee safe.” Sam replied, unable to say with confidence that they'd really be able to stop Heaven.

Ruby glanced over Tom’s head at Sam, her bleak expression silently agreeing with Sam’s omission.
“Sam, you around here?” Bobby’s voice called down the hall.

Sam squeezed Tom’s shoulder before crossing the storage room and peeking out the door.

“What’s up?”

“Cas is awake and he wants to talk to you and Ruby.”

Tom handed Kaylee off to Ruby, then they followed Bobby to the library. Castiel was seated at one of the tables with Kay. Dean leaned against some nearby bookcases and Dylaniel was seated on the corner of a table a few feet away from him. The library's floor still had a considerable amount of dried blood on it, so Sam knelt down in front of Tom, blocking his view of the possibly-upsetting room.

“What if you go play with the other kids for a while?” Sam suggested to the boy. “I bet Belda is putting together something fun. We’re just going to be talking about some boring stuff.”

“I could stay and help you. I don’t mind boring talk,” Tom told him, reluctant to leave.

“You've done a lot and you deserve a break.” When Tom didn't look convinced of the idea, Sam added, “It’ll help Belda for you to get the other kids playing. I know it's hard, but keeping morale up is important.”

“When you’re done talking can you find me?” Tom asked as he slowly began resigning himself to the task.

“Yeah, I'll come find you.”

“Okay.” Tom almost smiled at Sam before running down the hall in search of Belda and the others.

Sam watched him turn the corner, then sighed. The fact was that he wanted to go with Tom, to go play games or read books—to do whatever normal guardians and normal six-year-olds did together. He didn't really know how to be a non-hunter dad. John had barely been there for him as a parent and despite Bobby's warmer nature, he was still a hunter. Sam had hoped that he'd learn some of the parenting ropes by spending time with the coven, but instead he was being called back into something that was surely a tactical meeting.

“What did you want to talk about?” Ruby asked.

Sam followed her into the library and they both took a seat at the same table as Castiel and Kay.

“During the battle one of my sisters spoke to me,” Castiel explained. “She asked me if I had seen a ‘demon child.’”

“What?” Sam leaned forward in his chair. “How do they know about Kaylee? The first two angels are dead.”

“Is this how it was last time or did we change something?” Dean asked Dylaniel and Kay.

“How could we have changed something? The first noteworthy thing we did was going to the coven,” Dylaniel mused aloud.

“Alright, in our time the coven was attacked so we know that's normal.” Kay shook her head. “I don't know if they knew about me this early though.”
“What else did your sister say?” Sam encouraged Castiel to continue.

“She told me that I would be spared if I helped them.”

“What do they want?” Ruby’s voice didn't hide her concern and her eyes scanned Castiel somewhat warily.

“I asked if they wanted the child killed as Uriel did.”

Sam felt sickened by the thought of Castiel being turned into a mole. He looked at the newborn in Ruby’s arms. Ever since the hunters had tried using him as bait to catch Ruby, he'd feared that his child would become a target. Uriel had wanted her dead, but the idea of Heaven wanting that too was crushing.

“But she told me not to hurt it,” Castiel continued. “That was all she said before we were interrupted. I do not believe that they know Kaylee's sex.”

“What does Heaven want with our daughter?” Ruby asked Kay.

“I have no idea.” Kay's expression was grim. “From everything I heard, for at least a decade or so—I mean, I thought orders were kill, not capture.”

“We might not have sufficient vantage points to say what Heaven hadn't tried during the first few years. All our intel from this time is secondhand,” Dylaniel pointed out.

“Heaven may wish to understand how a demon child came about,” Castiel suggested. “Beyond any implications it might have on the state of Lucifer's imprisonment, physiologically it would be of interest to Heaven.”

“Physiologically? What, they want to dissect her?” Ruby’s face contorted slightly at the idea.

“Possibly.” Castiel tilted his head to one side in a move that nearly resembled a shrug. “I'm not sure what is the best method of study.”

Ruby held Kaylee a little closer to her. “That's insane.”

“No, it’s not,” Kay replied. “In our time, when the war escalated to the point where humans started dying off en masse, there was a significant effort in Hell to try to become self-sufficient, including reproduction. Nothing ever really came of it, but if Hell had actually found a way to have kids—time moves 120 times faster than Earth time down there and angels in the service of Heaven are forbidden from breeding. Imagine what that means for army sizes,” she explained, showing a glimpse of her expertise. “The self-sufficiency of Hell has huge implications for all of the planes, especially if war breaks out.”

“You think they're really focused on the long game?” Sam asked, but immediately realized that in Kay and Dylaniel’s timeline, the long game had clearly been Heaven’s focus.

“The first angel we fought was,” Ruby pointed out. “He was worried about how her having a soul would impact a war. Do you think Heaven knows about her having a soul?”

“No idea.” Kay shrugged.

“I do not know,” Castiel added.

“How is Heaven getting their information anyway? I mean, how did they even know about the
coven?” Sam asked, frustrated by their ignorance. “How are we supposed to figure out a plan going forward if we are flying blind? Meanwhile they're two steps ahead of us.”

“Did we tip our hand at all during the fight?” Dean asked. “I was just running through the woods the whole time, so no bombshells there.”

“An angel saw me teleport a group.” Dylaniel confessed. “She immediately returned to Heaven. I don't know if she assumed I was another fallen angel using concealment magic or if she suspected that I'm a nephilim.”

“Some angels saw me using powers: telekinesis and the Light,” Kay added.

“I used telekinesis.” Sam frowned slightly at the thought of struggling to hold the first angel he fought while multitasking. “And I touched another one and killed it with that light thing.”

“Did any of them see you use the Light?” Kay asked.

“I don't know. I wasn't looking around.” Sam pursed his lips anxiously. “What's it mean?”

“To your low-ranking angel, at this point, it's probably just unusual. But any intelligence is going to go up the chain of command,” Dylaniel explained. “The high choirs are going to know that Lucian is in play—maybe two Lucians, actually.”

“That archdemon?” Sam asked. “They think I'm—we're—him? How can they think we're both him?”

“It's a prophetic title, and we both might fit it,” Kay replied. “Hopefully, they're just super confused by there being two of us. Maybe they'll think they're mistaken?”

“Heaven does not believe in mistakes,” Castiel warned.

“Not yet, but wait til they get a few lost battles on their tally,” Kay countered. “That's gonna be an existential crisis-and-a-half.”

“After losing so many angels and seeing all our unknown variables, Heaven isn't going to be taking chances. We should avoid fighting them directly at all costs,” Dylaniel suggested as he stood up from his perch on the table corner and stretched.

“That's gonna be impossible,” Dean speculated. “How are we supposed to stop this train wreck if we can't get out in front of it?”

“In front of a crashing train seems like the worst place to be standing in relation to it,” Castiel replied, legitimately confused by the statement.

“It's a metaphor,” Dylaniel explained. “A poorly chosen one.”

“No, that sounded pretty spot-on,” Ruby commented.

“Dean’s right.” Kay tried to keep everyone from getting too discouraged. “This isn't the kind of thing that we can outrun. We need to figure out a strategy and that means assessing our current and potential resources.”

“Our current resources are fairly limited in terms of sheer scale.” Dylaniel paced a little as he spoke, then settled for leaned against the wall. “It may be worth taking a full inventory….”

Sam was trying to focus on what Dylaniel was saying, but his brain hiccuped. About ten feet to
Dylaniel's left, Dean stood leaning against a bookcase in almost the exact same pose. Sam did a double-take. Dean and Dylaniel appeared kind of similar. With that tiny nudge, Sam noticed how much Dylaniel looked like Dean around a decade earlier. The hair and eye color were different, but the underlying structure was mostly identical.

"Sam, you okay?" Dean asked. "You look like you saw a ghost…. You know what I mean."

"You two…" Sam gestured at Dean and Dylaniel. "You look alike."

Dean and Dylaniel both looked at each other, realized they were standing in the same position, then each self-consciously moved. Dylaniel only stood up straight and adopted a more professional air about him. Meanwhile Dean stumbled a step away from Dylaniel, while trying to pretend he wasn't embarrassed by Sam's observation. Kay facepalmed as the others watched with growing suspicion.

"Are... you two related?" asked Bobby, who'd also known Dean in his early twenties.

"Had our timelines been the same, Dean would've been my dad," Dylaniel admitted unceremoniously.

There was a long uncomfortable silence as the information was processed. Dean blushed reflexively and covered part of his face with his hand. Sam just stared candidly at his would-be nephew. Bobby let out an audible breath.

"You fucked an angel?" Ruby asked, then started laughing uncontrollably. "Holy shit. You Winchester boys are a fucking yin-yang match set."

"You had relations with an angel…." Castiel said to Dean. It wasn't really a question.

For a moment, Dean was worried that Castiel would ask which angel, but instead he just looked somewhere between confused and uncomfortable. Seeing Castiel's reaction made Dean's stomach sink slightly, until his attention was pulled back to the others.

"Did you get to meet her?" Sam asked.

"See, this is why I didn't want to tell you guys!" Dean crossed his arms in front of his chest anxiously. "This is awkward as hell."

"You think your situation is awkward?" Ruby pointed at Kay. "She's older than Sam."

Sam and Kay exchanged an uneasy glance at the realization.

"Look, I don't want to get into it," Dean tried to quell any further discussion. "Dyl doesn't either. So can we just not make it into an episode of Days Of Our Lives?"

"He isn't my dad in the same way that Sam isn't Kay's—more so, actually," Dylaniel added in an attempt to help avoid any unpleasant lines of questioning. "I would prefer that you all don't begin conflating Dean with my dad."

"Now that we got through that, can we get back to the important stuff, like the fucking apocalypse?" Dean encouraged them.

"How old are you?" Ruby asked Dylaniel.

"Twenty-one," he replied.
The question didn't hinge on the presumption that his father and Dean were the same person, so it didn't offend him. In general Dyaniel was happy to answer any questions the others might have, as long as it didn't prove to be a sensitive topic. Despite Dyaniel's indifference to the question, Dean chewed his lip at the obvious attempt by Ruby to probe around the issue.

“No way. You really are young.” Ruby looked between Dyaniel and Dean a few times. “Are you shorter than Dean? Was your mom’s meatsuit short or did Dean have a late growth spurt?”

“I couldn’t tell you about my maternal genetics.”

“Ruby, lay off,” Sam whispered and nodded toward Dean, who was shifting anxiously at the tangential talk about his genetics.

“You have to admit this is fascinating, even off-limits bits aside.” Ruby looked back at Dyaniel. “I'm sorry, what was your full name again?”

“Dyaniel Winchester.”

“Dyaniel.” Ruby considered the name for a moment, then glanced at Dean. “I just can't picture someone like Dean picking that.”

“Don't look at me. I didn't name him.” Dean threw up his hand out toward Dyaniel in an agitated gesture.

Dyaniel’s brow furrowed at Ruby’s statement. “Do you have a problem with my name?”

“No,” she replied. “I just thought Dean would pick something boring and human.”

“My dad called me Dylan. As did humans in general tended. Angels usually preferred to call me Dyaniel,” the nephilim explained, then clarified, “if they liked me. If they didn't like me, they generally would call me by the other species’ name. It was fairly telling at times.”

“They called you plenty of things,” Kay corrected in a bitter tone that Sam immediately recognized.

It was the same proximate anger that Dean had felt when Sam had been picked on at school. Suddenly he was seeing the interactions between Kay and Dyaniel with a new perspective. They weren't just colleagues. They were family, and despite his cool exterior and apparent combat skills, Kay was the older, protective one.

Dyaniel offered a strangely-positive spin. “When it’s the enemy speaking, that’s how you know you’re doing your job right.”

Dean suspected that piece of perverse wisdom had originally come from Dee.

“Oh, I’m sure the shit talking in Heaven’s already begun. Not to mention Lilith already hates Sam.” Kay reframed the idea to fit their current predicament. “Dyl, I know that back home you just killed pretty much anyone who pushed those buttons, but with us so outmatched right now you maybe want to mitigate the number of people that hate you. We don’t have the manpower to defend our names, let alone to allow our names to get out.”

“Our names are already out there,” Sam corrected, nodding to Dean, Castiel, Bobby, and Ruby.

“Well, then we need more manpower,” Dean suggested. The other Ruby had said that Dee had organized alliances from the beginning. Maybe his experience helping Bobby organize the hunters
network had some applicable value. “So how do we collect our hunters?”

“If any are still alive,” Castiel qualified.

“You think Heaven is razing them?” Bobby asked, earning an unenthusiastic look from the angel. “Why waste a perfectly good trap?”

“This just turned into another shooting gallery, didn’t it?” Dean groaned at the very real danger surrounding the operation.

“I’m not risking my life for some hunters,” Ruby said flatly.

“I can't either,” Sam added. "I get that we can't keep our heads in the sand, but I'm not risking my life like I used to." He internally cringed at the thought of what him dying so shortly after Gabin would do to Tom. And without him around, how long would Ruby stay with Kaylee? Would she attempt to take Kaylee somewhere away from Dean and his talk of hunters? “I can't protect my family from the big stuff if I get killed during the little stuff.”

“What about Ellen and Jo? Are they the little stuff?” Dean shot back, a little offended that Sam took a risk on the coven but categorically passed on the hunters.

“I'm not saying—” Sam huffed out a breath at the insinuation that he didn’t care about Ellen and Jo. “Look, I can't teleport or whatever. I'm not the best person to do anything for them. I get that they're family, but if you're really just popping in to grab them, you should be looking at Cas and Dyl. I don't know what you want from me.”

“I want you to not count yourself out across the board. I've seen how bad this can go. I get that you want out. I get that you need to take care of your kid, but pretty soon this is probably gonna be an all-hands-on-deck situation and you need to accept that.” Dean waited for Sam to reply, but he merely pursed his lips. “You spent the last year and a half on a vendetta and looking out for yourself—I'm not criticizing; I'm just saying that a whole bunch of people need our help and when it comes to helping people, you used to be the best.”

“In our timeline Sam was one of the biggest power-players our side had—” Dyaniel started to explain, but Sam cut him off.

“He was King of Hell,” Sam countered the unfair comparison. Of course someone with the backing of Hell would be an asset.

“Independent of that.”

“We aren't these powerhouses you think we are,” Sam told Kay and Dyaniel. “I'm sorry, but the powers I can control with any accuracy only work against demons. The rest of it—I don't know what I'm doing out there and I can barely keep it up for a few seconds before I start getting tapped out.”

Kay got up from her seat at the table and walked over to the closest bookcase. She pulled a hardback book off the shelf, then threw it at Sam, hitting his shoulder. Ruby scooted her chair away from Sam when she saw Kay reach again for the bookcase.

“Seriously?” Sam dodged a second book. “Stop throwing shit at me.”

“Stop me,” Kay replied while continuing to throw books at him.

Everyone else just watched, unprepared to stop the bizarre scene unfolding before them, though
Dean’s expression turned somewhat distressed as he realized what Kay was trying to do.

“It’s been too crazy a day for—” Sam swatted a book out of the air, stubbing his middle finger in the process.

“Yeah, well, I don't remember the last time I had to leisurely block projectiles,” Kay said casually while grabbing some more ammunition.

“Just fucking stop it!” Sam shouted a little, but the book flying at his face stopped.

He was allowed a split-second of pride at the feat before another book flew from the shelf behind him and hit him in the back of the head. The book he'd been holding in front of him fell as soon as his concentration was broken.

“You need some practice, but this isn't as hopeless as you think.” Kay made her point explicit as she went to pick up the armful of books lying about the floor. “You could probably be combat-ready in a few days if you really committed to it.”

“I’m trying to avoid combat.” Sam silently conceded the fact that he might benefit from more training with his powers, but that didn't mean that he wanted to start down the path to being back in the field regularly.

“No, you’re trying to avoid dying,” Ruby corrected. “You should take any leg up you can get on defending yourself and Kaylee.”

Sam nodded in acknowledgement of the point. He may have wanted to limit his exposure to danger, but turning his back on training would only harm them. Despite not being sure to what extent he'd allow himself to voluntarily risk combat, he needed to be able to protect his family. A few months ago, when they were fighting demons, he'd been a very capable opponent. Now their biggest concern seemed to be angels, and while he had a slight advantage over someone like Dean or Bobby, he’d still faltered under pressure.

“It's also a good skill to have when she learns how to throw things across the room,” Kay nodded at Kaylee.

Sam chuckled weakly at the statement. There had been a time when the thought of using inhuman powers to help in parenting would’ve been inconceivable, but he’d given up on trying to be normal long ago. The decision to have Kaylee had closed that door. Now, powers or not, he honestly didn’t care as long as he could be there for his child—maybe children. That meant getting more proficient with his powers and inevitably fighting, but fighting smart.

“Do the hunters even have days for me to train?” Sam asked. “And I still can’t teleport. I’ll do what I can to help when it makes sense, but for this, I’m still not the right person. The whole point is to be in and out. If we get into a fight with Heaven right now—”

“Fine, you’re right.” Dean let him off the hook, then closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose while playing the scenario out in his head. “Fuck! This isn’t gonna work. We just don’t have enough to even get moving on this. Say they are alive still and say we can locate them all. We get to as many of them as we can, at the same time, since Heaven’s probably watching. We can only save as many as are in four locations—less, actually. Four of you can teleport, but only Dyl and Cas can transport other people—and none of the hunters know any of the four of you.”

“I’m still not on board with even this hypothetical plan,” Ruby injected. “Just as a reminder.”

“Three of you,” Dean corrected, further discouraged by Ruby’s lack of support on the proposed
operation. “So what, we get one warning and two rescued out of a few dozen hunters? These choices….”

“Heaven would likely attempt to prevent us from teleporting back,” Castiel speculated. “They know we have at least two people capable of evacuating others. I would be willing to try collecting your friends, but anyone who goes should be prepared to have their flight removed by grapen angels upon landing.”

“Dean, we can barely take care of ourselves.” Bobby tried to lessen Dean’s helpless guilt. “For now we shouldn’t be focusing on resources that we know Heaven is guarding. I’m sorry. I know this is hard, but if they’re still alive it’s because they’re bait.”

“For all we know, they’re all dead,” Ruby added. “We just don’t have enough information.”

“We need more resources,” Kay mused aloud while chewing her lip.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean that we start throwing ourselves into traps,” Sam said. “You can’t even get a hunter out of there without a talisman and good luck getting them to—”

“Those weren’t the resources I was thinking of,” Kay interrupted, then straightened up in her chair, gathering some composure. “I need to go conquer Hell.”
“Conquer Hell…. You're serious?” Ruby nearly stammered the question.

The way Kay had proposed the takeover, she seemed to be regarding it as a chore more than an unprecedented feat. Even among the archdemons, no single demon had controlled Hell in centuries—and that was on Earth’s time scale. According to Crowley, there was some sort of civil war and Lilith was making her run at power, but Kay had other plans.

“Someone has to oppose Lilith and we need those resources,” Kay replied on a practical level, then turned to the more personal issue. “Anyway, it's my realm. I'm not going to just sit back and let it fall into chaos.”

“How is it your realm?” Ruby asked. “You're from Earth.”

She knew Kay was part demon, but it felt strange to consider anyone that wasn't a legitimate smoke-cloud-tortured-soul demon as having any claim on Hell. Granted, she didn't really know much about Kay or the whole Lucian thing, but the fact that it still didn't sit right with Ruby despite her knowing so much more than your average demon… it didn't really nurture confidence overall.

“I took over ruling Hell after my dad. I was queen for eleven years.” Kay looked at Sam. “I mean, if you’d like to make a claim on it then we could probably work something out, but if not then I don't see how there's any question that I should do it.”

“You think I'd want to get caught up in Hell?” Sam raised his hands in forfeit. He couldn't see why she was acting like getting mixed up with Hell was a positive thing.

“Maybe? You’d be good at it,” Kay commented, but she didn’t press the issue. “If you don't want it, that’s fine. There's no need to make you. Me taking Hell might actually take some of the external pressure off of you.”

“But you'd be making yourself a target,” Dylaniel warned. “You were the one saying we couldn't afford to be known.”

“Because of a lack of resources and protection,” she replied. “It's a chicken and an egg, and at this point we need to take the risk, the small risk. Hell is a safe realm.” Kay’s reassurance about Hell earned even more confused looks from Sam, Ruby, and Bobby.

“Maybe Hell was a safe place while you ran it. Right now it's in a civil war,” Dean countered.

“You've never been in Central, let alone the Citadel. If I can help Crowley stabilize the Pits, the Citadel is gonna be the safest place in the three planes outside of the Heart of Heaven.”

“You said we could make our impact through subtle workings. This isn't subtle workings,” Dylaniel told her. “If you do this, you’ll be public knowledge and you’ll be locked back into that
life.”

“I have a responsibility to them—”

“No, you don’t,” Dylaniel interrupted as he crossed his arms.

Kay knew that he was just concerned for her safety and, to a lesser extent, her happiness. If he’d been thinking as an officer she knew he would’ve conceded the strategic point, but he was still reeling from the loss of everyone else in their lives. On some level he’d probably even miss her while she was downstairs.

“I get that you don’t want me taking risks, but tell me that we can just let Lilith take Hell.” Kay appealed to his reason. “Tell me that if you found out about a bunch of fallen or nephilim were about to be wiped out, you wouldn’t be gearing up.”

Dylaniel tried one last time. “They aren’t counting on you to save them.”

“Yeah, they are. They just don't know it yet.”

“Why do you care so much about demons?” Ruby asked, legitimately confused by the concern. She was a demon and she barely cared about demons.

“Because someone has to.” Kay answered, a bit disheartened by Ruby’s question. “We’re people, even if everybody’s forgotten that.”

On some basic level Ruby had known that demons had their own unique personalities and relationship. Beyond being a demon, she’d interacted with many over the years, both inside of Hell and on Earth. In general, she found demons to be less pleasant than humans, but they were far from cookie-cutter villains. Despite that knowledge, it was strange to have someone describe their species as full-fledged people—but maybe that was because the torture in Hell was, by definition, dehumanizing. There was something intriguing about the idea of Hell being ruled by someone who saw demons as something more.

“Yeah… okay.” Ruby nodded thoughtfully, then added in a serious tone, “This I want to see.”

Kay smiled at the vote of confidence. “Thanks.”

“I’m all for stopping Lilith from getting Hell-bombs or whatever, but the rest of us don't know what we're doing,” Dean interjected. “You can’t literally drop off the face of the Earth on us.”

“I’m not gonna just disappear.” Kay paused for a moment to reflect on the fact that the act did require disappearing at some point in the process. “I’ll come back and be around, just not as much depending on how it goes downstairs.”

“You're one of our best assets.”

“And right now I can do the most good in Hell,” Kay reiterated. “This is half stopping Lilith from gaining more ground, but it’s also getting us some more people, so that we don’t have to be the ones running into the traps. In war you want to delegate, otherwise you don’t last long.”

“This isn’t a war yet,” Sam said with less conviction than he would’ve liked. “Not on Earth.”

“Speak softly and carry a big stick—preferably one that kills angels and demons.”

“Lilith's making her play for Hell, but she’s also active on Earth breaking seals.” Ruby reminded
“We don’t have the luxury of taking them one at a time.”

“No matter how much pressure we put on her in Hell, we have to assume that she’ll continue working to break the seals,” Dyaniel advised. “We need to stop her before she gets to sixty-five.”

“Don’t they need sixty-six seals?” Bobby asked.

“If she gets to sixty-five then we’re gonna be fighting with one arm behind our backs,” Kay replied. “Sam and I won’t be able to go into the field.”

Sam leaned forward in his chair. “What do you mean?”

“If she kills one of us or if one of us kills her, that breaks the last seal. It’s the whole Lilith-Lucian dynamic.”

“Once the sixty-fifth seal is broken, it’ll be of the utmost importance to keep Sam and Kay away from Lilith,” Dyaniel warned. “Similarly, before then it’ll probably be very difficult to get to Lilith.”

“If we kill her before sixty-five, then we stop this whole thing?” Ruby asked.

“Yeah, but we really don’t want to risk Sam or me fighting her at this point, period. Who knows when they’ll bust sixty-five.” Kay shrugged. “We can’t take the chance on having bad timing.”

“You guys were like that for years and it was okay,” Dean speculated.

“Yeah, but we had a fucking army. Right now it’s just a dozen of us, and Sam and I are the only ones that can fight without weapons or using the craft. If we get benched you’re gonna be fighting angels exclusively melee. Hence wanting to get some reinforcements from Hell.”

“Even with larger numbers, we would want to avoid melee once we start facing aces and nova.” Dyaniel gave his tactical opinion.

“We want to avoid having Sam and Kay sitting on their hands no matter what,” Dean corrected.

“But if someone other than us kills her after sixty-five we’re fine, right?” Sam mused aloud, somewhat quelling the tangent.

“Yeah,” Kay confirmed. “If anyone other than us kills her at any point we’re fine.”

“Even so, we still need to find out where we stand with the seals. What does that take?” Ruby asked.

“I’ve had a few visions related to seals, but that can’t be all of them,” Sam commented.

“Some angels of sufficient rank and choir are familiar with the full list of seals.” Castiel suggested, “My sister, Anael, fell some time ago. She might be able to assist us.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“No. She was a friend to me while we both served in the garrison, though I have not heard from her since she fell.”

“Anael,” Dean interrupted, then asked Dyaniel and Kay, “the redhead?”

“That’s her,” Dyaniel confirmed.
Castiel sat up a bit more in a gesture that Dean found oddly emotional. “You knew her?”

“She was one of the first angels to team up with our side. If we can figure out how to find her, there's probably a good chance of her helping us.”

“Do you know how they found her in your timeline?” Dean asked.

“No idea,” replied Kay. “I know she was at the brokered alliance in 2014. Her name was second on the contract, right after my dad. So she must've been around before then.”

“She and I never discussed her activities prior to her 2020 Rhine Ops,” Dylaniel stated, earning a few confused looks. “She executed a sequence of textbook flanking maneuvers, which is very difficult against angels. It was very interesting... but it's not helpful for finding her.”

“It may not work, but I could try contacting her on a specific telepathic frequency,” Castiel suggested. “Previously, when she was apparently considering falling, she would confide her thoughts to me there because none of the other angels accessed it.”

Dylaniel raised an eyebrow. “What frequency?”

“Sub3-26,849.211 HZ.”

“Point 211?” Kay’s eyes widened as she turned to her cousin. “Isn't that pirate radio?”

“Yes,” Dylaniel confirmed. “Now we know the origin of it.”

Castiel furrowed his brow slightly. “What's 'pirate radio'?"

Okay, so apart from us keeping a tally on the seals, before or after sixty-five somebody other than Sam and Kay has to down Lilith. And the sooner the better,” Ruby summarized, while passing a fussing Kaylee off to Sam. “So where do we find her?”

“Is she even on Earth?” Sam asked as he rocked the newborn. “The two of us spent months looking for her and she basically disappeared after we took our first shot at her. If she crawled back to Hell, then I don't know what most of us are supposed to do.”

“If she was in Hell, then you and I would go down there and hold her still while some flunky stabbed her in the face.” Kay sounded delighted by the thought. “Rumor is that the sixty-sixth seal can only be broken on Earth.”

“So if you stayed in Hell, Lucifer couldn't get out?” Dean asked Kay, reconsidering the merits of her going downstairs.

“Kaylee and I would have to stay in Hell too,” Sam added, as he held his daughter a bit closer to him in an unconsciously defensive move.

“It wouldn't work long-term anyway. After a while she’d probably just start destroying Earth to provoke us into confronting her,” Kay speculated. “That's what Lilith and Heaven did in our time when they couldn't get traction any other way.”

“What did Heaven want?”

“Michael and Lucifer on Earth at the same time, so they could have their prophesied world-shattering battle,” Dylaniel answered.
“How does messing up the Earth help break Lucifer out of his cage?”

“It didn’t affect the seals breaking. It’s purpose was to make the status quo so undesirable that we wouldn’t find the world worth fighting for any longer.” Dylaniel scowled subtly at a thought. “It’s one of the ways of coercing vessels into taking their angels.”

Dean noticed that, despite Dylaniel and Sam’s discussion, Castiel was staring at him. The angel’s brow furrowed in what Dean hoped was thought and not loathing. His immediate concern was that his association with Dylaniel had somehow damaged their relationship—friendship… or whatever described things between them. Castiel had said he'd try to be accepting of nephilim, but that was without knowing that Dean hypothetically had a personal interest in nephilim. He wasn't sure what that omission did to his credibility with the angel.

"You are a vessel of Michael," Castiel told Dean. It wasn’t a question. “That is why you were under the protection of Heaven. Your status as the Righteous Man cannot be coincidental to you having had a child that is the Michaelsword.”

“Don’t call me that,” Dylaniel said in a particularly cold tone that caught everyone except Kay by surprise. “I don't belong to Michael.”

“I did not mean for it to be derogatory.” Castiel studied the nephilim for several seconds, trying to comprehend the perceived slight. “I… apologize.”

“I understand that you're new to thinking about possession from a vessel's perspective, so I will forgive you for not considered how the term might be taken.” Dean and Kay exchanged a glance at how easily Dylaniel forgave Castiel. “However, going forward I'll be less and less tolerant of disrespect for any vessels.”

“I understand,” Castiel replied.

There was an uncomfortable pause while everyone waited to see if the moment of tension would be allowed to pass or if either of the angelic creatures had anything left to say on the matter. Once the aside had clearly finished, Sam opted to get back to the previous subject. Something had been mentioned that he didn't understand. Granted, lately there'd been a lot that he didn't understand.

“What's the Righteous Man?”

“It was a designation given to Dean by the highest authority of Heaven,” Castiel answered. “When my team was instructed to save Dean from Hell we were told it was vital. I suppose I now know the purpose of our mission. It would make sense that Heaven would want Michael’s last vessel to be returned to Earth in preparation for the Apocalypse.”

“Why not just tell you guys that he's Michael’s meatsuit?” Ruby asked Castiel.

“I do not know.”

“The Sword of Heaven isn't synonymous with the Righteous Man. There may have been other previous vessels of Michael in Hell, but only Dean was the Righteous Man,” Dylaniel explained. “It's a prophetic title, like Lucian.”

“Actually that yin-yang analogy is fairly accurate.” Kay acknowledged Ruby’s joking analysis. “Lucian and the Righteous Man are opposite sides of the coin.”

“Prophetic—what am I supposed to do?” Dean asked with growing alarm. He'd never gotten a clear explanation of that in 2039.
“It’s not ‘supposed to.’ It’s already done,” Dyaniel corrected, but Kay looked anxiously at Dean. He could tell she didn’t want to be having that part of the conversation, which alarmed him more than anything.

“Maybe we should—” Kay started to pull back the conversation, but Dean pressed forward.

“What happened? What did I do?”

“You broke the first seal,” Dyaniel replied. “While you were in Hell.”

“How…” Dean barely got the word out before he felt the blood drain from his face. Deep down he knew how it had happened. The first time he tortured a human soul and liked it, he’d thought he felt his own soul fracture—but it wasn’t the only thing he’d broken. The act had shaken him more than anything else in his life. Nothing had been the same since, not just for him. The world had changed in that moment, because of him.

Dean’s knees buckled. Dyaniel and Kay grabbed him and gently lowered him to the ground. He’d fainted, finally overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the loss and the thought that on some level it had all rested on a choice he’d made.

“Dean?” Sam handed off Kaylee to Ruby, then hurried over to check his brother’s pulse and eyes. Kay looked up at her cousin in exasperation. “Jesus, Dyl. You don’t just drop something like that on someone.”

“How was I supposed to know that he’d react like that?” Dyaniel said in his defense.

“It’s call being conscientious.” Kay shook her head at the whole situation.

“I could wake him up if we urgently need his assistance, but I do not recommend it,” Castiel suggested.

“Just let him rest,” Sam instructed. “I know things are bad, but we can’t keep propping him up on crutches. He should sleep it off.”

“I can help move him,” Dyaniel volunteered as a sort of apology. “Does anyone know which room he’s staying in?”

“18” answered Kay. Dyaniel recognized the room as having been his parents’ room, but didn’t say anything. “But save your power reserves. We can carry him like normal people.”

“Like normal humans,” the nephilim corrected while crouching down to help Sam lift Dean.

“Demons don’t normally pop around carrying people either,” Kay added while making a face that Sam suspected was similar to his own ‘bitch face.’

She followed them as they half-carried, half-dragged Dean down the hall. They placed him on the bed and Sam removed his shoes. Dyaniel left the room unusually quickly in a move that Kay suspected was related to the discomfort of seeing his parents’ bed with only one pillow.

“I’ll stay with him,” Kay told Sam. “I should be the one to talk to him about this whole thing.”

“He might need some time to deal with the…..” He didn’t know whether to categorize it as grief, guilt, or something else. “Emotional stuff before you start talking specifics.”
“I was planning on talking about the ‘emotional stuff.’ I can relate to this.” She gestured toward Dean’s poor state.

“What happened?” Sam asked, fearful of anything that might put his daughter into a similar position.

“We're Lucian; me, your daughter... you, too. Lucian breaks the last seal.” Kay looked Sam in the eyes. “Like I said, we're the other side of the coin. In my world, I freed Lucifer.”

Dean woke up to find Kay leaning against the wall. Her eyes were closed, but she softly chewed her lips. It was a small comfort that she hadn't been waiting so long that she'd resorted to sitting down. The idea that he might've put someone else out even more was unsettling. Though, at that point he wasn't sure he could bring himself to get out of bed, so maybe he was a burden despite his consciousness.

“You okay?” she asked when she opened her eyes a few seconds later.

He turned his head away from her to half bury it in his pillow, unsure if he wanted to accept the invitation to share. “This is all my fault.”

“No, it's not.” Kay stepped forward from the wall, but hesitated to approach the bed. “Everyone has done something—”

“But I started it.” His frustration cut through the emotional fatigue. “I got the ball rolling.”

“You went to Hell for Sam. You were trying to do what was right.” She tried to reassure him, but the message fell flat.

Good intentions had only ever gotten him so far. It seemed like half the time he tried to do something right it went sideways. He'd lost so much in the hunt for Azazel. He'd done so much damage in going to 2039. Now he found out that even something as personal as being tortured had turned out to be a catastrophic failure.

“I broke in Hell. If I hadn't....” He clenched his eyes, trying not to tear up.

Kay walked around the room to the direction he was facing, then sat down on the edge of the bed with enough force to jostle him. Her face was determined, yet caring. In that fleeting moment, she reminded him of Sam. The similarity put Dean at ease a bit more, so he let her see him in his vulnerability.

“Let me tell you something about Hell: everyone breaks down there. That's just part of the place’s charm.” Kay smiled sadly at him. “You were up against an archdemon, in a hopeless situation. The thing that's always blown me away is that you came back from it. I've seen a lot, but I've never seen a damaged soul recover.”

“But why me? I don't deserve.... The one guy to start the Apocalypse, gets a free ride out of Hell.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you're the most motivated to stop it?” Kay shrugged. “I'm not saying you should just shrug this off. I know how hard it is to have been a party to this. But you're here and we have a chance, even if it's a slim chance, to stop this thing before it gets too much momentum, but we need your help.”

“What am I supposed to do? How do I come back from something like this?”
“You can start by talking to me about it. I won't judge. I've seen a lot in Hell.” Kay did him the small mercy of looking around the room rather than watching him closely. “There's usually a moment when the first fissures form, when the soul starts to turn. What did it for you?”

“Alastair, he carved me... for decades. He bled me and whipped me. One day he offered to give me a pass... if I would torture another soul.”

Kay nodded slowly at the thought. “He did that because he knew how much it would hurt you.”

“It did. I couldn't take it. I just wanted it to stop hurting. I didn't want to care about them anymore.”

“And one day you didn't care,” she said, knowing perfectly well it was true.

“One day... they weren't even souls anymore. They were just something I could take away from Alastair when he wasn’t looking, something I could destroy.” Dean swallowed hard. “I don’t know when it changed—when I changed. I just…. It was a craft and I knew I was getting better—Jesus.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, then pressed his palms to his closed eyes. After silently counting to ten he exhaled, then took a deeper breath to calm his nerves.

“Is that what broke you?” Kay asked in as nonjudgmental a tone as he'd ever heard.

“No,” Dean admitted. “Alastair, he said that I was doing a good job. It's stupid, I know it's stupid —”

“It's not stupid.”

“Someone was proud of me.” A tear rolled down his cheek and he didn't bother trying to hide it. “It'd been so long since I'd felt that. Sam and Bobby were the only people that ever made me feel that.”

“You aren't proud of yourself?” Kay asked, surprised by the newly-discovered disparity between Dean and her uncle.

“I started the fucking Apocalypse,” he groaned.

“You've got to forgive yourself, for that, for them.” Kay referred to everyone lost in 2039. “For everything. You're trying your best and it's been a steep climb. You can make it if you aren't carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“I don't know how.”

“You remember that I was the one that accidentally broke the last seal. I was trying to save my dad’s life, but I condemned him to a decade of suffering and sent the world further down the death spiral. Sometimes I think it should've been me to say yes. I was the one who fucked up. I'm not as strong as my dad. I'm not as good of a ruler as my dad. Maybe if he'd been around Alex wouldn't have died? Maybe they could've had more kids—a second chance at a family? Maybe I'd have been a weak enough vessel that they actually could've killed Lucifer?” Kay sighed. “But life doesn't work like that. It's not about logic or symmetry. The just outcome doesn't happen naturally; we've got to fight for it. We bear the burden as best we can while we try to make things right.”

“How do you carry that guilt?”

“I don't always convince myself, but I try to remind myself that my intentions were good and I was
misinformed. That, and I talked to people about my guilt.”

“Who do you even talk to about something like this?”

“I talked to my parents.” Kay clutched one of her necklaces. “My dad forgave me.”

He couldn't imagine his dad forgiving him for messing up a hunt let alone unleashing Lucifer on the Earth. Meanwhile, her dad had personally suffered for the mistake. “I don't know who would forgive me.”

“I forgive you,” she replied with a simple sincerity that both warmed and pained his heart. “So would Sam.”

“If it wasn't for me he'd be out. He could live his life with his kid.” Dean gestured in a random direction to convey the far away hypothetical, but Kay noticed that he'd stopped crying.

“You really want to play that causality blame game? If it wasn't for you dying or even breaking the first seal he wouldn't have been running around with Ruby all those months. He might not have a kid,” Kay countered. “He's not angry at you. He’s worried about you.”

Dean rejected the idea. “He's got too much other stuff going on to be worrying about me.”

“Guess what; he's your brother. That's not how it works.” Kay pursed her lips. “I've had a lot on my plate before and twice as many brothers as him—three times as many if you count Dyl—and I still manage to worry about them all the time—managed.”

“Manage,” Dean corrected. “You're still worrying about Dylaniel… and now Sam and me too.”

“Gods, I feel old all of a sudden.” Kay rubbed the back of her neck, then looked down at Dean, whose eyes didn't seem nearly as damp.

“I think I'm still the oldest sibling,” Dean corrected.

“Cas has siblings.” She raised an eyebrow smugly.

“That's cheating.” He smiled ever so slightly, then his brow furrowed at a thought. “What happened to Alastair in your time?”

“I killed him, with the help of my uncle.”

Dean nodded while he contemplated her answer. “He's out there somewhere.”

Kay nodded. She didn't ask whether he was ready to face Alastair. The answer was something she didn't want to hear as much as he didn't want to admit it.

After Sam had delivered Dean to his bedroom, Ruby returned Kaylee to him, then went back to the storage room she'd been investigating before Bobby had collected them. She carefully resecured the crates on the off chance that any of the kids found their way to the cache. Once she'd finished that, she thought about heading to the library to see the variety of spell books, but she hesitated.

Sam had seemed understandably distressed by everything. As much as she wanted to explore the bunker for anything of value, she worried about him. He was obviously struggling with the prospect of returning to action and he didn't look thrilled by all the talk of Hell. All that, plus the added responsibility of having a newborn....
She found Sam in the bedroom that he'd claimed the night before. He was sitting half cross-legged on the bed, watching Kaylee sleep in front of him. One of his hands absentmindedly touched his lips in an anxious gesture.

“What's wrong?” Ruby sat down on the edge of the bed between him and the door. “I mean, which wrong thing in particular is bothering you now?”

A tiny smile flickered on his lips at her amendment, but he didn't look up from his daughter. He considered the question for a moment and his voice was a bit too quiet when he did finally speak.

“In this moment, in Kay’s timeline, the other me was taking over Hell,” Sam replied. “Now she's going to do that for me.”

“I don't think she minds. The way she was talking about Hell, it's almost like she likes it.”

“Do you think I failed her?” Sam's slightly pink and damp eyes met hers for the first time.

“What?” Ruby’s head tilted to the side and her brow furrowed in concerned confusion.

“She said that she took over after me—him,” Sam corrected himself, noting that it was getting difficult at times to parse them. “Somehow things got set up so that she inherited that insane situation.”

“It was the Apocalypse. Every situation was insane.” Ruby tried to offer some mitigating context.

“It's kind of the Apocalypse now. I don't want to leave something so horrible for my—our daughter.”

He thought about what his death might mean. For Kay it seemed to have left her stuck ruling Hell. As Dylaniel had said, ‘locked into that life.’ More than that, she'd been the one to fight Lilith and free Lucifer. It was like the only thing her dad had left her was burdens. He didn't want to do that to his own daughter.

“You're not leaving anything. You're still alive.” Ruby put her right hand on his left knee. “We’ve got a plan—well, something that might turn into a plan. And we're gonna do whatever we can to fight this thing.”

“What if I'm not prepared to do what's necessary?”

The thought had shaken him. One way or another, the other Sam hadn't done enough. He'd failed. The other timeline had gone wrong and he didn't have confidence that he could do any better. Maybe having the lessons of the other timeline would help them do a better job, but there was a very real difference between having information and having answers. He couldn't know for sure that any course of action was the right choice. Maybe none of them could know?

“You're gonna do what you think is right,” she told him.

“What if that's not good enough?”

“You're a good man. You basically always want to do the right thing, whether it's practical or not… that's shit circumstances” Ruby assured him. “If that's not enough, then maybe enough wasn't on the table at all.”

“Can you do me a favor? If you think I'm wrong, tell me.”
“I always do.” Ruby smirked at a thought. “You're kinda in a bad spot when you need a demon to act as your moral compass… or maybe you're the moral and I'm the practical compass?”

“Either way, you've never led me astray.” Sam smiled, which made Ruby visibly relax.

“Now it's my turn to point out the shitstorm that we're currently in the eye of.”

“I'm the first to admit we're in a bad spot.” Sam looked between Kaylee and Ruby before adding, “but I think I'd be completely lost without you.”

“You're such a fucking dork,” Ruby said before she kissed him.

He closed his eyes as they kissed. Her hand slid up his thigh. The intimate moment was interrupted by a strange sensation. About ten feet in front of him he could sense a demon—he recognized Kay, but more than her mere presence, he felt some sort of emotional turmoil.

He opened his eyes and saw that the bedroom door had been left slightly ajar when Ruby had entered. Kay was in the hallway when she had accidentally spotted them. Her expression was shock unlike he'd seen before. She turned and hurried away without saying a word.

“Shit.” Sam pulled back from Ruby a bit reluctantly. “I need to go check on something. Can you watch her for a second?”

“Uh, sure,” Ruby agreed as he got up from the bed. “What's going on?”

“I don’t know.”

Sam walked down the hall in the direction that Kay had gone. After a minute or so he found her in one of the parlors. She was leaned against the back of an armchair that was still covered with a canvas drop cloth. Her body was turned away from him, drawn in on itself. He was trying to figure out what to say to let her know he was there, but she spoke first.

“I know you're not him.” Her voice wavered. Sam’s heart sank a bit at the realization that he’d reminded Kay of her father. “But I haven't seen him happy in so long. I think I forgot… what he looked like when he was happy.”

He could see her hand touch her face and knew that she was crying. Sam approached her cautiously. Kay didn't turn away from him to hide her tears, but she didn't meet his gaze. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled her into a hug. She buried her face in his shoulder while clutching his shirt.

“I'm sorry,” Kay whispered.

He spoke softly, a little fearful that his own voice would falter at a higher volume. “You don't have to apologize.”

“You shouldn't have to deal with this.”

“You shouldn't have to either. You never should've had to deal with any of this. I know I'm not him, that I never met him, but I know he didn't want you to have this burden.” Sam wanted to spare her from it. It didn't make sense, rationally, but the idea of somehow sparing her from serving Hell made him feel a little better about his own daughter’s chances. “You don't have to deal with Hell. We could find another way to stop Lilith. You’ve been through… I can't imagine what you've been through.”
“That's nice of you to offer.” Kay considered how to explain why she couldn't accept. “Maybe it’d be nice to take a break, to just get away from it all, but that's not how life works. You don't get to choose your lucky breaks. You just get to make the most of what you have.”

“You’re going to try to make the most out of Hell?”

“I'm not gonna try; I'm gonna do it,” Kay corrected as she leaned back, stopping the hug so that she could look him in the face.

Her tone was so certain that it shook him profoundly. In a way her conviction was inspiring, yet also daunting. He could tell that she was used to operating on another level from what he'd done previously. Being in her orbit meant either stepping up or continually feeling helpless to effect her standard of change. He'd already mentally committed to improving his powers and trying to be more in the game, but that was nearly a minimal effort. Making an impact in these extraordinary times would require more.

“I don't understand how you can be so confident,” Sam confessed. “We're overwhelmed.”

“The easiest choices in life are when you really have no choice at all.”

“You're saying you don't have a choice?” The thought deflated him a bit.

“No. I'm saying, of course it's hard. It's hard for all of us, because we have so much ahead of us. We have lots of choices, potential—hell, we can save the world or screw it up. We probably have enough time ahead of us that we can screw it up a few times and not completely ruin everything.” Kay smiled sadly. “Yeah, that's hard, but that's something you've got to appreciate whenever you can. This struggle you're feeling, and I'm feeling it too, is what's worth fighting for. That's freedom and responsibility. It's all the good in life.”

Sam hadn't really considered the fundamental source of all his fears: deciding how much and when to tell Ruby about the other them; deciding whether or not to take on a guardian role for Tom; deciding whether or not to put his personal safety before that of others, in order to ensure he was around for his daughter; deciding to categorically turn from all things Hell, or risk recreating moments from Kay’s dad’s life.

He was overwhelmed by choices because he had the power to affect change. Reflecting on those fears, he knew that in his heart he didn't believe in fate. He couldn't believe that their lives were prewritten. The acknowledgment of the idea both comforted and intimidated him. In a very real way he didn't feel as helpless as he had while fleeing from Lilith’s demons or Heaven. They were relatively safe and their purpose was clear. But beyond stopping the Apocalypse, more than that he was fighting for his family.

“It's amazing you're this optimistic after everything.” He meant it as more of a compliment than a criticism of their circumstances.

“I wouldn't have survived this long if I wasn't an optimist.”

“Touché.” Sam nodded at the significance of that point. After a moment he ventured into a more difficult subject. “Can I….”

“What?” She encouraged him to continue.

“It's nothing.”

“What?” Kay tried again. “What were you gonna say?”
“I was going….” Sam sighed. “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

The invitation to essentially ask her anything reminded him of the disparity in their relationship. To him, she was almost a stranger that he felt some weird duty to, like a long lost cousin or half-sibling. He wanted to get along with her and help her if possible, but there wasn’t the level of trust necessary to fully confide in her. Whereas in Kay’s mind, he was familiar, if not her actual family. To her, he was someone she could be vulnerable around, and based on where she came from, that vulnerability was probably a rare gift.

“How’d he die?” Sam knew he could be dragging up unpleasant memories, but part of him needed to know one of his potential downfalls. “Your dad.”

“He didn’t,” she replied with a little more composure than he'd expected. “I thought… you said that you took over for him.”

“I thought… you said that you took over for him.”

“I did,” she confirmed. “He sacrificed himself so that we could trap Lucifer. He was Lucifer’s vessel.”

The news shook him, but honestly on some level he wasn’t even surprised. Ever since he’d found out that he was rumored to be Lucian and, more generally, associated with Lucifer, he’d felt uneasy. With the news that he was in some way demonic, maybe through Lucifer’s will, it grew stronger. Then there was the fact that Dean was a vessel to Michael and in many ways their circumstances seemed to run parallel… but Sam’s association had been more sinister.

As unpleasant as it was to learn that he was indeed connected to Lucifer, it was almost more upsetting to imagine himself becoming vessel to an angel. He tried to imagine becoming an empty shell to another person, little more than a walking corpse, like Castiel or Ruby’s bodies—at least Ruby’s meatsuit had been void of a soul when she took it. And those possessors were good people; the other Sam had given form to a monster. The thought made him shudder.

“I’m Lucifer’s vessel?”

“My dad, you, me—it’s passed down through the blood.”

He nodded at her words, remembering the discovery of the grace in Kaylee right after she was born. “And Kaylee.”

“Her too.”

“She’s just a baby….” Sam sighed at the new threat to his daughter. “If Lucifer gets out, he’s going to come for us?”

“He still needs consent to possess one of us,” Kay said as a small comfort. “But, yeah.”

“Why did your dad say yes?” Sam asked, but as soon as he’d posed the question, he knew at least part of the answer. Some instinct in him called out that the obvious reason to say yes was so that his daughter wouldn’t. There was no doubt in his mind that that had been a motivation of the other Sam. Whether he’d ever told Kay was another matter.

“Lucifer’s presence on Earth, it created so much damage, at home and in the world. It was the only way we had of stopping the hemorrhaging. Sometimes it didn’t seem worth it. My dad would’ve disagreed.” Kay’s lips formed a slight smile, but her eyes had lost some of their warmth.
I’m sorry about how it ended.”

“I haven’t reached the end yet.” Kay looked up at Sam with an earnestness that made him incapable of breaking eye contact. “Could you do something for me?”

He didn’t even have to hear the request to know that he’d attempt it. “Yeah.”

“I know this is a dumb, maybe impossible thing to ask of a person, but….” She hesitated nervously. “Can you try to be hopeful?”

“Wow.” Of all the things she could’ve asked, that was not something he could’ve imagined. All things being equal, he wanted to have hope, but it seemed like such a fleeting mindset nowadays.

“I told you it was dumb.”

“No, it’s not. I’ll try, I promise.”

“Thanks.” Kay averted her gaze bashfully. “Life isn't perfect—”

“You don't have to tell me that twice. I mean, have you met me?” he joked, then thought better of it. Sam extended a hand to her. “I'm Sam. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Kay.” She shook it with a smile. “Likewise.”

“I should start getting ready to meet with Crowley,” Kay said, then added apologetically, “the longer I put this off, the worse the mess downstairs’ll be.”

“Here.” Sam reached into his pocket, withdrew the silver talisman that Crowley had given him at Bobby's house, and offered it to her. “If you’re really set on Hell—it might take some time for me to wrap my head around it, but… I’m hopeful that you know what you're doing.”

“Thanks. Do you want to watch some of the negotiations?”

“I'm not going to Hell. I can't.” Sam couldn't imagine wanting to go under any circumstances, but with a newborn and everyone else in such a delicate state, it seemed like a horrible idea to leave Earth.

“I can't meet Crowley in Hell for the first time. He doesn't know me, so I doubt I could get inside the Citadel without a hundred guards jumping me. And I really don't want to waste the element of surprise on my allies.” Kay thought for a moment. “Dyl would probably kill me if I summoned Crowley straight into the bunker.”

“I’d be with Dyl on this.” He wanted to keep their sanctuary need-to-know, even among their theoretical allies. “I don't know him. I don't trust him.”

“This really is some sort of opposite world where up is down and hot is cold,” She commented, then shrugged. “Eh, maybe it's just that not enough time has passed? Either way, if we can get a solid alliance with him, he’ll be one of the best resources you’ll ever meet.”

“Good to know.” Sam had a hard time picturing himself trusting a sneaky sort of demon like Crowley. Though he supposed it might be easier to trust a non-violent sneak with a common goal more than a direct brute with a conflicting goal. “If you aren't going to Hell and he isn't coming here, where are you going to meet?”

“A crossroads, of course. I'm sure Dyl will want to be there too. He could bring you or anyone
else along,” Kay replied. “That reminds me, I need to go grab a tin.”

“I feel like the Hell talk will go over my head.” Sam gave himself a self-deprecating out.

“That's half the reason to go,” Kay said as she started walking out of the room. “You’ll probably learn something.”

After Kay left to get her reagents, Sam started heading back to Ruby. He was almost back to his room when he saw Dean heading away from him down a perpendicular hallway. Dean's shoulders were somewhat slumped and he was moving with a little fatigue.

Sam called out as he hurried to see how his brother was doing. “Hey Dean, are you okay?”

“I… no,” Dean confessed. He looked around, unable to settle on some tangible manifestation of his disappointment. “I didn't mean for this to happen.”

“I know,” Sam assured him. He was certain there was no way Dean would've knowingly allowed the first seal to be broken. “It's not your fault.”

Dean’s lips thinned. He felt ashamed at his weakness, at how much he'd craved even a small amount of praise. The thought of telling Sam made him cringe. Maybe he could confide about his feelings about breaking the seal in general. But he told himself that knowing why the seal was broken would probably lead to Sam feeling some guilt. Who knew if Sam was even capable of understanding that kind of desperation? As much as he wanted to continue striving for better communication with Sam, it was still such a raw wound that he wasn't quite ready to expose it.

“It's just a lot to process right now. I need some distance. I'll be fine.”

Sam thought about trying to press Dean for more information, but decided against it. Forcing the issue could harm their delicate relationship. Instead he would try to make himself available as a source of support.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded, then smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

Ruby came around the corner with Kaylee. She spotted Sam and moved to hand off their daughter.

“I just bumped into Kay. She's gonna go meet with Crowley in a few minutes. I think I'm gonna go watch,” Ruby explained.

“Oh... she suggested I go.” Sam realized that he'd been assuming Ruby would be available to continue watching Kaylee, but that wasn't actually a given. He wasn't sure if she'd been helping him with their daughter as a favor or because of some independent parental instinct. Either way he didn't really feel comfortable subordinating her desire to do other things to his own.

“You actually want to watch a Crossroads demon deal?” Dean asked her. “I've seen Kay talk deals. It could take hours.”

“This could be the biggest conversation in the history of Hell. Damn straight, I want to go,” Ruby replied.

“I hadn't really thought of it that way,” Sam admitted. His lips thinned a bit. He was actually starting to get disappointed about not going.
“You aren't thinking of dabbling in the Hell politics, are you?” Dean asked Sam.

The thought was a little unsettling to Dean. He'd wanted Sam to start getting more skin in the game, but at the same time he was pretty well terrified of his little brother venturing too far down the road to Hell. It'd been a bit unnerving to hear Kay and Ruby encouraging him to become more proficient with his powers, though rationally he understood that it was probably a good thing. But emotionally revisiting his own time in Hell had helped stoke those fears anew.

Despite that, when it came right down to it, he was trying to learn to trust Sam, including with his powers. He had to push aside the fear that Sam would end up like Kay’s dad. Using powers didn't mean that Sam would become… inhuman. Dean furrowed his brow at his limited vocabulary and the way it fed into his negative thoughts.

“No.” Sam rejected the idea that he might go to the meeting for some professional interest. “It'd just would've been kind of interesting to watch, and nice to make sure Kay is alright.”

“That's fair,” Dean agreed. He noticed Sam describing it as a previous possibility, then realized Ruby had essentially called ‘not it’ on watching the baby. For a second he thought about leaving Sam to be stuck on baby duty in order to keep him away from the Hell talk, but he knew that was dismissive of Sam in exactly the way he was trying to avoid. “If you want, I can watch Kaylee for you two.”

Sam double-checked. “Are you sure?”

“I've taken care of a baby before. It's fine,” Dean assured them, but added, “just don't stay out too long. I really don't want to go with Cas on an emergency formula run or something.”

After collecting all the necessary supplies and taking a headcount, Kay, Dyaniel, Sam, Ruby, and Bobby teleported to a crossroads. It was a mundane dirt intersection in the middle of a field in central Washington, but it held some sort of sentimental value for Kay. More importantly, it was secluded enough that no one was likely to stumble upon them no matter how long the process took.

Everyone but Kay stood to the side of the road. They were mostly there out of curiosity, though Dyaniel watched their surroundings for any possible threats.

Kay placed Crowley's talisman inside the small tin, then buried the box in the ground. Her hands patted the dirt flat with a little more reverence than Sam had ever seen in the ritual before. When she stood up, her whole body conveyed dignity. It was strange seeing how she could slip into such a different role on a moment's notice. He couldn't tell if she was putting on an act or if her composure was entirely sincere. Either way it was an impressive bit of body language.

Within seconds Crowley appeared in front of her. His expression was wary, but not hostile. He looked her up and down before taking in the presence of their audience.

“Generally speaking I don't take referrals,” Crowley commented with a sidelong glance at Sam.

“These are desperate times,” Kay replied.

“You have no idea.”

“Actually, I’d wager that between the two of us, you're the one with less information—and I'd like to rectify that,” Kay said with a sly smile. “For reasonable consideration of course.”

"Of course.” Crowley smiled and relaxed his posture a bit. “I don't think I've had the pleasure.
"You are?"

"Lucian." She blinked her eyes black. “But you can call me Kay.”
“You’re Lucian?”

Crowley took in Kay’s appearance. She wasn’t short by any means, but her build was somewhat lean and the casual t-shirt and jeans she wore made her unassuming, though she stood with an unflinching intensity that gave him pause.

After contemplating her for a second, he looked pointedly at Sam and said, “I have reason to believe that that spot has already been filled.”

“She's the one here to talk.” Sam raised his hands a bit to indicate he wasn't touching the substantive conversation. “We’re just watching.”

“Sam and I both meet the prerequisites of the title and I'm the one prepared to deal,” Kay replied, drawing back the archdemon’s attention. “You're looking for leadership to help unify and control Hell. I'm the best person for the job.”

“Why's that?” Crowley invited her to continue the pitch.

“Because I've already done it.”

Crowley breathed a laugh at the statement, but realized no one else seemed amused by the clear joke. “You're daft.”

“No, I'm prescient,” Kay responded coolly. “You have two big problems. The obvious one is Lilith. She's got Hell in a stranglehold, but you already knew that. The problem that is playing second priority is the angels.”

Crowley straightened at the mention of angels. Almost no one knew of the angels as being a potential threat. Even within Hell, a realm supposedly crafted by an angel, the word had barely been uttered. Yet the few in the know had recently humored the species as an enemy. After the investigation into the assault on Hell to save Dean and his recent deal for holy oil, the unpleasant possibility was looking more and more real.

“What do you know about angels?” Crowley probed.

“Enough to know that your protections on Hell need to be foolproof. All thirty-three gates—”

“There are twenty-one gates,” he interrupted, pleased to catch her in a mistake.

“There are thirty-three,” Kay restated firmly. “Whether you know about all of them is another matter. There's one at 327x1618. Go and check if you like. It's located on the ceiling, probably under some dust at this point.”

“Why would there be a gate on the ceiling?” He was trying to imagine picking a less practical
location.

“Because the realm was made by an angel and they love to fly even more than us.”

“Us?” Crowley took a few steps, circling Kay to get a better look at her.

She noticed Dylaniel move his hands to rest on the grips of his knives, but otherwise the subtle gesture of concern went unobserved.

The archdemon continued, “I see your eyes and you're talking about Hell, but I've never heard of you. And I haven't seen a cloud of black smoke from you. So when you say ‘us’ I have to wonder.”

She’d expected this sort of understandable challenge. “You want to see more?”

“Yes,” he replied, expecting her to smoke out, but instead he witnessed something unexpected.

Kay manifested her horns, syf, claws, and fangs. She didn’t bother manifesting her wings since their angelic connotations might beg more questions than they’d answer. It took a significant amount of willpower to not look at Sam, Ruby, or Bobby for their reactions. While she heard Ruby exhale the word ‘fuck’ none of them detracted from the moment by fainting or the like. In hindsight, she probably should’ve warned them, but aside from Dean, it’d been years since she’d had to explain her appearance to anyone.

“I can do even more party tricks in Hell.” Kay intentionally flashed the syf tracing up her horns with an almost ember-like glow.

“What are you?” the archdemon eyed the syf, recognizing the regal pattern of his own creation.

“The First of the Second Season.” Her grin was all fangs. Over Crowley's shoulder she could see Dylaniel roll his eyes at her flaunting.

“You really are a demon, aren't you?”

“Yes. I'm the first born demon.”

Crowley looked at the no-longer-pregnant Ruby. He quickly recognized the physical similarities between Kay and Sam and Ruby. “What is this, some sort of accelerated aging effect?”

“No. I'm from an alternate timeline’s future,” Kay replied, as if her suggestion was any less absurd. Crowley started to open his mouth to express what was undoubtedly skepticism, but she continued, “That's how I know about the twelve hidden gates. That's how I know that Mir has been lingering around the Seat. And that's how I know about May 30th, 1723.”

Crowley checked the others for their reactions to the date of his human death, but they all just seemed confused. “Who told you?”

“You did.” Kay smiled softly in an attempt to reassure him. “I understand your concern. How can you trust someone like me with a story that sounds so insane? The answer is to not trust me. Do your own investigation.”

“Without tipping my hand.” Crowley brought up how difficult it would be to verify who she was without doing things like potentially revealing the location of new gates.

“With respect, I can only help you sate your curiosity so much.” She reverted back to her normal
appearance with a shrug. “The more I'm involved in your inquiry, the less you’ll trust its results.”

“So I'm on my own to figure this out.”

“Only until you decide to accept my help,” Kay incentivized. “My goal is to enter into a contract with you, but we don’t need to fully commit at this point. I'm willing to make it severable with each subsection contingent on our mutual satisfaction of previous performance. If either of us don’t like where our partnership is headed, we can end it.”

He considered her more thoughtfully than before. "What's your game?"

"I want to survive, but I would prefer to flourish. And I want the same for Hell."

"Hell doesn't flourish," he replied as if it was a given.

"You mean because we serve a function? A cog in the machine can't be something more?" She strolled around the dirt intersection, growing visibly more at home in the conversation. "I respect order. I revere our role in the planes, but that doesn't mean I accept stagnation. I won't settle for leaving ourselves open, begging for the other planes to disrespect us. This war with Lilith not only harms us directly, but we expose ourselves to attack from the outside."

"I appreciate that you're thinking long-term, but my immediate concern is obviously the immediate," Crowley rebuffed.

"That's part of why I think we'd make a good team. I naturally want to look out for the farther-off dangers. You're already familiar with the on-the-ground issues. I also think that you'll find me to be versatile in my approach to warfare."

"Do you have much experience with war?"

"A lifetime." Kay didn’t attempt to quantify all her years split between Earth and Hell. "If you provide me with enough up-to-date intelligence, I can offer you tactical advice with the benefit of having seen one way this could play out. You aren’t going to get that offer anywhere else."

"The definition of priceless." Crowley provided the end of her sales job for her. “What sorts of information do you want?"

"Let's get some insurance on this conversation going forward." Kay slowed him down. As much as she intended on aiding Hell regardless of her personal benefit, she wanted to keep up some appearance on self-interest and caution. Nothing soured a Crossroads deal faster than altruism. "If you decline my offer for a formal alliance, you agree that neither you nor your agents will harm, through volitional act or knowing omission, myself, the four of them, Dean Winchester, Castiel—"

"Who's Castiel?" Crowley asked, worried by the unknown variable.

"An angel."

"That's going to be a sticking point.” He shook his head. “As a policy matter, I can't support blanket immunity for an angel.”

"He's fallen. He won't fight against Hell."

"Will you give me your word on that?"

"Yes," Kay answered without missing a beat. She knew that this Castiel was not as open-minded
as her uncle. Despite her concerns that he might still harbor tribalistic animosity towards Hell, she knew hesitating would weaken her bargaining position. "I swear on my name that the angel Castiel will not fight against Hell, with the exception that he be free to reasonably and in good faith combat the agents of Lilith and Lucifer, should zie arise and take control of the Abyss."

"I'm sorry." Crowley's mouth hung open in surprise. "What did you just say about Lucifer?"

Crowley listened silently as Kay and Dylaniel explained the basics of the seals and the potential for Lucifer rising. Sam, Ruby, and Bobby had heard it all before, except for the fact that Sam and Kay were Lucifer's vessels. When that news dropped, Ruby looked up at Sam, but he didn't seem surprised. She tapped a finger on his leg, catching his attention.

"You knew?" she whispered to him.

"Kay told me just before we came here."

Ruby hadn't really had a chance to think about the implications of Sam and her daughter being vessels to Lucifer. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Sam confessed.

He wanted to tell her that they'd be fine, but she was smart enough to know any reassurance wasn't guaranteed. Instead he shifted towards her and let his fingers touch her wrist. When she didn't pull away, he caressed her arm subtly. It might not have been as comforting as holding her hand, but he didn't want to risk embarrassing her in front of everyone.

While he was distracted whispering with Ruby, the negotiations seemed to have taken a turn to the technical. He had some difficulty following the conversation, but, he suspected, not as much as Ruby and Bobby. Dylaniel’s understanding was indeterminable thanks to his perpetually wary expression. It wasn’t that Kay and Crowley were discussing complex ideas. The trouble was that somewhere along the way they had both slipped into using terms of the trade. Despite the fact that they were talking about Hell, it occasionally reminded Sam of a few of his pre-law and business classes from college.

"When was the last realm-wide inventory and census?" Kay asked. Her arms were crossed and her right index finger tapped her lip thoughtfully.

"Across all of Hell, we haven't had a census in twenty-eight years, but several of the more orderly castes on our side have records up through two years ago. A property inventory of all assets hasn’t been done since well before Lilith’s coup. Most everyone beyond us bookkeepers only care about the intake."

"I’d need the most up-to-date report of the content of each of the tranches," Kay instructed Crowley, who nodded, intrigued by the request.

"What's a tranche?" Ruby whispered to Sam and Bobby.

Bobby shrugged, but Sam’s eyes had widened at the familiar term. "It's like a subset of a group of assets based on quality like ‘prime’ versus ‘subprime,’” Sam replied quietly. "I don't understand how they're using it."

"The Arbris have the numbers based on the analysis of all souls when they come in. That could tell you some of what you want to know, but that won't tell you how close the souls are to breaking,” Crowley answered Kay.
They were talking about the economics of Hell, a system built on human souls. On some level Sam had known that souls were the primary good Crossroads demons dealt in, but to listen to them being talked about the same way someone might talk about stocks or commodities was bizarre.

“We’ve been a tad preoccupied with the civil war to maintain business as usual,” Crowley added, a bit defensive of his lack of information.

“Well that's a huge mistake on your part,” Kay replied.

Crowley's tone turned annoyed, but he didn't raise his voice. “We're fighting a superior force.”

“No, you're fighting a mismatched force,” Kay corrected, then raised her finger to indicate that she wasn't done speaking. Ruby shot Sam a shocked look, conveying how rare it was to essentially shush an archdemon. “You're playing defense, so it's understandable that you're making panicked attempts at military action, desperately trying to keep your head above water. Your problem is that you're matching their strength with your weakness. You can't maintain business as usual? Your strength is business. You should be killing them with it.”

“Lilith won't negotiate a truce,” Crowley stated flatly, though his demeanor towards Kay warmed somewhat.

“I'm not talking about a truce. I'm talking about victory.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Issue a realm-wide notice that the Arbris are performing a valuation on all trade goods: souls, vested curses, hounds, everything,” Kay replied.

“A realm-wide valuation in the middle of the a war?” Crowley's brow furrowed. “Lilith's side won't tell us what they have.”

“State right up front that it's to set a new market price, but only for disclosed goods,” Kay added. “If anyone of the other side wants anything, they have to tell you what their assets are first.”

“What are the benefits to them?”

To his surprise, Sam could see where the scheme was going. By merely making a big show of syncing up both sides of Hell’s economy, it hinted at some future offer to come. Crowley himself was taking that same bait. It almost didn't matter what came next. Rumors of a truce or plans to bribe the other side would cause some level of upset on Lilith's side. If they could create enough suspicion within Lilith's ranks, then it might snowball from there.

“Profit, if they can join us fast enough,” she answered.

“And if they don't?”

“Then they're going to learn some very painful lessons about supply and demand.” Kay’s voice turned cold. “I'm not above total war, but I'm hopeful it won't come to that.”

“You really think that Lilith's underlings will deal with you guys?” Ruby asked from the sidelines, drawn in by such an unusually nonviolent prospect.

“Just because we're in the middle of a war doesn't mean people will stop trying to make a profit.”

“Quite the opposite,” Crowley agreed. “I'll have the Council approve the valuation so we can get
as much information as we can on the current tranches. Though I doubt we'll get any response from the Torquean, Luxia, or Wæcnan castes.”

“The Luxia are too faithful to turn, but it was always my impression that the others castes mostly followed out of fear or pride,” Kay observed aloud. “There are few things that can overcome both fear and pride: greed is one of them.”

“Also, I need to know which dungeons the hunters’ souls are being worked over in,” Kay said after finishing off nearly two hours discussing tactical options as well as contract terms. Bobby and Ruby both were a bit worn by the lengthy and sometimes difficult-to-follow conversation. After the first fifteen minutes Dylaniel had taken to walking the perimeter while staying within eyesight and earshot. Sam was riveted the whole time, but the mention of hunters drew everyone else back in.

“Don't tell me you want to spare them?” Crowley asked in disappointment while glancing at Bobby and Sam.

“Of course not; I'm gonna make them an offer,” Kay replied, earning expressions of intrigue from the current and former hunters as well as the archdemon.

“You aren't going to help them?” Bobby was a bit crestfallen.

“That depends on how you look at it, but, no, I'm not gonna give them a free pass just because I happen to know some hunters,” Kay said almost apologetically. “It's Hell. We don't do nepotism. We do order.”

Crowley smiled at her response. “You may fit in well in Hell after all.”

“You have no idea.”

“What's the deal you’d plan to offer them?” the archdemon inquired.

“If they’ll allow themselves to break and swear to oaths of loyalty to Hell—”

“You’re going to ask hunters to swear loyalty to Hell?” Crowley nearly laughed at the idea.

“What would you give them?” Sam asked. To him the thought of hunters being flawed and self-interested didn’t seem so far off. “It's a deal, right?”

“They won't have their personalities torn away by the Torquean,” Kay answered. “And they'll have the full rights of a demon.”

“Rights?” Crowley and Ruby both echoed.

“One of the things demons crave the most is dignity, and there's nothing in the natural order of Hell that stops us from having it. You can still suffer with dignity.” She appealed to his sense of order, then reframed it as another tool. “I’m not talking about it touching the souls. If we allow it for just demons, there's no harm to our inventory. Dignity can be given by us for nearly nothing, in exchange for so very much.”

Crowley toyed with the idea. “You're selling feelings?”

“No, I'm selling a system. In my Hell….” Kay chose her words thoughtfully. “It is a living clockwork, an ecosystem, a bureaucracy, and a homeland. In my Hell, we don't have slaves. We
“If we decide to proceed what do you want in exchange for your help?” Crowley asked.

“We need assistance protecting certain parties.” Kay gestured to Ruby and Bobby to elaborate.

Ruby provided her demands. “I have two dozen witches in need of a new home and protection, enough to stand up against angels, including scrying.”

Sam noticed Ruby’s talk about relocating the survivors from her coven. The thought made his stomach sink a bit. He hadn't considered the possibility that the coven would end up leaving the bunker in the near future. He’d been assuming that the remainder of the coven would stay nearby, since that’s what had apparently happened in Kay’s timeline. Also, for months, he’d been planning on staying with them in one form or another for a little while after Kaylee was born.

Beyond the issue of expectation, he was facing the prospect of being separated from Tom. Sam knew that it wasn’t his place to say anything one way or another when it came to the boy’s future. He wasn’t actually a guardian to him, but for the last day or so he’d been at least facing that possibility. But this timeline was different. There were more adult survivors from the coven. Tom didn’t need him the same way that Kay’s brother had needed their parents. The thought was strangely painful.

“And there are a few dozen hunters in the field, who Heaven might be watching,” Bobby added. “We want them picked up and brought to a safe place.”

“You want us to make a hunter petting zoo?” Crowley teased. “It's that kind of novel thinking that Hell can get behind.”

“If you can get them out of the initial danger, then we have the ability to hide each of them from angelic scrying,” Ruby explained.

“How’s that?” Crowley asked, but Kay raised her hand to stop Ruby from saying anything.

“That's another chip on our side of the table,” Kay stated firmly. “We’ll also need forces on Earth to help defend the seals that Lilith is attempting to break.”

The Archdemon raised an eyebrow. “You know the locations of these seals?”

“They're more like rituals, which may or may not be bound to specific locations,” Ruby corrected.

“We’re pursuing a source who might be able to give us a comprehensive list of seals,” Kay informed him.

“And Hell will gain access to this list?” Crowley nearly purred.

“That sounds like a bad idea if I’ve ever heard one,” Bobby muttered. Dyaniel nodded to the old hunter in agreement.

“If you want our soldiers, you’ll have to tell them where to go,” Crowley replied.

“Split up the list and encrypt each with a different cypher. That way it's at least harder for our side to betray us and we’d know who they are if they do,” Sam suggested.

“That sounds reasonable,” Crowley agreed, then added with a smile, “Glad to have you onboard as well, Sam.”
Dean held baby Kaylee as he casually wandered the halls of the bunker. It was a very different environment than what he had seen in 2039. Many of the rooms were still in the process of being restored to some function, whereas in the future there had been a warmth. It felt like a home. He supposed that their current surroundings could someday have that. It was full of that potential, like the newborn he was helping care for. A few years in the future she might run around the corridors and call it home.

For a moment he tried to imagine someday having a child of his own. He'd always known what it was like to take care of a child, but because his experience had been helping care for his brother he'd never thought of childcare as a particularly parental activity. It was hard to speculate what difference it would make for him to care for his own child.

He'd barely interacted with the other Dean while he was in 2039. He seemed like a good father. Dylaniel at least seemed to respect him. He supposed, more importantly, Dylaniel seemed to love him.

He and the other Dean hadn't had a chance to talk about John or how the relationship with their dad had affected parenthood. The truth was that one of the big reasons he hadn't wanted kids was because he didn't know how to be the kind of father he would’ve wanted to be. It scared him to think that he could hurt a child, but wasn't that so much of what he knew? He wasn't dumb. He knew that his childhood was abusive and that that sort of behavior tended to manifest in the victims' later relationships.

It was hard to think of how he could learn to be a caring dad, the way Dylaniel’s dad had been, but then he figured it out. The other Dean had waited to have a kid eight or nine years after Sam had had Kaylee. By that point Sam had three kids. Based on everything he'd seen in 2039, and between his brother and niece, Sam was a really good and kind father. Sam was his inspiration, even if it was objectively early to say so.

With that small amount of reassurance, he thought of the photograph of the Dee with baby Dylaniel. There wasn't much of a resemblance between the newborn Kaylee and the newborn Dylaniel from the photo. Kaylee's hair and eyes were darker. It may have been his imagination, but in the photograph Dylaniel may have been smaller. Maybe the size difference was a characteristic of nephilim or he was born a bit early?

Dean rocked Kaylee for a moment, then kissed her forehead. He took a seat in one of the parlors’ chairs and put his feet up on a coffee table, settling in for an extended stay. She'd fussed when he'd tried to put her down for a nap, so he resigned himself to holding her until she fell asleep.

The truth was that he was enjoying the tiny measure of peace. He'd been through so much in such a short time. For maybe the first in his life—that wasn't a djinn-induced-hallucination, that is—he welcomed the domestic escape. It wasn't that he wanted to retire from hunting or fighting, but he could see some of the appeal in having more in his life, a sanctuary.

"You seem to have experience with children," Castiel commented as he entered the parlor.

Dean sat up a little more at his arrival. He felt a bit awkward holding a baby while alone with Castiel. On some level he knew it didn't mean anything. They weren't even remotely at risk of being in a relationship, though it brought up uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that he wasn't prepared to look at. He felt like an ass for wanting to avoid Castiel through no fault of the angel's. With some effort he pushed the discomfort aside and tried to reply as he would with anyone else.

"I helped raised Sam," Dean explained. "So far, she's easier than him. I'm also older now, which
"Dylaniel seems...." Castiel hesitated, trying to find the right wording. "Competent."

It was both amusing and sad watching Castiel struggle to say something nice about Dylaniel. Dean was so distracted by the absurd circumstances surrounding the statement that he almost didn't notice that the praise wasn't actually directed at the nephilim.

"Are you trying to compliment me on Dyl?"

Castiel tried to justify his attempt. "Even if you were not the one to raise him, he does reflect on you."

"Yeah, well, nothing against him, but I don't really want him to reflect on me."

"Why is that?" Castiel tilted his head slightly in confusion, a gesture that reminded Dean of Dylaniel.

"Because I'm not his dad. I'm so far from his dad...." Dean shook his head at the comparison. "The other me had a family—I'm not ready for that."

"Aside from the current demands of the Apocalypse, you appear capable of attending to a child," Castiel replied as he sat down in the chair next to Dean.

"That isn't the point. I'm not in a relationship for having a kid," Dean said. "I know you don't really come from a family that grows, but having kids is complicated. It's not just about replacing old people with young ones."

"I have come to realize that there are many things about humans that I do not understand—not just humans.... I do not understand many of Dylaniel’s concerns," Castiel admitted. "Is it difficult being a vessel?"

"You have a vessel. Why don't you ask him?"

"He died some time ago."

Dean felt bad in different ways for both the angel and the vessel. "I'm sorry."

"I cannot recall any of my siblings expressing remorse at the death of their vessel." Castiel looked down at the floor between his feet. "I think maybe that is part of the problem."

"You all really don't get to know your vessels, do you?" Dean asked. It was jarring to realize that his frame of reference was the AFE angels, which operated very differently from any of the current angels. Hell, even Michael had, on some level, interacted with his vessels; whether the archangel respected them at all was another matter.

"I know that Jimmy was devout. He left his wife and daughter for me. I never stopped to consider his feelings, beyond righteous duty." Castiel turned his face up to meet Dean’s eyes. "You do not even feel that duty for Michael. I cannot imagine what else you might feel towards Heaven as a vessel."

Dean almost stated that he didn't have enough experience to comment on being a vessel, but that wasn't actually true. He didn't have the same range of experience that Dylaniel and Kay had, but he'd heard some of their stories and had a few glimpses himself. That was probably more than 99% of the uninhabited vessels on Earth.
"In Dyl’s time, Michael hunted him and his dad. He even hunted me while I was there, and it was awful.” Dean took a deep breath, trying not to let the memories overtake him. "I could feel Michael and I knew he hated us. It was unreal, to have him get in my head."

“The bond between an angel and zir vessel is profound—”

“It was horrible. I didn't ask to be Michael’s vessel. I didn't ask for him to…. ” Dean stared at Castiel and debated how much to share with the angel. Normally, he wouldn't bare his soul, but in his own peculiar way Castiel seemed genuinely concerned about what he had gone through and what some of the issues were that vessels faced. “He violated me. He got inside my head without me knowing and used me to hurt people I cared about. Then he tried to hurt me until I said yes.”

Castiel's expression softened. “I am sorry. I did not know.”

"Right at the end, Heaven took away Dylaniel’s dad. I can't imagine what they did to him."

"I do not recommend trying to imagine it."

"They killed his other parent,” Dean added, surprising himself. After a moment he threw caution into the wind a bit, too intrigued by Castiel’s lack of curiosity. "You haven't asked who Dylaniel's angelic parent is."

"If an angel chooses to... couple with a human....” As much as Dean was nervous about Castiel discussing such a sensitive topic, he could see that Castiel was even more uncomfortable. "I do not understand it, but it is not my business. Knowing which of my siblings.... I do not want my opinion of zir to be clouded by a choice made under very different circumstances."

"I know they're like a… what was it?” Dean tried to recall how he'd described nephilim. “A 'scar on the grace of Heaven,' imperfect, or whatever—but I still don't get it. What's Heaven's problem with nephilim?"

"It is by our father's design that angels cannot reproduce with each other. Our limited numbers prevent us from taking drastic actions."

To Dean’s ears it sounded like he was reciting a poorly-thought-through justification; some party line. "Yeah, I saw a lot of angelic self-restraint in 2039."

"Normally,” Castiel conceded, then offered another reason. "Humans are our charge. Having relations with a human is nearly abusive."

"Abusive?"

"The disparity between the species....” Castiel struggled to explain it. "Humans could not understand the implications of copulating with an angel. My species is supposed to tend to the humans. Taking advantage of them like that is an affront to God's decree to take care of them."

"It sounds like you're comparing it to fucking livestock.” He could see Castiel growing even more uncomfortable. After all, Dean hypothetically might be the kind of human to someday have sex with an angel. In a way he'd just been called dumb.

"Humans are more complex than cattle.” Castiel tried to mitigate the damage, but failed spectacularly. "I am sorry. That was insulting."

"Yeah, it was," Dean replied in a move that resembled Dyaniel a bit more than he'd have liked. He pushed the thought and his annoyance at the comparison to animals aside. The fact was that
Despite his rigid behavior, Castiel sincerely hadn't meant to be dismissive. He just didn't have any social skills. "Have you talked to other humans before?"

"Not to any significant extent," the angel answered. "You are the human I have spoken to the most."

"No wonder you sometimes come off as a dick."

"I do not mean to."

"Well, you're one of the more interesting people I know, and that's saying something." Dean huffed a laugh. "And you're trying. That's more than most people would do."

"Thank you."

They sat in silence for a few seconds. Dean was trying to figure out what to say next when Kaylee started stretching in his arms. He repositioned her, then draped a little blanket over her exposed shoulders. When he looked back up Castiel was staring at the newborn.

"Does it bother you that she is a demon?" Castiel asked.

"Does it bother you?"

The angel thought on the question for several seconds before replying. "It is unsettling to not know what she means for the Abyssal... but on an individual basis, it does not bother me as much as I would have expected."

"Same here."

"We should stop talking so she can sleep," Castiel suggested in a hushed voice, then began to get up from his seat.

"Cas," Dean said, stopping him from standing up. "Babies sleep through this kind of stuff all the time. If you want to keep talking it's fine."

"What should I talk about?"

"You're the one practicing small talk. You pick."

"Has anyone told you what Heaven’s like?"

"That's not exactly small talk." Dean smirked. "But I'm listening."

After the initial discussions between Crowley and Kay were complete, the archdemon returned to the Citadel to perform his own inquiries and float the general deal with the remnants of the High Council. Everyone else went back to the bunker. Sam relieved Dean from watching Kaylee, then went to check on Tom. Kay and Dylaniel looked for Castiel to see how his attempts to contact Anael had gone. Ruby decided to take the lull to explore the library's selection in more depth.

When she entered the library she heard a sigh coming from the landing in the neighboring entryway. At the top of the stairs, overlooking the map-covered tables, Bobby leaned against the arm rail. His shoulders were slumped ominously and for a moment she was worried he might be ill. Then she noticed the smartphone he was bent over.
She called up to him. “What're you doing up there?”

“My reception’s something awful down here.”

“You're calling someone?” She wasn't sure whether a call could be traced back to the bunker, but it generally sounded dangerous.

“No. I'm just checking one of the message boards.” Bobby pursed his lips, but didn't volunteer any more.

“Is something wrong?” Ruby approached the bottom of the stairs.

“I know it doesn't make sense for us to go after all of them, especially with Kay trying to work a deal, but sittin’ back and not helping them....”

“I'm kind of sympathetic…. I mean—shit, sympathetic isn't the right word,” Ruby admitted. “I appreciate what you've done for me, so I don't like seeing you like this.”

“What have I done for you?”

“You welcomed me into your home when you didn't need to—and you tried to protect me from those angels,” she added after realizing that she’d never actually thank him. “You treat me like I'm a person. A lot of people haven't done that.”

“Surprised to get that treatment from an old hunter?”

She took his point that not all hunters would kill first and ask questions later. Hell, Sam had been that more admirable sort of hunter. “If things were different.... If Kaylee wasn't here, or the twenty-something witches that I'm responsible for—if it was just me on the line, maybe I could try to trust them, but I can't, not with everyone else.”

“It's okay. We couldn't even get them out if we tried. It's... it’s not just hunters.” Bobby descended the staircase, then held up his cellphone. “A friend of mine, Jody, she's asking for help and I can't do anything for her.”

“Help?”

“She posted a code word on a message board she knows I use. If it's cryptic like this, then she think she's being watched.”

Ruby raised her eyebrow. “You think she's got angels on her?”

“With this timing? Yeah.”

“But she isn't part of your hunters club?”

“She's the local sheriff, not a hunter, but she knows that Dean and I are.”

Ruby nodded, starting to piece together who she might be. “She's the one who found those bodies?”

“Yeah.” Bobby's expression was bleak.

Ruby groaned, regretting her decision before even fully forming it. She chewed her lip anxiously, then asked, “Are you and her fucking?”
“What?” Bobby responded, a little flustered by the question.

“I’m not gonna bust my ass on this if you two haven’t even hit second base,” Ruby said, causing Bobby to open his mouth, but she slapped his shoulder and began walking away before he could answer. “Come on, we have to go talk to an angel.”

It took them a minute to find Castiel. He was sitting in quiet concentration in a room filled floor-to-ceiling with radio equipment. Dylandiel sat at one of the radio terminals, listening to a set of headphones while scanning different channels and making notes on a pad of paper. Neither Bobby nor Ruby recognized the shorthand system the nephilim was writing in, but they hadn't come for him.

“How do we incapacitate you?” Ruby asked Castiel before he even opened his eyes.

Castiel looked up at her in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“You angels—how do we stun you or clip your wings or whatever?”

“You shouldn’t talk about hurting angels’ wings,” Dylandiel warned without taking off the headphones or looking up from his work. “It’s a sensitive subject.”

“Noted.” She didn't really care about overall diplomacy with the species that might categorically want to kill her and all the people she cared about. That being said, she was grateful that Castiel had saved her and Sam’s lives. “Sorry.”

“It is alright.” Castiel considered her question as he sat up. “There’s a symbol, which will expel angels to Heaven when activated.”

“Show me.”

Dylandiel handed Castiel the pad of paper and pencil. The angel drew the symbol with a thoughtfulness that Ruby respected. Dylandiel silently took off the headphones and watched the demonstration.

“How long does activation take?”

“Not long. Just touching it.”

“So why aren’t we just sending people in, then activating the symbol and transporting our targets out?”

“Castiel and I couldn’t be there while the symbol was used,” Dylandiel commented, eyes fixed on the drawing.

“Also, the symbol must be prepared in blood at the location of effect. The time necessary to prepare it would likely endanger the user,” Castiel said as he handed the pad back to Dylandiel.

“We’d have to act fast if we were doing anything at all,” Dylandiel agreed.

“That's the problem. What can we do fast that's effective against angels?” Bobby mused.

“I have an idea. It might be a bad idea, but it's an idea,” Ruby said unenthusiastically. “Bobby, can you communicate with her?”

Ruby flipped the copper talisman in the air and caught it a few times before starting. She’d asked
Dylaniel to pop her and Bobby to somewhere far enough away from the bunker that there wouldn't be any risk of friendly fire. Even though she knew what she was doing, it'd been decades since she'd actually desecrated land and didn't want to contaminate the bunker should she slip up. The process was theoretically possible for any demon, but it required a certain amount of willpower and focus. She had a slight advantage on the task thanks to her background as a witch and member of the Maji caste, but that didn't mean it was a cakewalk.

“I'm gonna have to speak Abyssal while preparing the cast, but when I'm ready for you I'll raise my hand, okay?” Ruby instructed Bobby.

“Okay, I'm ready when you are.”

She nodded at his go-ahead, but stopped herself short of speaking. “Do you want to improvise some earplugs or something?” she suggested to both of them.

“I'll manage,” Bobby assured her.

“Abyssal doesn't bother me as much as you'd expect,” Dylaniel added.

“Does it not mess with angels?” Ruby asked.

“No. It's actually more unpleasant for some choirs of angels. I've just had significant exposure,” Dylaniel explained. “It contains Kay's favorite curse words.”

“We do have some good ones,” Ruby bragged before refocusing on the task at hand.

She began reciting an incantation in Abyssal. Her eyes turned black. The field they were standing in began to wilt and smell of sulfur, but she fought to keep the effects of the ritual as contained as possible. With some effort she reached the point where only a single additional word would complete the desecration. Slowly, so that she wouldn't break her concentration, she raised her hand.

Bobby pulled out his phone and messaged Jody, “Trust me.”

“Go,” He told Ruby a few seconds after the message was sent.

She teleported to Jody’s living room, right behind her. Ruby spoke the final word the moment she touched down. A wave of unholy energy spread out, making the area less hospitable to angels and impeding angelic flight. Just as her scrying had showed, there was only one human-sized creature in the first floor of the home. Since the angels were watching from a safe distance, it would take a few seconds for them to cross the desecrated land and get to them.

Jody recoiled from the black eyed woman who had just appeared a few feet from her.

“Trust me,” Ruby said and held out her hand. The look of concern on Jody's face faded a bit as she stepped closer. Ruby pressed the talisman into Jody's palm. “Hold on tight.”

Three angels started running into the room with their blades drawn. Ruby blew them a kiss over her middle finger as she teleported back to the bunker with Jody in tow.

“Well, that's a new trick in our arsenal,” Ruby commented as she handed her trembling passenger to Bobby.

He wrapped a blanket around Jody and rubbed her arms to help her recover from the strenuous journey.
“What the hell was that?! What are you?” Jody asked Ruby.

“That was sort of Hell-adjacent, actually. I'm a demon,” Ruby replied, then spotted Sam and Dean entering the room, drawn by the minor the commotion. Dean hurried forward to help Jody, but Sam lingered further away with Kaylee. She went over to stand beside the thoroughly-confused-looking Sam.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Sam quietly asked Ruby. He leaned toward the door, indicating that he wanted to discuss something in private. When they were safely away from the others he continued, “I'm glad she's okay, but how did we get Jody? I thought that Kay and Crowley were still trying to work things out?”

“They are. This was Bobby and me. I popped over to Jody’s place, desecrated her house, then she piggybacked on my port back before the angels knew what hit ‘em,” Ruby explained, then added as an afterthought, “I guess Heaven’ll probably keep a shorter leash on the rest of their bait, but from talking to Bobby, she was the one he was most worried about.”

“You went after her alone? What if something had happened to you?” He could barely process anything beyond the fact that she'd just put herself in harm’s way and she was being so casual about it. His heart was pounding at the idea that she'd just endangered her life.

“I'm fine.” Ruby’s face scrunched in confusion. “Bobby was upset and needed my help.”

“It's just I don't want anything to happen to you.”

“Yeah, I don't want anything to happen to me either,” she agreed.

“I mean, you didn't talk to me about it.”

“You were busy. We had a plan all figured out. It took like three minutes once I grabbed the rosewood and did a quick scry.”

“No.” He could see that she wasn't understanding why he was hung up on it. She was thinking of their professional partnership, not their parental or romantic partnership. “I mean you risked your life without talking to me first.”

“You're the one that doesn't want to be out there.” Ruby gestured upward, indicating the potential battleground outside the bunker. “I'm trying to help and I didn't need to drag you into it, so I didn’t.”

“I don’t want to be out there because I have a kid—we have a kid. If something happens to one of us….” Sam glanced down at Kaylee, who’d started wriggling in his arms at the agitated voices. “I thought that we were a team, that we were in this together, but you chose to risk your life without even mentioning it to me. Your choices don't just affect you.”

“We are a team.” She scowled slightly at the insinuation that she’d been selfish. “But that doesn't mean I have to bounce every little errand off you.”

“Facing down angels isn't an errand.”

“It was safe. They weren’t even close—I was helping Bobby and you're giving me shit for it?” Ruby threw up her hands. “He's your fucking family.”

“Thank you for being nice to them.” Sam forced himself to stave off a full blown fight by conceding at least that point. Kaylee started whimpering and he tried to rock her a bit to calm her
down. “Look, I don't want to argue about this right now. With everything else that's going on, can we just not fight?”

“Fine. Give her to me.” Ruby reached out for their daughter. “She's probably hungry.”

He hesitated for a moment, then handed Kaylee to her. She accepted the fussing baby. With a pensive glance at Sam she turned and walked down the hall toward his bedroom.

“Fuck,” he sighed.

“What happened?” Bobby asked Jody after helping her to a seat. Sam and Ruby had left the room almost immediately, but Dean and Dyaniel lingered to hear what the newcomer had to say.

“Those things.” Jody rubbed her temples. “They did something to me—got in my head.”

“Angels are telepathic,” Dyaniel explained. Her eyes widened at the news that her interrogators had been angels, though after being saved by a demon she wasn’t about to question it. “It’s not unheard of for them to use that ability in interrogations, though it is generally considered distasteful.”

“So we really are pissing off Heaven,” Dean speculated.

“I don’t know if they were angry,” Jody corrected. “They just asked me a ton of questions, then disappeared, literally. But it felt like someone was watching me.”

“Someone was,” Dyaniel commented.

“What kinds of questions did they ask you?” Bobby refocused her. “We’re trying to figure out what they’re up to and anything you can tell us will help.”

“They wanted to know about Dean, the multiple homicide a few days ago, Sam—they asked a lot of questions about Sam…. Jody exhaled slowly in shame. “I told them he was a psychic or something and they looked like I’d dropped a bomb on them. They made me go over every detail of the crime scene and us talking. I don’t know what they were looking for.”

“They're looking for Sam.” Dean sighed. “And me, but I don't think they really get that yet.”

“Try to remember what they specifically asked you and how you responded,” Dyaniel instructed. “We can't determine what they know and how they're thinking without details.”

“They wanted to know how long I'd known Dean and Bobby.” Jody’s brow furrowed as she tried to recall the conversation. “Actually, they didn't ask about Sam until I mentioned him.”

“What'd you say about Sam—?” Dean started asking, but Bobby cut him off.

“Don't jump ahead. How'd you answer the question about knowing us?”

“I told them that I'd known you for years, but just met Dean this spring.” Jody thought for a moment. “They wanted to know when I first met Dean. I told them it was maybe May or early June. You'd said he was family that would be staying with you for awhile. They seemed confused by the family thing—asked me if you were actually related. I told them I didn't think so.”

“You think they were wondering about vessel stuff?” Dean asked Dyaniel, who nodded in agreement.
“I’m not sure if I dodged a bullet or not,” Bobby commented.

“It’s hard to say whether being of no value to them makes you disposable or not worth the effort of killing,” Dylaniel replied.

“Thanks,” Bobby muttered.

“They asked about the last three times I called your house. I don't remember what we talked about a few weeks ago. You know, the normal catching up, but I told them that I called for your help with the multiple homicide a few days ago. They wanted to know why I'd call you about that kind of thing. I explained you were hunters, but they didn't look surprised at the news. I mentioned Sam while telling them about us investigating the crime scene.”

“What did you say about him?”

“I thought… he was weird. When I met him, I thought Sam was hiding something—he kind of was at first, until he mentioned that he was a psychic. But it still felt like I was missing something, the way he was looking at the bodies.”

“When you told them he was a psychic, how did they react?” Dean probed deeper on the potentially important subject.

“They looked at each other…. There was a quiet one, she seemed to be in charge. She asked me if you and Sam were actually related or if you were family like with Bobby.” Jody tilted her head at a thought. “They wanted to know if he did anything unusual while examining the bodies, like playing with a mirror or crystal.”

“Trying to figure out if he's a witch?” Dean asked Bobby.

“Sounds like it.”

“You think they already knew about the coven?”

“Full humans with innate precognitive or clairvoyant abilities are almost unheard of,” Dylaniel interjected. “They might suspect he isn't human.”

“He is human, right?” Jody asked, half-joking, but no one attempted to tackle the issue.

“He had the vision before we got to the crime scene,” Dean pointed out. “For all they knew he was casting spells at Bobby’s house.”

“I guarantee they've searched my house. I'm betting that's how they found out about Jody—checking the phone records,” Bobby speculated. “I don't know about you two, but I don't even know what they'd be looking for to see if he was casting spells at the house.”

“Have you cast any spells in your house in the last few days?” Dylaniel asked Bobby.

“Sam did an alarm spell—”

“Ruby cast one in the fight with the angels that nearly melted a guy,” Dean added, earning a shocked look from Bobby. “It was while you were knocked out.”

“Don't forget the book summoning spell she did,” Booby pointed out.

“So what, the angels might think Sam is into some serious witchcraft?”
“Can a human even summon that book from Hell?”

“Sounds like a question for Ruby,” Dean commented.

“Was there any physical evidence of Ruby left at your house?” Dylaniel asked.

“You'd have to ask Sam what was on his laptop and in the Impala, but other than that…. Shit.” Bobby rubbed his face. “She tossed a bloody maternity shirt while she was there.”

“Maternity?” Jody looked at the three men. “There's a pregnant woman in the mix?”

“Not exactly at this point—”

“Fuck—the blood,” Dean groaned. “Ruby’s blood is at your place right in the middle of the fight scene. She got stabbed toward the end.”

“How much can they actually figure out from some blood?”

“You can tell a lot from some blood. If that woman was pregnant you could figure it out with a blood analysis,” Jody replied.

Dean lost a little color, then looked to Dylaniel. “Can you use blood to tell if someone’s a demon?”

“We’ve got some problems,” Dean said as he pulled up a seat next to Sam. He'd found his younger brother sitting alone in the library drinking a beer. “Heaven really is on the hunt, as in they're actually running down leads. That's how they knew about the coven and the other hunters.”

“We are hidden, right?” Sam asked, putting down his drink and sitting up a bit more in his chair.

“The bunker's safe as long as nobody points it out to Heaven or establishes a direct link from inside,” Dean assured him. “The problem is that they're researching you, Sammy. They're turning over rocks. That's how they know about Kaylee. They're retracing your steps backwards.”

“We were careful to cover our tracks and the leads have to be cold by now.”

“Yeah, well, there's several months of my research trying to find you guys in Bobby's place,” he pointed out. “So if they go back far enough, what're they gonna find that's gonna bite us in the ass?”

“Nothing. We didn't talk with anyone.” Sam rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, I guess they're clued into the ongoing Lucian-Lilith minion fighting now, if it wasn't already on their radar.”

It was hard to say whether Heaven would normally care about the squabbling of two demon factions. The way Castiel had spoken about demons and Hell had definitely given the impression of dismissiveness. Any angels aware of Lilith’s attempts to break the seals would understand the significance of Lucian, but it wasn't clear how common that knowledge was.

“That’s not that big,” Dean speculated hopefully.

“They're going to keep expanding their search.” Sam ran his fingers through his hair. “This is how they connect up with Clare's gang, isn't it? Heaven was looking for me and found the trail of bodies. They could be cutting some deal right now.”

Dean had a strange realization that he wasn’t as disturbed by the fact that Sam had killed hunters as
he had been before going to 2039. It was possible that the experience had hardened him, or maybe he really had previously allotted the hunters’ lives more value based solely on their profession?

“We don't know when they teamed up. It might be years from now.”

“It doesn't have to be like with the other timeline.” Sam looked in the direction of where he'd just had the small fight with Ruby before turning his attention back to the tactical. “How many angels did we kill at the coven? There's going to be fallout from that.”

“It had to be done.”

“I know. I really do, but it's like we can't catch a break with this. We put out one fire and another one flares up…. Things look like they’re gonna work with Crowley, and we at least have a lead with the other angel. I’m trying to have hope, but….” Sam pursed his lips. “I have this feeling, like I just know it’s going to get a lot worse before it gets any better.”
Kay was stuck sitting around waiting for Crowley to get back to her regarding her proposition, so she found herself lounging in an armchair watching Ruby, Dylaniel, and Castiel sort through their various magical and specialty weapons. Ruby’s demon-killing knife was separated from the angel blades. Dylaniel’s weapons were placed on the table for inventorying purposes, though he refused to be out of arm’s reach of at least one of them.

It was taking a while to gather all of the angel blades, which had been disbursed for the rescue mission at the coven and not wholly collected during the recovery period. Castiel was looking through the three angel blades on the table. He touched them, curious to see if he could sense which sibling each belonged to. One was Uriel’s, one was his, and one Kay had picked up at the coven from Wryael.

Ruby returned after fetching the fourth blade from Sam's room. Before she'd even gotten the blade halfway across the study Castiel could sense it humming with a power that he didn't recognize at first. It was different than the others; he could tell that now that he was really paying attention to the blades’ unique characteristics. This one’s signature was cold and fierce. When he touched it his eyes grew wide.

"Where did this blade come from?" Castiel asked. He only dared to hold the blade with two fingers before cautiously placing it on the table.

"I don’t know. An angel? It's just one of the blades," Kay answered from her chair with a shrug.

"They're all unique. Whose is it?" Dylaniel asked, but if Castiel was so alarmed the nephilim barely needed to check.

"It's Lucifer's blade. It should not exist in this world," Castiel explained without taking his eyes off the archangel’s blade.

"We brought one with us from our time," Dylaniel said as he leaned forward to examine the weapon. He held his hand over it, trying to sense any trace of its loathsome creator, but felt nothing.

"No shit—that was Luci's blade?" Kay stood up and stared at it with new reverence. “I just grabbed it because it was lying on the ground nearby. He must've dropped it... in the fight."

"What does it mean to us?" Ruby asked. "It's just another blade, right?"

"It is physical proof that Lucifer was on Earth," Castiel replied. “Even if he was not on this Earth.”

“He was on Earth before, though, back before he got locked up.”

“Yes, but an angel’s blade is very personal. We carry them with us almost at all times. Lucifer's is believed to be trapped with him in his cage,” Castiel clarified. “Without an explanation, its
presence is terrifying.”

“I thought finding something that scares angels would make me happier.” Ruby’s lips thinned. “This… I don't want this.”

“No matter what you think of angels, nothing is worth Lucifer being unleashed,” Dylaniel warned.

“Can I see it?” Kay asked as she approached the table.

Castiel didn't hand it to her, but instead gestured for her to take it. She turned it over in her hand and closed her eyes in concentration. On some level maybe it even felt right in her hands. It was almost hers. With Lucifer still in his cage, the only other person with any claim on the blade was Sam. But he’d never really fought with a blade—she'd barely fought with a blade before. In some weird way it was her dad’s blade; his hand had summoned it.

“What is it?” Dylaniel almost sounded concerned.

“It feels… like mine.” Kay looked up at Castiel. “Do you know your blade? Like, can you pick it out from a set?”

“Yes,” the angel replied.

“I want to try something.”

Sam was in one of the parlors with Belda and half of the kids. After talking with Dean about the potential complications with the angels and Clare’s hunters, Sam went to distract himself with the children while Ruby was still feeding Kaylee. He’d helped make sandwiches with some supplies that had been fetched earlier in the morning. Ruby had found him helping Belda herd nine kids back to the parlor and handed off the responsibility of watching Kaylee. So he sat on a couch in the parlor. In one arm he cradled Kaylee and with the other he attempted to play checkers with Tom while holding his half-eaten sandwich.

“Hey Sam, can I borrow you for a minute?” Kay asked as she strolled up to them.

“Sure.” He looked to Tom. “I need to go help Kay for a little bit, but we can play more later, okay?”

“Okay, Sam.” The boy nodded, took a bite of his sandwich, then hastily added, “Can I still be winning next time?”

“Yeah, you earned it. Count the pieces and we’ll start with that many when I get back.”

“Okay.” Tom smiled slightly and swung his dangling feet back and forth while counting the pieces.

Sam noticed Kay staring thoughtfully at Tom for a moment before turning and walking back into the hall. He followed her, uncertain if he should ask about what had surely been another trigger for her. She’d sought him out for something in particular, though, which might have to preempt what had just happened. He opted to broach the topic, but not force it.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. It's just a lot of stuff is still surreal.” Kay tried to offer a reassuring smile, but he didn't entirely buy it. “But it's okay. I'm doing okay.”
“Alright.” He temporarily let her off the hook. “What'd you want help with?”

“If I told you it'd ruin the experiment.”

“Alright….” He looked up and down the hall to see that they were alone, then stopped, eager to take advantage of the privacy. “I'm sorry. I've got to ask... you have horns?”

“I have a lot of stuff, but yeah.” Kay smirked. “It's part of being born a partially-supernatural creature. Some of the things that are alluded to with demons and angels can actually physically manifest on Earth as opposed to just in their home plane.”

“Angels?”

“As a vessel, I carry some grace.” Kay pointed over her shoulder to her back. “If you could go black or blue eyes, you'd see some angelic markings on my back. I can manifest it as wings, the way nephilim can.”

“Wings.” Sam exhaled a laugh. Castiel had mentioned Kaylee’s angelic markings, but he’d never imagined anything like wings. “Wow. I mean, I guess on the spectrum of everything that's been going on the last few days…. Like you said, surreal.”

“Wings aren't as exciting as you'd think, for me at least. I barely ever bust them out except to intimidate people.”

“Why not?” It was hard for him to imagine not taking advantage of having wings. “Does it hurt? The wings—or the horns?”

“No,” she assured him. “I mean, it feels a little weird where the horns pass the skin, but you get used to it after a minute or two. The most uncomfortable thing is that my back muscles can get tweaked really easily where the wings emerge. It's best not to think about all the muscles rearranging. I once saw a nephilim lose a wing right at the base—that's why you never want to fight with them out. There must've been thirty tendons snapping back into—”

“I get it; you can stop.” Sam's shoulder blade hurt just thinking about it. “I'm just gonna go with 'wings are magic.'”

“I'm glad you aren't a doctor… or an aeronautical engineer,” Kay teased, then kept leading him to the study where the others were waiting. When they reached the study, she had him stand with his back turned to the weapons table. She took two of the angel blades and laid them out on the table, then placed Lucifer's blade as the rightmost of the three.

“You can turn around,” Kay instructed.

“What am I supposed to do with the blades?” Sam asked, suddenly worried that this was some sort of powers training, complete with an audience.

“The blades are different. We want your opinion on which one is the best one.”

After handing Kaylee off to Ruby, he examined each blade trying to find the one he liked the most. Everyone watched with rapt attention as his hand settled on the rightmost blade. He picked up the weapon, clutching it with ease and confidence.

“What, are they balanced differently or something?” Sam asked as he played with the blade.

“Something like that.” Kay interrupted Castiel before the angel could spoil the test. “I want to try
out a few more combinations.”

“Okay… I guess,” he said, returning the blade and looking away from the table.

While his back was turned Kay reshuffled the three blades, placing Lucifer's blade in the center. “Which do you like of these three?”

Once again he examined the blades, but this time he settled on the middle one in only half the time.

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about?” Sam noticed the ominous glance Ruby shot Castiel.

“One more round, then I'll fess up,” Kay assured him. When he turned around she silently slipped Lucifer's blade under the table and replaced it with the last of the lesser angel blades. “Ready.”

Sam slowly looked over the blades. His fingers drifted across the spread twice before he resorted to picking them up one at a time. After a long while he just stood scowling at the blades.

“I don't know.” He didn't want to pick one at random. “They're all fine, I guess.”

“But?” Kay probed.

“Something isn't right about them…. They're just missing something.” He realized how strange a sentiment that was after the words had escaped him.

“That's fucking nuts,” Ruby commented, unconsciously holding Kaylee a little closer.

Sam looked to her in concern. “What's nuts?”

“You can pick Lucifer's blade out of the lot.”

“ Lucifer's blade?” Sam lost a little color. His hands pulled back, away from all of the angel blades. The thought that one of the blades had belonged to Lucifer was unsettling. The thought that he was somehow drawn to it was even worse.

“Yeah, I guess I accidentally brought it back with me,” Kay explained.

“How'd you even get it?”

“Dyl, me, and everyone were fighting him right before the two of us got thrown back here. He'd dropped his blade at some point. It just happened to be the one I grabbed from the ground.”

“You were fighting him,” Sam echoed weakly.

Kay had fought her dad, or at least someone who'd looked like her dad.

“We all fought Lucifer,” she said, sensing his anguish. “My dad did, too.”
Part way through his second beer, one of the male witches came into the kitchen. The man didn't notice Dean until he'd pulled a beer from the fridge and turned around.

“Sorry, I didn't see you there.”

“You're fine.” Dean extended his hand to the witch in an introductory handshake. “I'm Dean.”

“Pascoe.” He gestured at an empty seat across the small prep table from Dean. “Mind if I—?”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks. I like the kids; I'm just not used to being cooped up with them 24 hours a day.” Pascoe opened his beer, took a sip, then asked, “You were the one that went with Martin and Laurel to get the kids in the woods, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean answered grimly, a little sickened that he'd only then learned their names. “I'm sorry about—”

Pascoe spoke into his beer bottle. “You guys got four kids out.”

“The others didn't make it.” Dean was waiting for Pascoe to get upset and leave, but he didn't. They sat in silence for a painful few seconds.

“I was in charge of security for the whole coven. For almost ten years it's been my job to keep everyone alive.” Pascoe sipped his beer. “Welcome to the pity party.”

“They were angels. There wasn't anything more you could've done.”

“It's funny how that doesn't make it easier, does it?”

“No, it doesn't.” Dean sighed. “Have you lost people before?”

“On my watch or just in general?”

“In general.”

“About twelve, that I can remember. Grace was the most recent. She was Gabin's wife, Tom's mom.” Pascoe thumbed the label on his beer bottle. “I couldn't do anything to stop that either. She'd gone into the city to buy some reagents and the shop got raided.”

“Hunters?” Dean somehow managed to feel worse.

“Of course,” Pascoe confirmed, unaware that he was having a beer with a hunter. “Do you know Tom? He's the kid that keeps following Sam around. Do you have any idea how he's doing? I don't see him interacting with the other kids that much. When he does it's less playing and more being Belda's assistant.”

“I've seen him around a few times. I think he's trying to figure out how to help.” Dean thought that sounded like the Tom he'd known. “He's been trying to help Sam and Ruby with their baby. I think it makes him feel like… I don't know, like he can do something.”

“I can believe that.” Pascoe shook his head and huffed a laugh. "I still can't believe they had a kid…. I should have made my play at the bonfire."

Dean raised an eyebrow, then asked, "You got a thing for Ruby?"
"Not quite," Pascoe corrected with a little smile, then took another swig of beer.

Dean coughed on the few drops of beer he inhaled. "What—seriously?"

"Hey, it's not everyday that you meet a smart, funny, handsome guy. It's even harder when you don't go into town more than twice a month."

Dean could feel himself blushing, which was confirmed by Pascoe furrowing his brow with interest. The witch leaned back in his chair and watched Dean with some amusement. Dean's eyes flicked helplessly to the door to check that it was closed. Pascoe looked over his shoulder to see what Dean had been looking at, then returned to studying him.

“You seem a little tense. I can think of two very different reasons why me being gay could make you uncomfortable,” Pascoe said in a particularly calm voice. He leaned over the table slightly and gestured for Dean to come closer so he could whisper something. When Dean cautiously leaned forward, he said, “And homophobes don't voluntarily get closer to me after finding out.”

Dean’s eyes widened. He slid further back in his chair and covered his face with his hand. There wasn't a good way of denying… whatever it was that was going on. There was barely a way of explaining it.

“Please don't tell anyone,” Dean groaned.

“My lips are sealed.” Pascoe took a sip of his beer. “So… what are you?”

Dean looked up over his hands at the question. “What?”

“Gay, bi, demi—where do you land on the spectrum?”

"I don't, uh… I don't know." Dean’s mouth felt dry and he realized that his bottle was empty. "I do like being with women."

"So you're not gay, but you're—"

Dean eyed the door as he cut Pascoe off. "Holy shit. Please just stop. It's complicated."

“Okay, I didn't mean anything.” Pascoe got up and started to leave.

Dean mentally kicked himself. He hadn't meant to run the guy off. In fact the prospect of losing their conversation entirely was disappointing. The truth was that, as uncomfortable as he was at the idea of talking about the situation, it was kind of refreshing to have someone treating the topic like it wasn't a big deal. Dylaniel and Kay were entangled in the complications of knowing the other Dean’s personal history. Pascoe didn't have any of that baggage.

“Wait.” Dean gritted his teeth. “I'm gonna need another beer before I start talking.”

Pascoe grabbed a pair of beers and returned to the table. They both drank in silence for a few minutes, Pascoe waiting for Dean to settle on what he wanted to share. Dean pounded half his beer, working up the courage to even acknowledge the topic.

Rather than jump into the deep end of talking about himself, Dean asked, “What do you see in men?”

"What do you see in women?" Pascoe countered.

"Well, they're soft and sweet.” Dean smiled before adding, “But I do love a woman who can kick
"Some men can be soft and sweet, too," Pascoe pointed out. "I personally like the bigger, stronger guys. My kind of guy has to have nice abs and could go twelve rounds with me—I meant in boxing, but, yeah, sex too."

"I'm confused." Dean could feel himself getting a bit tipsy. "So do you pitch or catch?"

"That's a pretty forward question…. I prefer to top," Pascoe replied, then added for Dean's benefit, "Pitch."

"Well, good luck with that." Dean shook his head. "No way Sammy would take it."

"What makes you say that? Cause he isn't small, soft, and feminine?" Pascoe batted his eyelashes mockingly and tried the best he could to be effeminate despite being an inch taller than Dean and having more muscle.

"Shit." Dean threw his hands up slightly in forfeit at the prompt to think of Sam as effeminate. "This is not the conversation I wanted to be having."

"I'm just pointing out that you've got some backward views on this whole thing." Pascoe pointed at him with his bottle. "I just told you that I date tough guys, and you're still thinking that one of us has to be 'the woman.'"

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm just—fuck, I don't know what I'm talking about. You're more or less the only gay guy I've ever talked to." Dean bit his lip at the thought of the other Dean. "Besides, I guess, a bi guy."

"You sure about that?"

"Sure about what?"

"Until about five minutes ago you'd have said you'd only ever talked to 'I guess a bi guy.' I'm guessing you probably talked to more than two queer men. You just only know of two for sure." Pascoe relaxed in his chair. "We're just like everybody else. As awesome and fucked up as your average anyone."

It hadn't really occurred to him before, but Dean had to admit that he just assumed everyone was heterosexual until he was told otherwise. Knowing that now, he could see where some of his assumptions about queer people came from. Most of his exposure growing up had been when others had criticized the supposedly queer person. It wasn't a classification that he was used to people proactively self-identifying themselves as. He'd probably miscategorized a few people over the years, and who knew what impact that had on him?

After taking a moment to get used to the idea, he asked, "So why didn't you make a play on Sam?"

As far as Dean knew, Sam and Ruby's relationship, or whatever they wanted to call it, wasn't that old. He wanted to understand why a confident gay man wouldn't try to go after a potential date. If Dean had been stuck in a camp with the same people for years and then a smart and beautiful woman stopped by, he'd been busting out every suave move in his arsenal.

"It's hard to flirt with someone you barely know unless they're wearing a big 'I'm into men' sign around their neck. I mean, if I'd started flirting with you before I told you I was gay, how long would it have taken you to realize what was going on? And if you did and you weren't into men…. I've had a lot of rejections or worse. Thank god I'm imposing enough that homophobes tend to just
take off in the other direction,” Pascoe muttered, then finished his beer. "But yeah, sometimes it's hard to know when or how to try."

“That makes sense,” Dean conceded, a little disappointed by his own resignation.

“But I guess with everything going to hell, maybe it's not the time for playing coy."

"The end of the world’s as good an excuse as any to say ‘fuck it’ occasionally," Dean agreed and raised his drink to toast the sentiment.

In return Pascoe nodded, stood up to leave, and patted Dean's shoulder. "Thanks for the drink and chat. If you... ever want me to show you the ropes, just let me know.” Dean blinked up at him, heart pounding. "No strings. You just look like you have no idea what you'd even do with a man—and you look like you have great abs."

Dean was dumbfounded as the witch walked out of the room. He'd been hit on by men once or twice, but never like this. This wasn't a mistake. Pascoe knew that there was a possibility something might come of it. Dean felt a bit faint at the realization that the butterflies in his guts were from him knowing that possibility too.

“Anael would like to meet."

Castiel had received the message from his sister and gathered the usual suspects in the study in order to discuss the situation.

"Thank god for that,” Dean muttered, then remembered he was in the same room as people who considered themselves personally related to God. “Not God-god. You know what I mean—"

Ruby cut Dean off rather than watching him flounder. “What’d she say?"

“She has some concerns about the current events and she is open to hearing what we have to say,” Castiel informed them. “When I asked her if I could bring others to the meeting she was hesitant, but agreed to a small group.”

“So who all's going?” Bobby asked.

"Kay seems like an obvious choice," Sam suggested. “She talked circles around Crowley. She can probably handle an angel no problem.”

"I appreciate to vote of confidence,” Kay thanked Sam, then looked to Castiel. “But I'm guessing that she isn't feeling too sweet on all things Hell. Just because she's fallen doesn't mean she's open-minded about demons."

“She would likely be put off by the presence of demons. If we can avoid it, we should, at least for this initial meeting.”

“I guess I'm out.” Ruby half shrugged while feeding Kaylee from her seat on the couch.

“I'm probably….” Sam hesitated, unsure of how to categorize himself. “Am I too demon to go?”

Everyone turned to look at Sam. He shifted uncomfortably at the blatant attention. No one exactly knew how to categorize him, which left the subject largely undiscussed as each person was unsure what would be considered a faux pas.

“I do not know,” Castiel admitted. “It would not be difficult for her to sense that you aren’t entirely
human, though I do not know if that, in and of itself, would bother her. On close inspection she may be able to determine that you are Abyssal, which may cause her some distress.”

“I’ll stay,” Sam offered. “I don't want to mess it up.”

“No, you should go,” Kay interjected. “If she can't stand even the slightest hint of brimstone, then it's not gonna work out anyway. You guys think this is just a friendly chat, but alliances are about making deals and we need someone there with a certain set of instincts.”

"Cas and Dyl are in a much better position to make a deal with her,” Sam countered. “They've talked to angels before.”

"Dyl—I love him—but he lacks verbal finesse,” Kay said, causing Dylaniel to tilt his head, then nod at her point. “He can advise on angels like no one else, but he rubs almost everyone the wrong way the first few times they interact. And Cas isn't familiar with how things work on Earth. We need some practical thinking there, too.”

“Sam.” Ruby looked at him with determination. “You're the smartest guy in the room. Go with them.”

He didn't know what to say in response to the compliment. Instead he scooted closer to her on the couch while purposefully not looking at any of the others’ reactions.

"Dean should also go," Cas suggested, breaking the silence of everyone debating whether there was a challenger to Ruby’s claim. "He is the Micha—the Sword of Heaven, without the stigma of being a nephilim. He could be a valuable presence.”

“Wait a sec. How would Anael react to a nephilim?” Dean asked. “I mean, she seemed fine with them in 2039, but that was after who-knows-what.”

“The Anael you met knew my parents for years before they had me. She had time to become accustomed to the idea. This one…..” Dylaniel thought for a moment. “I have no idea how she'd react.”

Sam slid his hand onto Ruby’s thigh, unsure if she was in a mood to be affectionate. They hadn't spoken to any significant extent since their minor fight earlier in the day. After a while Ruby moved Kaylee to the other side, freeing her hand closest to Sam. She intertwined her fingers with his, then leaned into him a bit. His body relaxed more, knowing that things between them were better than he'd expected.

“Watch your ass,” Ruby whispered to him while the others were talking. “I know this angel’s supposed to be on our side, but she's still an angel.”

“I'll be careful,” he quietly agreed.

“Damn right, you will.”

“The meeting is in Los Angeles in one hour, so we will have to teleport there. I suggest everyone who is going meet back here in fifty-five minutes,” Castiel said, concluding the briefing.

Kay looked at Dylaniel with visible concern. He was staring straight ahead, lips pursed. Everyone else was splitting up to go about whatever business was needed before the meeting. She hurried over to him as quickly as possible without drawing any attention to them, then crouched next to his chair in order to look at him eye-to-eye.
“Dyl, are you okay?” she asked him quietly. “You don't have to go.”

“Yes, I do.” Dylaniel dodged the topic of how he was feeling. “They should have one of us there in case knowledge of our timeline is relevant.”

“They can do the groundwork, and if they need our input there can be another meeting on our terms.”

“We need to clinch her help now.” Dylaniel stood up to demonstrate that he was alright. “I'll be fine.”

Kay watched Dylaniel go over to the weapons cache. Despite the supposedly-peaceful nature of the meeting, Dylaniel began sharpening his knives, one of his nervous tells. She caught Dean in the hallway as he was leaving and pulled him aside to talk in private.

“I need you to keep an eye on Dyl for me.”

“What's up?” Dean knew he was bad with cities, but Kay seemed extra anxious about the situation.

“The meet-up’s in L.A. That’s a difficult place for him.”

“Difficult how?”

“His best friend was murdered there by a mob of humans.” Kay’s voice shook a little but she swallowed her emotion. “Don't let him kill anyone.”

Dean just stared at her for several seconds. The implications of Dylaniel's friend being killed by humans was its own headache, but the fact that it occurred in the city they were about to go to brought the thing to a whole other level. And she somehow expected him to be the safety net in case of some sort of mental break. The kid was a trained killer—technically so were Sam, Castiel, and him, but probably not nearly as well-trained as the nephilim.

“Let him? How am I supposed to stop him if he wants to?” he asked in exasperation.

“Just try to keep him relaxed,” Kay suggested.

“I've never seen him relaxed.”

For the first time since the revelation that the other Dean was Dylaniel's father, Sam saw an opening to speak with him one-on-one. The nephilim had finished speaking with Kay and was sharpening their weapons on the far side of the study. Sam squeezed Ruby’s hand before getting up to talk to him.

“You would've been my nephew?” Sam asked as he sat down on the edge of the table on which they'd played the angel blade shell game a few hours earlier.

“Yes,” Dylaniel answered without looking up from his knife.

“I…” Sam chewed his lip briefly. “It just seems like you don't like me.”

“Most people think I don't like them.” Dylaniel glanced up at him, observing his reaction.

“You didn't really answer the question.”
“You didn't really ask a question,” Dyaniel countered, then turned his attention back to his knife before elaborating: “I don't know you, and I don't make friends easily.”

“Why's that?” Sam probed, a bit surprised that he’d had volunteered some measure of extra information.

“It's just the way I am,” Dyaniel evaded, then added after a moment’s hesitation, “Friends come at a very high cost.”

“You didn't have many friends growing up?”

“I had my cousins.”

He imagined a young Dyaniel trying to play with the considerably older Kay and Tom. Sam had had difficulty playing with Dean at times and the age difference was only four years. The lack of friends reminded him of his own youth. Moving from school to school, he had rarely dared to make friends just to lose them. College was the first time he’d had a real, long-term friend that wasn't a hunter.

“Did you ever go to college or anything like that?” Sam asked hopefully.

“I was homeschooled until I was twelve, then I was educated on base.”

“On base?”

“At various military bases.” Dyaniel resheathed his knife, set it down on the table, and gave Sam his full attention. “Most of my later education was combat and military history.”

“Dean made you train that much?” The thought was a disheartening echo of Sam and Dean’s own childhoods.

“No, I did. Heaven has wanted me dead for my entire life. I wanted to be able to defend myself, but I also wanted to be such a force that angels feared me.” Dyaniel’s voice softened slightly as he added, “My dad hated the war.”

“I get that.” Sam had a profound sympathy for the other Dean. More than anything, he didn't want his daughter to grow up surrounded by such violence. It wouldn't have surprised him to hear that Dean’s child would've become a hunter, but a soldier was different. Sam had escaped the life of a hunter, twice. Yet Dyaniel and Kay's circumstances had been inescapable. As much as Sam had encountered kill-or-be-killed situations, Dyaniel seemed to have been raised in a world where that was commonplace. Sam's heart sank.

“The person I remind you of—the one that tried to kill you—it was Lucifer, wasn't it?” Sam asked, causing Dyaniel to avoid his eyes in a particularly crushing move.

“I had a lot of respect for my uncle. I still do,” Dyaniel finally answered. “Very few people were capable of understanding what he did to try to save the world; how much he was prepared to sacrifice. He was ready to die to stop Lucifer. When I was younger, it was hard to parse them at times, but now…”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Lucifer did.” Dyaniel's voice didn't betray any emotion except that he spoke a little quieter.

Sam nodded slowly as he processed the information. Dyaniel had been assaulted by an archangel
that had been wearing the other version of him. No wonder the kid was so nervous around him.

“My uncle stopped Lucifer from killing me. That's more than I could've asked for,” Dylaniel said as some morbid form of reassurance. “I can't begin to tell you how much Lucifer hated me.”

“How could he have stopped Lucifer from hurting you?” Sam felt faint. It hadn't even occurred to him that the other Sam might've survived or comprehended being possessed.

“My uncle was able to perceive what Lucifer was doing. He took control of their body long enough to stop him.”

“I didn't think that was possible.”

“It's almost unheard of among angels generally, among the high choirs… he was the only one to achieve it.”

“I’d assumed he died, or close enough.”

“Lucifer wouldn't let him die.”

Dylaniel's words made Sam shudder slightly. “Why?”

“It may have been that Lucifer was too close to him, or it may have been an attempt to hold him hostage over our family, to keep the others from trying to kill him.”

“But you tried to kill him?”

“Yes,” Dylaniel confessed. “I used to watch him on the security monitors and try to figure out how to kill him. He could see an attack coming… or my family would be upset.”

It was more than a little chilling to hear someone speak so candidly and remorselessly about trying to kill him—well—not him. The real target was Lucifer and in the grand scheme of things that might be worth the life of one person, even if they were family. Though, with Dylaniel being so difficult to read, it was hard to tell how the scales were weighted. The guy was only twenty-one. There were significant implications depending on how long his history of violence with Lucifer had lasted.

“How old were you, when you tried to kill him?” Dylaniel pursed his lips at Sam's question in an unsettling gesture. “Please tell me.”

“Which time?”

“I….” He swallowed hard. “I just want to know. All of it—any of it.”

“The first time was when I was ten, when he tried to kill my parents and me. He broke half a dozen of my bones. I stabbed him, but didn't pierce his heart. The second time was when I was eleven. I tried to shoot him. He ended up shooting me. The third time was a few days ago. He broke several of my bones….” Dylaniel's posture turned subtly inward. “Lucifer killed a lot of people I cared about. I've had more broken bones and gunshot wounds than I can remember, but that was the worst thing he ever did to me.”

“I'm sorry.” Sam didn't know what else to say.

“You don't have anything to apologize for.”

“Do I scare you?”
After a thoughtful pause, the nephilim said, “You seem like a good man. It's nice to be able to appreciate that.”

Sam contemplated the non-answer. Dylaniel was scared of him on some level, but he was either too polite or too cautious to say anything.

The other Sam had inflicted an unfathomable amount of damage on the world and had been forced into a conflict with his family. Despite having some level of consciousness or maybe even occasional control, he had hurt the people that he cared about in a profound way. His possession and attacks on Dylaniel must've been agonizing for the other Dean—and Ruby. In the other timeline she'd loved him only to lose him to a monster. He didn't want that for his family.

“Can you do something for me?” Sam asked.

“That depends on what you're requesting.”

“If I get possessed by Lucifer…” Sam took a moment to gather his conviction. “Kill us.”

“I promise,” Dylaniel agreed, a little faster than Sam would've liked.

Per Anael’s request they met at a small Japanese restaurant in Los Angeles’s Japantown. The furniture was worn and the walls were lined in thin sheets of white paper covered in black ink brushwork of hiragana and kanji. Their party was led to a private room in the back of the building, separated by a narrow hallway and a noren curtain. Dylaniel looked at the cloth hanging in lieu of a door, then scowled at the lack of privacy.

“You don't have to worry here. The family that operates this restaurant is entirely discreet,” Anael said as a greeting. She sat cross-legged on a small cushion at the head of a low table. Her red hair was contained in a single large braid, which contrasted with her cream-colored blouse.

A middle-aged woman of Pacific Islander descent sat quietly to Anael’s left. She wore a simple pink dress in a floral pattern and had somewhat messy grey hair. Her right hand appeared to have suffered a severe cold burn long ago. The woman didn't react to them at all. In fact, she didn't seem to react to anything.

“Take off your shoes,” Anael instructed when Dean moved to enter the room.

The four men awkwardly removed their shoes in the hallway before entering. Castiel took slightly longer than the others, as it was his first time untying a knot.

Castiel sat to his sister’s right with Dean on the other side of him. Dylaniel sat next to the unidentified woman, with his back to the wall and the door in front of him. Sam took the last seat, which was opposite Anael. Dean repositioned himself a few times, unaccustomed to sitting on the floor. Castiel didn't attempt any adjustments to his posture, but appeared rigid and generally uncomfortable with his situation.

“It's good to see you again, Castiel.” Anael smiled at him, but lost some of her enthusiasm when she glanced at the others. “I wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Are you okay?” Castiel asked with a surprising amount of concern in his voice. “I regret not checking on you sooner.”

“If you had been caught you would've been imprisoned. I don't think less of you,” she assured him. “I’ve survived. I have a place in this world. It's why I agreed to speak with you all.”
“Thank you for meeting with us.” Sam ventured into the conversation. “We understand that this is taking a lot of faith on your part.”

“Do you understand faith?” Anael asked Sam in a slightly critical tone.

In hindsight his word choice may have been a bit off considered the audience, but he tried to roll with the punch. “I think I do,” he answered honestly. “Or at least I used to have a more spiritual faith. Recently… my faith has been in people.”

“Faith is… safer placed in people,” she agreed.

A server entered the room and began placing cups of miso soup, small dishes of sushi, and a few bottles of sauces on the table before them. The waiter moved to place a napkin on the lap of the woman sitting to Anael's left, but Anael waved him off. She received the napkin from him, unfolded it, then carefully positioned it to cover the woman's dress.

Anael didn't even wait for the waiter to leave before asking, “How many of our people are dead?”

Dyaniel grabbed a plate of futomaki and moved it closer to Sam. The gesture of moving one of the only vegetarian dishes towards him didn't go unnoticed by Sam. He smiled slightly at the thought that Dyaniel had voluntarily done something nice for him. He couldn't recall seeing him voluntarily doing something nice for anyone.

“Uriel, Tambriel, Nordael, Wryael—”

Dean spotted Dyaniel's demeanor change suddenly as Castiel recited the list. One moment he was reaching for the soy sauce and the next his hand pulled back to weakly rest on the edge of the table. He was distracted by something that hadn't been noticed by anyone else. For a terrifying second Dean expected Dyaniel's eyes to flash blue, but no angels came.

“How many?” she interrupted, then started sipping her soup.

“We think eighteen,” Dean answered, turning his attention back to the discussion. “Including Uriel and Tambriel, who weren't in the big fight.”

“Our family hasn't lost this many since the Rebellion,” Anael commented. “Zachariah is probably telling all of Heaven that you are the next Lucifer.”

“If I were that powerful…. If only we were to be so capable,” Castiel agreed. “But I expect you are right.”

“And that rumor doesn't bother you?”

“I would prefer to not be seen that way, but I cannot change that situation now.”

Anael leaned forward and held a small cup of soup to the older woman’s lips, then carefully tipped it up to feed her. After a few seconds she put down the cup and cleaned the woman's mouth with the napkin that had been on her lap. The angel watched her motionless companion thoughtfully for a moment, then looked back to her guests.

“You said that you need my help preventing the apocalypse. How can I do that?”

Dean broached their main goal. “The Archdemon Lilith is trying to break Lucifer’s seals. We don't know how many she’s already broken and we don't know what all the seals are.”
“If you can get us the list of seals, we can try to get protection for them until we are able to stop her,” Castiel added.

Anael ate a piece of uni while listening to her brother. She spotted his untouched chopsticks and her brow furrowed.

“Castiel, you aren't eating.” She pointed out.

“I do not need to eat.”

“Almost nothing on Earth is done out of necessity. Eat something,” she said. “That's an order.”

Castiel turned to Dean for input. Dean gave him a sympathetic shrug, then pick up the pair of chopsticks in front of him. After watching Dean fumble with the chopsticks for several seconds, Castiel reached across the table, picked up a piece of ebi with his bare hands, and popped it in his mouth. Everyone watched his face contort as he tried to process the experience.

“What do you think?” Dean asked after giving him a chance to swallow the mound of shrimp and rice.

“It's very complex,” Castiel replied.

“With those you can take the tails off before you eat them. You don't actually need to eat the shell,” Sam advised for future attempts.

“Earth has many obscure customs related to eating, some of which include accommodating aesthetic preferences,” Anael confirmed. Satisfied with Castiel’s effort, she continued with their business. “How do you plan on protecting the seals?”

“Currently the plan is to have demons protect the seals,” Sam answered since Castiel was preoccupied trying to clear his mouth of all remaining grains of rice.

Anael didn't bother trying to conceal her disgust. “Demons?”

“If we can get any help in addition to that we'll use it, but right now that's our best bet,” Sam explained. “We're talking about the Apocalypse. We can't be overly conservative.”

“Demons and I don't get along.” Anael eyed Sam for a few seconds before turning back to Castiel. “You may want to reconsider the help you already have.”

“Hey, we're putting our asses on the line,” Dean complained.

“So am I. I need to know that I can trust those I surround myself with,” she countered, then looked back to Sam. “You radiate with the Abyss.”

“Listen: you don't like whatever it is that I am? Well, I don't like it either, and you don't even know the half of it. I'm Lucifer's vessel.” Sam glanced briefly at the woman that Anael had been feeding. “I have a week-old daughter. I have people who are depending on me. So even if you don't trust me, trust that I don't want Lucifer getting out.”

Anael's eyes passed over him a few times, reassessing him. Her posture relaxed and she drank some tea while considering his position.

“You're one of the arch-vessels?” Her voice was noticeably less hostile than a minute earlier.

“They all are,” Castiel informed her.
“One of Lucifer's, the Righteous Man—” Dean’s shoulders slumped slightly at her use of the title “—and… What are you?” Anael stared at Dylaniel in a truly substantial way for the first time.

“I'm one of the Swords of Heaven,” Dylaniel answered.

“There's only one.” Anael’s eyes narrowed. “Everyone knows there's only one left. The others were killed two years ago.”

“I'm from one of the potential futures, from the year 2039.” The truth sounded so absurd that Sam and Dean both expected her to balk at the statement, but she didn't.

She leaned in with interest. “Time was altered?”

“Yes and no,” he replied. “My timeline was deviated from several days ago. I arrived here just before that.”

Anael nodded as she considered the sequence of events. “Who sent you back?”

“No one sent me back. I'm here through an accident. Well, I chose this time as well as any to exit at,” Dylaniel corrected.

“How does a human navigate time?” As soon as Anael asked the question her eyes widened. “You're a split-soul.”

“Yes. I'm a nephilim.”

Everyone watched to see how she'd react. Dylaniel held himself up with his usual defensive conviction, though Sam spotted him pull his knife under the table. Dean put down his chopsticks and slipped his hand into the pocket containing his hidden angel blade.

“I haven't seen one of your kind in over 1,500 years.” She stared candidly. “You're an adult.”

“I'm twenty-one years old.”

“The one I saw before... she was no more than eight when she was found.” Anael looked at her hands with what Sam suspected was guilt. “How did you survive so long?”

“I had protection. In my time there was an organized effort to protect fallen angels and their nephilim. The alliance made it safer for us,” Dylaniel explained.

“Their? You said that multiple angels had fallen in your time?”

Sam could hear hopeful desperation in her voice and it struck him as painfully familiar. She’d been in hiding, like him, but for decades. Now someone was telling her that there was a way to have more safety… maybe even a family. He wondered if the others realized how potentially powerful this 'what-if' was to her.

“Thousands of angels had fallen. They lived on Earth among humans and some demons,” Dylaniel replied.

“Were they happy?”

“As much as one can be amid the Apocalypse.”

Sam tried to wrap up the pitch in a more consumable manner. “You're not the only person that we want to ally ourselves with. We're trying to get enough people with diverse abilities and a common
goal to offer us some protection and help us prevent the Apocalypse.” With a little luck the fact that demons were a part of the alliance from Dylaniel's time made her less wary of them. “But we need your help getting the ball rolling.”

Anael looked between each of her companions. She spent a significantly longer amount of time considering Castiel, Dylaniel, and the silent woman next to her. Sam noticed her hand gently grip the woman's forearm in almost a gesture of reassurance.

“I’ll help you,” Anael agreed. “But I cannot abide aiding demons while my brothers and sisters are abandoned.”

“What are you suggesting?” Sam asked, unsure of what they were getting themselves into.

“I'll work on compiling the list of seals, and in the meantime I want you to make freeing my siblings a priority.”

“Freeing?”

She replied, “I want us to help them fall.”

There was another quiet pause while the men struggled to process her request.

“Anael, is that really what you want for them?” Castiel's voice was nearly pleading.

His sister reached her chopsticks across the table to the plate of ebi in front of Castiel. She removed the tail from the shrimp, dipped it in some soy sauce, then popped it in her mouth. A smile spread across her face as she savored the experience.

“I've never wanted anything more than that in my entire life,” she answered.

Sam had no idea what helping the angels fall entailed, but it sounded like an ordeal, especially considering all their other priorities. He'd have to speak with Dylaniel and Castiel to find out how feasible it even was.

“We want your help, but you're asking a lot.” Sam tried to lower her expectations.

“I'm asking for more than anything short of saving the Earth. I know that,” Anael acknowledged. “If you find a way to do this without me, to avoid this burden on you, then you’ll save the world but leave my brothers and sisters to be treated as blunt tools. My family will be forced to endure the fact that they were manipulated into trying to destroy the very thing they’ve been charged with protecting. You can’t expect me to do nothing when I know there’s another way.”

Castiel tried a different approach for talking her out of it. “There has never been an undertaking like that. We do not even know how to go about it.”

“Nephilim, you know of at least one way the angels fell. What do you think?”

Her question made everyone turn to Dylaniel.

Dylaniel thought for several seconds before replying. “I think I'm inclined to help you.”
After meeting with Anael in Los Angeles, Sam, Dean, Castiel, and Dylaniel returned to the bunker where the others were anxiously waiting for them. Bobby had tried his best to bring Jody up to speed on the current situation, though everyone understood that it was a lot to process. They recapped the conversation with Anael, which was generally considered as having mixed yet positive results… until they reached the discussion of Anael's request.

“She can't be serious,” Kay muttered while checking the designated cupboard of intoxicants in the library. She pulled out a sixty-year-old bottle of scotch, but moved it aside in search of other quarry. “For fuck’s sake, is there no weed in this place?”

“We're not as well-stocked as you were. Bring me that bottle,” Dean told her.

She grabbed the bottle along with two glasses, which was quickly amended to four for Bobby and Jody.

Dean took a sizable sip, then commented, “This whole 'angels falling' thing. I don't know what to think.”

“She wants us to go on the offensive against Heaven,” Kay said before taking her own large swig. “We can barely handle defending ourselves right now.”

“What the fuck does ‘making them fall’ even mean?” Ruby asked while passing Kaylee off to Sam. She started to grab a glass of her own, looked at the baby, then returned the glass to the cupboard.

“She wants us to recreate the circumstances surrounding the fall of the angels in our time?” Kay theorized. She stared knowingly at Dylaniel, then glanced at Dean. To anyone with less context Dean looked thoughtful. To her he looked like he was actively trying not to break out into a sweat. He took another long sip.

“And what's that actually mean?” Ruby pressed.

“Reaching a critical mass of individual fallen angels. The exact mechanics could vary, but once they start seeing large segments of their siblings fall it'll trigger a larger wave,” Dylaniel answered.

“This sounds incredibly dangerous,” Sam commented.

Bobby suggested a more positive spin. “Isn't every angel not following Heaven’s orders one less angel trying to kill us? They don't have an endless supply.”

“If we push them, Heaven will push back,” Kay warned.

“How much?” Sam asked.

“How much will they push back?” Kay huffed. “How much do you got? It's a whole new can of
worms. If Heaven didn't already want us dead….”

“What would this even do to Earth? Having a bunch of angels on it?” Sam mused aloud.

“They're just like any other supernatural creature. The humans shouldn't even notice them,” Dylaniel assured the others.

“I'm sorry, but Cas is pretty fucking noticeable,” Ruby countered. "He can crush a rock with his bare hands and doesn't have any social skills."

“So he's like a demon,” Dean jabbed in defense of the angel.

“I have acquired some social skills,” Castiel interjected a bit indignantly.

Dylaniel tried a different argument. “How can we interfere in the affairs of Hell and not even address Heaven?”

“We don't want to invite a full-on war with Heaven,” Kay said.

“We killed over a dozen angels. Empires have been destroyed for less,” Dylaniel countered. “We're already at war with Heaven. We've just been too sheltered for you all to notice. They'll happily kill us all and anyone else who's in their way.”

Kay stared at Dylaniel. She could tell he was livid, even if he might not appear it to the others. Something was upsetting him, and she couldn't put her finger on it. For over a decade he'd prioritized killing the angels of Heaven over recruiting them. Recruitment had always been his parents’ project. It was possible that he was trying to adopt their mission as some sort of tribute, but she had trouble picturing him doing something that sentimental. Granted, he was in a much more emotionally-vulnerable state than she was used to seeing him in.

“We shouldn't be picking fights when we're already outnumbered,” Bobby pointed out. “Just walkin’ into that isn't the right decision.”

“This isn't about doing what's right for us. It's about what's right.” Dylaniel's voice was raised and noticeably tense. “They're being held as slaves to tyrannical zealots.”

“It's been that way forever. They don't know anything different.” Kay’s voice was less argumentative and more discouraged. She didn't want to be shooting her cousin down.

“Maybe they should know something different,” Ruby interjected. “The kid’s got a point.”

“I'm not a kid,” Dylaniel shot back reflexively.

“I'm like 400 years older than you; you're a kid,” Ruby countered. “Anyway, I'm trying to help you. So just shut the hell up for a second. Cas—the angels up in Heaven—are they slaves?”

“They….” Castiel opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “They are loyal.”

“That doesn't answer my question. In your opinion, yes or no?”

The mood in the room dropped as they all watched Castiel struggle with the question. It was obvious and understandable that he wanted to say no, that his old life hadn't been as bleak as they were making it out to be, but it wasn't yet in his nature to lie or speak half-truths. He was being asked for his opinion, a very rare occurrence for an angel, and the unusualness of that in and of itself gave him pause about the nature of his previous existence.
Ruby decided when Castiel was unable to answer the question altogether. “That’s it. I’m in.”

Sam knew Ruby well enough to recognize that the idea of the angels being enslaved had to be a trigger for her. Not that he wasn’t sympathetic to an entire species’ plight, but she was undoubtedly taking the issue personally. If Ruby was coming down on the side of assisting the fall, he was that much more inclined to seriously consider the topic.

He looked down at his daughter. Part of him wanted to turn away from the complication and its potential risks. His parental instincts told him to limit any sort of exposure to danger that his family might face. But something deep inside him railed against the oppression of an entire people. Like the threat of Lucifer being freed, this was another example of his new internal conflict between protecting his family and protecting some future or ideal that he wanted to preserve for his family. As much as he wanted to guarantee that he would always be there for Kaylee, more than that he wanted her to grow up in a world free from Lucifer. He wanted her to grow up knowing that her dad was the kind of person who stood against injustice.

“Yeah, okay.” Sam nodded. “I’m in too.”

“Dyl….” Kay could see that this was incredibly important to her cousin and even if she didn’t fully understand what was happening, she knew she couldn’t bring herself to hurt him. “I’ll support whatever you think is right.”

“Wh….” Dean almost questioned Kay’s change of heart, but despite the problems that avenue of discussion might cause him personally, he had to admit that he felt for the angels. He’d met several fallen angels in 2039 who seemed like good people. And no matter how short Anael had been with Sam, she did have a quality that improved his opinion of angels more broadly. “Okay.”

“Dyl, the only thing I ask is that you think on it for a day or so. Make sure it's really what you want,” Kay added. “Then if you still want to take this up we can figure out a plan and get it rolling.”

“There are only 12,000 of us.” Castiel spoke up, uncertain about the idea of a mass fall. “There is no way of knowing what forcing conflict will do to my species.”

“There are 11,867 angels,” Dylaniel corrected. “And Heaven is already sending them into harm’s way. Michael will have no qualms sending them to their deaths. The point is to give them the freedom to say no.”

“But that will put them into direct conflict with other angels.”

“The fallen angels in our time found it worth the risk,” Dylaniel countered, giving Castiel pause.

“How many angels died in your timeline?” Sam asked, suddenly realizing how small in numbers their enemy was without Templars.

“By the time we left, Heaven had approximately 3,500 and we had probably less than 600,” Dylaniel answered grimly.

Castiel looked a bit faint at the news that nearly two-thirds of his siblings had died in just thirty years. If he could’ve passed out from shock he might have. Instead he sat down in a chair.

“Jesus,” Sam exhaled.

“Per capita that's not actually too bad,” Kay commented. “It was the end of the line when we left.
Everyone was on their last legs.”

“Yeah, I don't think there was a single species that had more than the minimum vital population,” Dean added, recalling the massive chalkboard of bad news.

“Minimum viable population,” Dylaniel corrected. “Once the humans fall below their threshold there's a domino effect since angels are most compatible with humans and historically nephilim have always had at least one human progenitor.”

“Not to mention Hell can’t sustain its demons without humans,” Kay added, then shook her head recalling Hell's inventory troubles in the last years of her reign. “Gods, I wish the humans had only lost two-thirds of their population. How many billions do you guys have right now?”

“Something like 7 billion,” Sam replied.

“Yeah, we’d take 2.3 billion humans any day.”

“Speak for yourself,” Dylaniel muttered.

“What actually caused all that destruction?” Sam mused. “Did the angels falling trigger it? Because if so, we really need to be careful.”

“We need to be careful no matter what,” Ruby pointed out.

“As far as I know Heaven’s outrage over the angels falling didn't really have an impact on the death toll until much of the large-scale damage had already begun. It took over a decade before Heaven really started actively going after fallen angels over any other species of enemy,” Dylaniel answered. “That was already after the rise of the Templars and the destruction of cities. As long as there was hope of preserving all the choirs, Heaven wasn't prepared to kill angels en masse.”

“The biggest factor for destruction in a broader sense was our dads resisting the Apocalypse,” Kay answered. “My dad and I managed to stay away from Lilith for almost twenty years. No angel has ever been able to catch Dyl, and his dad made it thirty years. The longer Heaven had to wait for their apocalypse, the more cranky they got.”

“Cranky? That's the word you're using for it?” Dean shuddered at the memory of the ruins of New Orleans.

“You're saying the longer we hold out, the worse the damage from Heaven is going to be?” Sam frowned at the implications.

“Well, if you say yes it's going to be a hundred times worse than even the long-term beating,” Kay replied.

“We need to end this fast,” Ruby stated. “We need to take Lilith out and I don't care what it takes—deals with demons or angels, making angels fall or demons rise—anything as long as we don't serve any vessels up on a silver platter.”

“So Kay tries to close the deal with Crowley in order to get our hunters safe, and maybe get that network up and running again, the coven relocated, and enough demons on Earth to defend the seals from Lilith's side. But in order to defend the seals we need to know what they all are, which means getting Anael’s help, and she’ll be a lot happier if we get working on the angels.” Dean recapped their basic plan… which, as he ticked off the points on his fingers, became more and more complicated.
“So you all are gonna feed them stone soup?” Jody mused aloud as she watched the show.

“What soup?”

“Stone soup... seriously, none of you know that story?” Jody looked around at them surprised, then realized her mistake. “God, am I really the only one that’s had a kid?”

“Um.” Sam held up Kaylee into her line of sight across the room to correct her.

“Okay, raised a kid,” Jody conceded. “It's a kid's story—well, an old folk story. Some stranger walks into town and he's really hungry, but he doesn't have any money. He takes a rock out of his pocket and announces to the whole town that it's a magical rock that can make soup—”

“I've never seen one make soup, but depending on the rock type—” Ruby started speculating.

“It's not actually a magical rock,” Jody explained.

“Jod, with this crowd…” Bobby said with a shrug.

“Hey, I get it. I'm talking to a demon, an angel, and some time travelers. I need to clarify when stuff isn't actually magic.” Jody raised her hands in acknowledgement of her new reality.

“Anyway, the stranger says the rock can make delicious soup and he'd be happy to share with the whole town, but he needs to borrow a large pot of water and a stove. Some villagers say, ‘Yeah, sure. We've got to see this,’ and lend him the pot and stove.

“He throws the stone in the water and brings it to a boil and starts talking up how great it's going to be. And a curious villager walks over to see how the soups coming. He tells her, ‘It's coming along, but I bet it'd be even better tasting if we threw in some onions.’ So the woman got some onions from her garden and threw them in. Then the smell of the boiling onions attract more people and he convinces each of them that the soup will be better with another addition, which they give him. In the end, there's a giant pot of soup and the only thing the guy put in was a rock.”

“He conned them?” Dylaniel asked, confused by the moral of the story.

“I think the lesson is about making something out of nothing,” Sam suggested.

“By conning people,” Ruby corrected.

Sam tried again. “It's kinda about teamwork.”

“Yeah... tricking people doesn't really count as teamwork,” Ruby replied. “Not that I have a problem with it. Just, maybe you shouldn't be getting warm fuzzies.”

“I'm fine conning people,” Kay agreed.

Dylaniel and Dean both nodded in a move that made them look even more like each other.

“Bobby, the people you hang around with….” Jody smiled while shaking her head a bit. “I mean, I knew about Dean—”

“Hey!” Dean said defensively. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Don't play dumb,” Bobby muttered.

“Who's playing?” Ruby jabbed.
“Well even if Anael helps us find the seals and if we get demons protecting them, that's still only stalling. This isn't going to be over until we kill Lilith.” Ruby refocused the conversation to the long-term solution.

“Until you guys kill Lilith,” Sam corrected, then looked to Kay in benched solidarity.

“And that means finding her.”

“So we need eyes on the ground looking for demonic omens,” Bobby suggested.

“Well, we can't really use demons for that or we're gonna get a ton of false positives on any short-range activity,” Ruby commented.

“Hunters—that's what they do,” Sam said as he turned to Bobby and Dean. “How many hunters are in your network?”

“Assuming they're still alive? Forty?”

“We need more.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Bobby replied.

“I can look for any weird hits in our crime database if you tell me what to watch for. It probably won't have anything for the last day or two and it only covers a few parts of the US, but it might be helpful,” Jody volunteered. “Actually, I might have some strings I could pull to check in parts of southern Canada too.

Sam smiled at her. “Welcome to the research team.”

“What's a demonic omen even look like?”

“Lightning storms, cattle mutilation—” Dean began, but he was interrupted.

“That's getting to be such an outdated omen,” Ruby commented. “I mean, it's okay. There's a reason it's a classic, but it's lost some of its value since factory farming took off. Now who does it scare? McDonalds?”

“Okay, so what's trendy?”

“Lightning storms, human mutilation—either destroyed (but not eaten) bodies, or trashed meatsuits,” Ruby explained. “Natural gas poisoning where there aren't any wells, circles of land that are bleached white, acid rain—”

“Situations where there's a strange and high concentration of sulfur,” Sam guessed, earning him a playful predatory biting gesture from Ruby.

“Please don't do that in front of me,” Kay requested while pointedly looking away from the flirting.

“Me too,” Dean added with a smirk.

“Hey Dean, that's a nice bed you have.” Ruby grinned menacingly. “It'd be a shame if something—”

“Oh my fucking—fine.” Dean got up from the table. “Excuse me while I go salt my door.”

“Dude, calm down,” Sam told his brother.
“Please don't have sex in his bed.” Dylaniel added his vote, making a quarter of the room grimace with the mental image.

“Why does everyone think we actually want to have sex in his bed?” Sam asked in exasperation.

“I mean, I wouldn't say no,” Ruby said just loud enough to make Dean glare at her.

“See what I have to deal with?” Bobby muttered to Jody.

“So you have raised kids.”

“I don’t know if demonic omens are gonna cut it for finding Lilith,” Ruby speculated after the teasing had died down.

“You two were hunting her for months,” Dean pointed out. “What’d you use?”

“We followed omens and Sam’s visions, but that was spotty, and before she upped her security. After I got pregnant we stopped looking for her altogether.”

“What about using visions?” Bobby asked.

“Lilith only shows every few months. Most of the action doesn't actually happen around her,” Sam replied apologetically.

Dean thought of all the magic he'd witnessed in 2039. “I don’t suppose you have a locator spell or something like that?”

“We’d need some part of her, blood of her current meatsuit, her smoke…. Her trace sulfur wouldn't work,” Ruby mused aloud. “All the stuff that we’d need to find her, we’d need to get from her in the first place.”

“Crossroads deal?” Sam asked hopefully.

“I’ll talk with Crowley,” Kay agreed. “We might be able to get some older hits, but getting real-time information through any sort of protective magics has never really worked well. Crossroads doesn't like to advertise their limitations, but for intelligence they mostly have to stick to their asset networks and data analytics.”

Dean thought back to trying to initially find Sam. Shola had been evasive on the subject of providing anything more than word from eyes on the ground. After finding Sam, he'd found out his brother was covered in anti-scrying tattoos. If Lilith had anything on par with the tattoos that would make locating her equally challenging, or worse.

“If she's really gone to ground, is it possible we can't find her with magic?” Dean worried aloud.

“Yes,” Ruby confirmed grimly.

“So that might mean waiting for her to come out,” Sam said. “As soon as the sixty-fifth seal is broken she'll be really going after me again.”

“She'll also be looking for me if she's smart,” Kay added.

“We aren't using either of you for bait.” Ruby shot down the unspoken thought.

“That's for sure,” Dean agreed, crossing his arms in front of his chest.
Despite her earlier teasing, Ruby unconsciously crossed her arms as well, mimicking his determination on the subject.

“If we can't scry her out, I'm not sure how else to find her. She's got the whole world to hide in,” Kay said. “I'm not suggesting we play bait at all, just that we're on a really short clock that we can't even read yet and we don't know how to find her. The longer it takes to figure out the seals, the less time we have when Sam and I can directly help trying to deal with that whole mess.”

“Her people might know where she is,” Bobby suggested.

“Her location has to be need-to-know,” Sam speculated. “Does she have an inner circle? Do you even know who might be helping her this early?”

“There's Abbadon—the knights split up pretty early on.” Kay began listing off the usual suspects. “Samhain was a big force for recruiting, so I'm sure he was in the game early. Alastair—”

“Him,” Dean interrupted. “He's our in.”

“Dean, you cannot be suggesting—” Castiel started arguing against the plan, but Dean cut him off.

“I don't like it. I'm just saying it's an option.”

“Who's Alastair?” Sam asked while staring anxiously at his slightly agitated brother.

“He's the demon that tortured me.” Dean somehow spoke through pursed lips. “He'll want me back. He's a smart guy, but he's stubborn. He'll make mistakes trying to get ahold of me.”

“You're stubborn too,” Ruby replied. “You really think a battle of wills or wits with an arch is gonna work out for you?”

“You can't play bait with Alastair,” Dylaniel said in agreement.

“If it get us intel on Lilith's location—” Dean tried to convince them, but was interrupted.

“Do you think he'd really give her up?”

“He's fucked up, but I know him. I know how he thinks.” Dean nodded to himself. “I could make him talk.”

“Dean, in our time he got ahold of Dee and did a lot of damage—like, more or less took him out of the fight. If he actually gets ahold of you there's no telling how bad it can get.” Kay looked at him meaningfully. “We don't want to invite history to repeat itself. That's how Lucifer got out in the first place. That forced the fight with Lilith.”

“We're trying for a fight with Lilith, we just need you and Sam to stay out of it,” Dean countered. “We just need to make a plan and stick to it—”

“If you're in trouble, how can you expect me to just….,” Sam was visibly pained by the prospect. He rocked Kaylee for some small comfort, but it didn't alleviate the concern on his face.

“You've got a family to think about. You've got the whole fucking world to think about.” Dean thought back to all the destruction that Lucifer’s freedom had caused. “If Lucifer gets out—we can't let that happen. I don't care what we have to do.”

“Okay, everyone shut the fuck up!” Kay shouted. “Nobody is going after Alastair. We don't have the luxury of being stupid.” She stood up and looked around the room to see if anyone would risk
arguing with that basic principle. “We have other stuff to deal with that's less suicidal, so let's start with that.”

“Then we can work our way up to suicidal,” Ruby muttered.

“It's called running down leads,” Bobby commented.

“The suicidal part is actually when you run out of leads,” Dean corrected, earning a nod of approval from Ruby.

“We’ll start researching and we’ll start getting intel soon.” Sam offered his beloved pastime as a form of reassurance of future progress. “Maybe we'll catch a lucky break. At the very least we can really hammer out the best possible plan.”

Dylaniel took off fairly quickly after the debriefing finished. Kay checked his room and old haunts, eventually finding him sitting on the highest point of the building that covered the bunker. It had been one of his favorite places to sit and think as a teenager. There was something about being as close to the sky as possible that gave him comfort. She suspected it was some sort of angelic instinct.

“Are you okay? You seemed more… emotional than usual,” she said as she sat down beside him on the edge of the rooftop.

His shoulders were slumped and he held one of his blessed knives. He turned the weapon over in his hand, thoughtfully dragging his finger along the flat side of the blade.

“It's fine to be emotional,” she assured him. “I just—is there anything that you want to talk about?”

“Nordael is dead.” Dylaniel stared at the weapon rather than her. “I served with her for years…. She was my friend.”

“I'm sorry, Dyl. I miss everyone too.”

“No, I mean she was killed in the fight at the coven,” he said flatly, then pursed his lips, unsure if he should say more.

Kay blinked at him, startled by the new development. “What?”

“I didn't see her,” Dylaniel elaborated. “I don't know who killed her…. I don't know what I would've done if I'd seen her.”

Kay nodded at his concern. She wasn't sure how she'd react if she was forced into a confrontation with an old friend. There were a dozen or so angels that she'd been close to, but most of her friends weren't likely to be in combat situations. Though her knights had been left without leadership for much longer in this timeline. Her heart sank at the thought of Joseba or Tora having sided with Lilith in her absence.

“Things aren't going to be the same this time around. We might end up facing people we were friends with.”

“If the angels don’t fall....” Dylaniel paused, contemplating his blade. “I'm supposed to fight the servants of Heaven, but they're the people I…. I don't want to kill people that I care about. I don't want to kill Hael if she's unlucky enough to be sent after us.”
“No one's asking you to single-handedly take on all of Heaven.”

“That's all I'm good for.”

She wanted to hug him, but she knew that the act never really provided him comfort. It was merely something he endured to help others feel better. Rather than trying to comfort him through intimacy, she tried to comfort him through sincerity.

“Dyl, I need you to look at me,” she instructed, causing him to face her for the first time. She looked him in the eyes and spoke with absolute conviction. “That's not true. That's not all you're good for.”

“Tell me one service that I've provided beyond killing.”

She could tell from his slightly furrowed brow and gentle eyes that he wasn't being snide; he really wanted to know.

“You've inspired people. You still do.” She slowly extended her hand toward him, hesitated, then delicately rested it on his shoulder. “I love you. You know that, right?”

He nodded and turned back to studying the blessed weapon.

“Are you okay?” Dean asked Castiel after the others went off to begin their research and other activities. Dean was about to attempt scrounging up some dinner when he noticed that Castiel hadn't gotten up from his chair. The angel had barely reacted since all the talk about falling. Hell, forcing him to consider the nature of his siblings’ existence had been enough to justify a crisis, independent of hearing about all the potential destruction his species might suffer or cause.

“I am…. I'm scared for my family,” Castiel confided. “I do not know what the right answer is.”

“None of us know what the right answer is,” Dean replied. “We just try our best.”

“On Earth, everyone is so casual about rebelling. I am not sure that it is right to hope for my brothers and sisters to fall. They would become as much an exile as I am. The stigma of expulsion is one thing, but Heaven is profound. I would not wish its loss on anyone.”

Dean felt a bit saddened by the idea that Castiel might be trapped into a life he didn't want. “Do you regret falling?”

“No,” Castiel answered after a long time. “I made my choices and, especially knowing what I know now, I would not choose differently. I suppose… when I think about my existence in Heaven, living before I thought on my own and felt… felt anything—I have more conviction in my choices. But those choices are difficult and carry considerable risk.”

“What was it like, to not feel anything?” Dean asked, completely thrown by the concept.

“It was clear and endless, yet... uneventful.” Castiel tilted his head to the side, processing something that Dean could only guess at. “The last few days, they have been longer than any number of the millennia I've served and I do not know how that is.”

“You said that Heaven’s angels are loyal….” Dean drew the conversation away from such a foreign concept and tried to get back to what he could relate to. “When I was younger I was very loyal to my dad. I never questioned what he said or the directions he gave. There was something comforting about it—like you said, 'clear,' not having to decide for myself. I was always following
orders; the orders of someone who knew better than me.”

“It is one of the benefits of faith,” Castiel agreed.

“Yeah, but then there came a day when I knew he was wrong.” Dean swallowed hard at the memory of his dad yelling at Sam for secretly applying to college. “After that, it was like there was a crack in the glass that just kept getting bigger and bigger. Then all of a sudden my whole world shattered.”

“That does not sound comforting.”

“It scared the hell out of me. It still does sometimes, but it's strange. When I think about all the things I've done, the things I've wanted to do, the things that I've been too scared to do—after all those bad thoughts, I'm... I'm trying my best. I'm trying to take responsibility for myself. I'm trying to be comfortable with myself... and that's more than I've ever done before in my life.” Dean had been so caught up dissecting his feelings in real time that he'd nearly forgotten about the angel watching him with rapt attention. “Why would I ever want to spare someone that?”

“I don't know how to do that, but it sounds like something I would like to try,” Castiel told him. “Maybe I would not want to spare someone that potential either?”

“I think trying’s the whole point.” Dean smiled and put his hand on Castiel's arm in a gesture of reassurance. “You'll figure it out.”

“Thank you.” Castiel looked at Dean with a little more softness than he was used to. The subtle change in the angel’s demeanor reminded Dean of the other Cas. His heart skipped at the thought and he could feel himself blush. Dean pulled his hand away, but not so fast as to be obvious. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah. I'm fine,” Dean replied. “It's just been a complicated day.”

After receiving the okay from Crowley to come down to Hell, Kay teleported directly to his private office. The office was the same, unexpectedly modest room that she'd known practically her whole life. In all probability, his secret ledger cypher was probably currently hidden in the false bottom of the left bookcase. The Crowley that had been a mentor to her had made her the sole heir to all of his assets and secrets. In her time, she knew where all the bodies were buried, including his actual body. Here, there was likely some overlap, but also potential pitfalls of assuming knowledge or familiarity where it might not actually exist. She sat down opposite him, in one of his guest chairs.

“Is this chair hexed?” she asked, blinking her eyes black to inspect it.

“Honest mistake,” Crowley said while snapping his fingers to undo the hex.

“I know you're honest,” she assured him. “That's part of why I'd like to work with you.”

“My vulnerability is your boon,” he commented.

“Hopefully we'll both get a boon from this.” Kay smiled at him. “How'd the Council take my offer and suggestion for the valuation?”

“They're not quite sure what to make of you. Your origin is a bit far-fetched, to say the least. Morrison and Weller seemed to believe it was possible, which generally improved your standing,” Crowley explained. “Denerus, Ravana, and Opeth liked the idea of ordering a realm-wide valuation, though I'm not convinced Halphas understands the potential strategic value.”
“Have you made any progress on my demands?” Kay asked.

“We have people in the field picking up what's left of your hunters and we're putting the finishing touches on a camp for the coven.”

“Is the camp near Saskatoon?”

Crowley raised an eyebrow at the accuracy of her guess. “Yes.”

“I want the warding enhanced well beyond what you'd been planning,” Kay said grimly. “In my time it wasn't enough and we suffered too much for it.”

“Alright, I'll ask Morrison to lend a few more minds to it,” the archdemon agreed. “The Council would like to see you in person before they finalize any sort of alliance between us.”

“I understand. Shall we continue this chat on our way to the Council’s chamber?”

“If you'd like.” Crowley stood, then got the door for her.

She noticed that Crowley lagged behind her slightly while they walked. If he was anyone else, she'd have suspected that he was sneaking a glance at her ass, but he wasn't nearly that simple. He was making her lead in order to test whether she could navigate the labyrinthine halls of the Citadel. Not only did she guide him to the throne room—she took a shortcut.

When they entered the throne room on their way to the Council’s chamber, Kay spotted Mir standing at attention beside the Seat. The sight of the knight warmed her heart, though she knew he didn't recognize her back. His cold black eyes watched her with a cautious curiosity and she wondered if he could already sense that there was something different about her.

Instead of heading toward the door to the Council’s chamber, she approached the Seat. It was black and bare, and it filled her with pity. Without a second's thought she turned and sat down on the throne. Crowley reached out to warn her against it, but it was too late. His mouth opened and closed several times as he struggled to find the words. For his part, Mir's razor-thin mouth smiled with what she recognized as relief. He’d been waiting for her for far too long.

Kay didn't even need to look up to know that the tree's bark was turning white. She could feel the branches budding thousands of crimson flowers. It was a deeply comforting sensation. In a very real way, it felt like home. This might not be her time and these demons might not know her, but Hell itself was profound and in her heart she suspected it remembered her.

“Sorry I didn't warn you about this, but I thought showing you would be easier than telling you,” Kay told Crowley in an unassuming voice. The last thing she wanted to do was to make him think she was cutting him and the Council out of the equation entirely. But it was hard to imagine anyone believing that she could change the very fabric of Hell.

After taking a minute to overcome his shock, Crowley asked, “How are you doing that?”

“I carry Lucifer's grace. It gives me a special relationship with Hell that you and I took advantage of in my time,” Kay explained. “In my time I was Queen of Hell.”

“Queen?” She could sense Crowley's concern. He was the current head of a republic and she'd just mentioned a monarch.

“I was your… well, 'puppet' is too dismissive. We had a partnership, but I bore all the public praise and wrath.” She waved her hand, sealing all the doors to the hall. Crowley undoubtedly
appreciated the power and finesse she'd just exercised. “I'd like to talk about our contract, between just you and me.”

“I didn't know such a contract existed,” he replied cautiously.

“Wouldn't you like one to?”

His eyes looked her over, then scanned up the tree. She could feel his shock and concern turning into the hunger of an opportunist eager to strike. He smiled at her.

“I think I might.”

The archdemons in Crowley's alliance were unaccustomed to being summoned, either magically or politically. The eight powerful demons entered the throne room, each stumbling or doing a double-take at the blooming throne. She could feel in them what passed for rapture in Hell, but when each of them saw her sitting in such a commanding position, she could sense their fear.

“I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Lucian. I believe Crowley told you about my offer?”

“How are you doing that?” Morrison asked with professional curiosity more than anything else.

“I'm Lucifer's chosen.” Kay focused on the floor in front of her. The stone fissured and a few small, black vines began growing out of it. They were Alex's favorite, so she'd had the most experience creating that particular flora. She didn't want to risk flubbing her first politically-useful display of power, so she went with what was familiar. “I have a special relationship with Hell.”

Halphas took a defensive posture. “What're you going to do with us?”

“Hopefully, I'm going to conquer Hell with you,” Kay replied in an attempt to reassure the Council, but their worry was still palpable.

“No one said anything about this.” Ravana gestured at the throne. “We wanted an ally, not a ruler.”

“I am your ally, whether you believe it or not,” Kay said. “I know I'm an outsider to you, but I also know each of your value. You lead your castes because you've earned the respect of your people. I'm asking that you allow me to earn your respect.”

She got up off the throne and walked up to the demons. She removed her jacket and tossed it aside to stand before them in her plain black jeans and backless B.R.M.C. t-shirt. Holding up her arms, she wanted to appear as non-threatening and candid as possible.

“This is me. Just flesh and blood, but demon and full of suggestions.” At the admission of being in a mortal form Halphas flared with excited opportunity and took a step forward to attack her. Kay held up a hand, gripping him with her powers. “Please don't try to hurt me. I don't want our relationship to start off on the wrong foot.”

“You can read our minds?” Denerus inquired.

“No, but I can sense other demons and their emotions” Kay confessed. “I know you don't trust me. You barely believe me at all, but I do want to work with you to stop Lilith and unify Hell—”

“Under your control,” Weller added, zir mood cautiously neutral.

“I don't want to dissolve the Council. I don't want to kill or unseat any of you, because you are the
best of your castes and strong castes are vital to the long-term survival of Hell.” The fact that half the castes were at war with the other half had to be a sore point, if not an outright source of embarrassment for the archdemons. “But I can give Hell something that it sorely needs right now.”

“And that is?” Denerus asked.

“Order. A single, strong voice to rally behind. Our enemy has that clarity in Lilith. We’ll need that if we’re going to defeat her, and we’ll need it even more to defend ourselves against Heaven.” She could feel the terror that the mere mention of Heaven instilled in them. “I've fought and killed angels. I know how to protect our people. I know how to command the respect we deserve.”

Morrison was warming to her slightly, falling somewhat victim to his own scientific daring. “You said you wanted to earn our respect. How do you plan on going about doing that?”

“I'm going to give you your first military victory against Lilith. Then I'm going to help you cripple her forces through the pairing of a carrot and a stick.”

“We don't have any significant military. We can't win this with knights alone and our troops are completely preoccupied defending our border,” Halphas warned.

“That's why I plan on gifting you soldiers.”

“And where are you hiding these soldiers?”

“In Lilith's army,” she answered with cool conviction.

The archdemons considered her with a strange mixture of amusement and wariness. None of them were about to turn down such an incredible gift, even if they weren't sure how such a thing was possible.

She smiled at their tacit acceptance, then said, “Now that we've temporarily worked through that bout of tension, let me tell you about my long jacket.”

“There's one last thing,” Kay told Crowley after the other archdemons had left. She pursed her lips slightly while debating whether it was worth bringing up. “I need a soul.”

“I thought you had one?”

“I meant that I need some time alone with one of the inventory souls.”

“Dare I ask?” His voice alluded to a vulgar joke, the irony being that he was thinking of the wrong form of vulgarity.

“I'm out of practice.”

Crowley stared at her thoughtfully. She didn't appear remotely happy at the prospect of what she needed to do, which gave him pause. It was actually quite telling, both that she would confide in him and that she was visibly not going to enjoy it. He nodded in understanding.

“I can have one with a more vile history brought in.”

She appreciated the offer, but couldn't accept it. “No, just have one picked at random. It's not about righteousness. It's about being able to do what I have to.” Kay sat back down on the Seat with the air of a queen. “This throne doesn't rest on the moral high ground.”
Kay sat, staring at the pool of blood she'd just created. Well, it wasn't actually blood; souls didn't technically have bodies. The blood was just a reflexive manifestation of their pain and fear. It was their expected result of being tortured, so it occurred. Despite knowing the secret of the illusion, it still looked, felt, and smelled like blood. It'd still made her want to throw up for the first two hours.

The soul had given out under her torture. In roughly an hour its tattered form would dissolve into the ether, consumed by Hell itself. Not that there was much resembling a body at that point. She had systematically taken it apart with her claws. On a few occasions, she'd had to stop to calm her nerves, but somehow she'd managed to avoid vomiting.

She sat on the floor of the throne room. The doors were locked and the room had been cleared. All of her clothes had been taken off so that they wouldn't become soiled in the process. She touched her palm to the surface of the blood, coated it, then looked at her hand.

For most of her life, she'd known violence as a colleague. Occasionally, she'd had to actually fight on Earth, but it had never really reached her personal life until recently. She hadn't seen Sa'dah's or Bobby's bodies. Alex had been cleaned and dressed before she helped wrap him for his pyre. She hadn't actually seen violent death touch her family until Cas. Then in less than 48 hours it had also come for Tom, her mother, her father…. She didn't want to think about what had happened to her uncle Dean. Going into the fight at the temple she hadn't been concerned about the sight of blood and carnage. Coming out of the fight at the coven she had been debilitated by it.

She looked at what was left of the destroyed soul's face. It was mostly human in appearance, with some distortions that may have hinted at guilt or self-loathing. It had been a woman in her mid-fifties. Kay knew nothing personal about her. She didn't ask a single question of the soul while she worked it over. The only thing she knew was that the woman didn't want to die. The soul had screamed it repeatedly. As much as she would've liked to silence the soul to make it easier, she didn't. After all, she couldn't silence all of Hell for her own comfort.

Kay lay down on the floor and stared up at the ceiling. She watched the flames of the heavy black chandeliers flicker as the blood pooled around her naked body. In her old throne room, purple and black vines grew along the ceiling and their pollen would ignite, sparking as it fell downward. Hell had been something beautiful, but in this time it was nothing more than cold, dried bones. If she wanted to bring it back to life there would have to be blood.

Kay hated flying, but she knew the importance of showmanship. The Black Gate was located on the ceiling of Hell, over the northwest quadrant of the Pits. Her father had discovered it after investigating an overly generous offer by an archdemon to purchase several parcels of dungeons. The story of the Black Gate had been a recurring lesson during her training in Hell: always be wary of gains too easily gotten.

The gains she was currently seeking would potentially come with relative ease, but significant risk. She wasn't going to enter Lilith's territory from the edge of Central District. Instead she'd enter Hell directly into enemy territory via the unknown gate. From there she would collect followers and souls as she cut a straight line through the Upper Pits, back to Central.

At that point, there would be no feasible way to hold territory in the Pits. Any dungeons she took would easily be engulfed after she left since she lacked the forces necessary to leave a defensible garrison. She needed to take troops with her, both as her promised gift to the Council and for her own protection. Instead, she'd sack the dungeons, taking their inventory and temporarily damaging their functionality. So to get the most reward for her efforts, she decided to hit dungeons under
Alastair's banner, specifically one of his favorites, the dungeon where he held hunters.

Her basic plan for recruiting Lilith's demons on that trip was fairly simple. She was going to show such power and confidence as to shake their conviction. Lilith promised to follow Lucifer's will. Kay could do one better; she was a creation of Lucifer's will, unlike any they'd seen. Lilith may have been Lucifer's first demon, but Kay could pull out tricks that demons hadn't witnessed since Lucifer zirself walked the realm.

She had briefly humored the idea of performing her march naked. Most of the depictions of Lucifer in Hell had zir naked, so there would've been a potential symbolic benefit. And there occasionally was a psychological advantage to making your opponent confused while maintaining your own composure. But in the end she didn't want to deal with the long-term repercussions of having hundreds or thousands of her potential followers seeing her bare ass. She might personally be able to take jokes in poor taste, but the throne could not suffer disrespect.

Instead she had some clothes made for the occasion. Her elegant black wings perfectly matched her black long coat with red blossom trim. Her eyes and horns echoed the same black. Her fangs, claws, and inhuman earlobes were out for all to see. Looking the part made her confidence as the Queen of Hell swell in her.

She descended from the Black Gate and touched down on the stone rooftops of the first dungeon on her list. Normally, she'd be wearing her heavy black combat boots, but once again awing the masses was more important than comfort. The stone was rough, but the direct contact with the Abyss made it easier for her to use her powers.

She focused on the Hell she'd grown up with, the hauntingly beautiful creature. With every ounce of longing for home that she had, she reached out for the long-dead flora, trying to find their roots. Tiny blue leaves grew out from around her feet, spreading through some seams between the dungeon's stonework. The dozens of demons that had been stationed nearby stared in complete shock at the sight of plant life—any life in Hell.

When she took a step toward the crowd, they recoiled from her. Each step spawned a strange new plant, which spread out around her. They didn't know what to make of her and that was fine. As long as she wasn't being swarmed by enemies she stood a good chance of winning.

“I would like to introduce myself. I am Lucian, your queen,” she announced to the crowd.

One of the bolder demons rushed at her, but she caught him with telekinesis, lifted him into the air and tore his shell to pieces.

“I am Lucian, Queen of Hell, First of the Second Season. If you have a problem with that, then I have no problem ending you, just as the First Season shall end,” Kay stated a little louder. “I will grant a pardon to anyone who stood with Lilith, as long as you sincerely wish to join me… otherwise, you'll die. It's your choice.”

She could sense the conflict among the demons in front of her. Several were leaning towards joining her while a few others were offended by her claims and threats. She snapped her finger and pointed at one of the Lilith loyalists in an intentionally provoking manner.

“You, what do you say?” Kay goaded.

“I say go fuck yours—”

She grabbed zir with telekinesis, pulled zir to her, then burned zir away with the First Light. Her
wings flapped out broadly and she changed their coloration to glow intensely with the First Light, stopping just short of blinding the crowd.

“I bring the Light of the Morningstar and it will burn through the enemies of our realm,” Kay declared as she dimmed her wings back to black. “So, who is with me?”

Several of the demons closest to her turned to stand between her and the mob, protecting her. The visible switch in loyalty compelled more demons to choose a side, compelling the next group, causing a ripple that spread out across the rooftops of three dungeons. She watched the growing brawl unfold and occasionally aided her new followers. But her arguably biggest impact went unseen by the crowd.

By the time she’d made it fifteen steps she’d already disrupted the productivity of an entire dungeon in the Upper Pits. From the moment she’d touched down, she started awakening the roots embedded in the walls. By then brilliant flowers were growing in even the darkest corners. It was a display of her power, but also a move to significantly slow the short-term production in one of Alastair’s best dungeons. If an archdemon wouldn't deal with her and she didn't have the numbers to garrison a dungeon, then she would make it known that she would cripple it.

The technique for temporarily disabling the dungeons was actually a trick she'd picked up from Alex. On more than one occasion, he'd accidentally hurt dungeons productivity by awakening the roots within the dungeon’s walls. One of the great secrets of Hell was just how much of it housed dormant root systems. Hell had once been the richest garden in all of God’s creation until its corruption. When Lucifer took it for zipper own all of the ancient roots were left in the stone.

It was one thing to wow the masses by growing a few flowers on the surface, but with a bit extra effort she could revive deeper roots and infest the gloomy dungeons with something inspiring. The Torquean demons might be able to trim the flowers blooming around their implements of torture, but the weeds would just grow back. It might seem like a nuisance at first, but she’d seen Alex be temporarily banned from the Pits for fear that his flowers would ruin dungeons. She was capable of subduing the plants, but without her help, the only way to stop the weeds would be to completely excavate the stone walls, something that was unheard of prior to the inception of the engineering caste in 2019.

Kay smiled at the memory of Alex innocently grinning as he toured the damage, a bloodletting room lined in turquoise and silver lilies. She touched her chest, where her necklaces rested below her jacket. With the thought of her family and her beautiful realm, she reached out to wake the lost titans of Hell.

The hunters’ dungeon was the fifth one of her march. It seemed that word of her travel was somewhat preceding her because when she arrived, there was already a fight in progress between pro-Lilith and pro-Lucian demons. With a few theatrical kills she was able to take it easily and get down to the more delicate business.

Hunter souls were notorious in the market of Hell. They were a painfully slow render, but the quality of the resulting demons were very high. That's why Alastair hoarded as many for himself as possible. They were both bragging rights as a torturer and were incredibly valuable once they'd become tender, broken to the brink of turning. Kay wanted the cache for both those reasons, but also she hoped to gain the resulting demons from the whole process on top of it.

The current inventory for that dungeon was only 76, but that was more than worth a little effort on her part. She had the souls gathered in the largest hall available within the fortified dungeon. With a bit of luck she could demonstrate her desired approach to some of her newly-recruited Torquean
and then let them process the remainder while she moved on to her next conquest.

“I’d like to introduce myself,” Kay addressed the souls, who were understandably thrown by not actively being tortured for the first time since they’d arrived in Hell. “I’m the Queen of Hell.”

“Lilith,” one of the souls whispered, triggering a murmur through her audience.

“No. I’m the one who is going to drive her from Hell, and from Earth.” Kay emphasized her interest to remove Lilith from the souls’ former home. “I have a simple proposal for each of you. Swear your loyalty to me, accept your position as a servant of the Seat of Hell, and in exchange you’ll have your identity preserved as much as possible and you will be accepted into our community.”

One of the souls spoke with a meekness that she recognized as either the result of decades of abuse or a human that had simply made the wrong career decision. “Community?”

“Hell is a complex system, which maybe hasn't been explained to you since your arrival. Once you become a demon, you’ll be sorted into your appropriate castes, though based on your backgrounds I except most of you would become Torquean, Cruciare, or Raberian, our primary torturer caste and two of our largest military castes.”

“I’m not fighting for Hell,” said another soul. “You can shove—”

Kay snapped her fingers and pointed at the soul. She didn't actually do anything to him, but the act itself and her deadly serious glare was startling enough to terrify him into silence. He'd been tortured for so long the anticipation of pain was second nature.

“You misunderstand me. You don’t get a choice in whether you fight for us or not. You get the choice of what happens between now and then.” Kay paused a beat to let her words sink in. “This isn't an escapable scenario. You're in Hell, a completely different plane from Earth. You physically cannot leave here as you are. No demon will help you regardless of their caste or faction, because you haven't earned their help and you have nothing of value to them as you are. The value in you is breaking you. Maybe you could sell yourself to the highest bidder, but they won't buy what they can simply take. The fastest way for you to keep any shred of your dignity is to acclimate before your mind is entirely picked away with rusty blades.”

For some reason it seemed like this was news to them. They all stared at her with a bleak silence at the prospect. She generally took it as a good sign, with a little luck they’d be less resistant to change after learning they had no way back to their old lives or to Heaven. Kay made a mental note to establish orientation meetings for the newly arrived souls. Not addressing their feelings might make them feel less respected, but it simply left their expectations unreasonable.

“I'd rather die,” said one of the souls in defiance.

Kay rolled her eyes at the statement of protest. “In case you didn't notice, you did die. This is the end of the line. When you get trashed as a soul or killed as a demon, there's no next step. There's nothing.” She informed them. “I suggest you take that to heart.”

“It's better than torture!” yelled another soul.

“But is it better than a cheeseburger?” The souls stared at her, dumbfounded by the question. None of them had eaten in subjective years or even decades. “You're right, nobody—well, very few people prefer torture to nothingness, but that's not all you're losing. I know you're in pain, but if there's anything that still might give you happiness, you'll lose that too. If you can stand to give
that up, you're more than welcome to.”

Kay knew that all unbroken souls by their very nature had something they were still trying to
survive for. The trick was finding that passion and taking advantage of it. She called over several
of her highest ranking converted Torquean and spoke with them in Abyssal, making sure that they
understood her desired plan. With the basics covered, it was time to begin the more delicate part
of grading and sorting the hunter souls.

“Do any of you know of the hunter Sam Winchester?” she asked, causing almost two dozen souls
to cautiously raise their hands. She pointed to the first one. “You follow me, the rest of you will
stay here until I call for you.”

She led the soul and three assistants into a smaller craving room. At her direction, one demon
stood guarding each of the two doors out of the room. The soul found himself in the middle of the
small room with Kay in front of him and the last demon behind him. He was surrounded.

“Tell me what you know about Winchester,” Kay instructed the soul as she sat down on a chest of
equipment.

She specifically avoided calling him Sam in order to mask her own opinions. Without any insight
into her feelings, the hunter was forced to either be honest or take a shot in the dark as to what she
wanted to hear. Her ability to sense emotions only extended to demons, so she was forced to use
her intuition while evaluating souls.

“He's a hunter out of the Midwest. His dad and brother were big names, but he's….” The soul
hesitated. “There are rumors about him.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“That he's one of you.”

She was well familiar with the semi-public knowledge that Sam was a demon. “As a human and a
hunter, how did that make you feel?”

“I thought it was nuts. Maybe he's a little odd, but that happens sometimes with hunters—the job
and all.” The soul didn’t meet her eyes. “I just couldn't picture him getting possessed or
whatever.”

She studied the soul for a second trying to decide how sincere the answer was. His demeanor
carried a politeness, but she didn't mistake it for weakness. The soul had probably been in Hell for
a while considered the aging scars on his form. This one appeared promising.

“You seem concerned,” Kay observed aloud. “Tell me why.”

“I... I don't want you to torture me.”

“That's what I like to hear.” She smiled at him. “I prefer it to screams because statements like that
are the foundation to a beautiful relationship.”

Kay telekinetically pulled the soul closer to her, though she was careful not to harm it. She could
see the soul trembling as he was drawn to standing only inches from her. In most circumstances,
the fact that Kay was sitting and the soul was standing would've framed the dynamic as giving him
dominance, but her visible lack of intimidation unnerved the soul all the more.
She suspected that he was partially thrown by the almost sexual innuendo in the use of the word ‘relationship’ and the fact that her head was roughly at the same level as the soul’s crotch. The soul had been male and a hunter, which tended to be a more primal crowd. As powerful a manipulative tool as sex or the prospect of sex might be, she would never lower herself to actually using it. Her sex life had been too serious a matter in her own time, and here it was finally a personal matter. She wasn’t about use blatant sex appeal to get what she wanted, even if it would completely disorient or win over a target.

“You said that you heard Sam Winchester was ‘one of you,’ but I think you misspoke. I think you meant to say that he’s one of us.” She smiled up at him.

“I’m not a demon,” he said meekly. The fact that he couldn’t evade her eyes while looking down in fear or shame seemed to make him even more uncomfortable.

“You're a soul and as much as you're trying to resist, I can see the cracks forming in you.” Her finger traced one down the left side of his rib cage. “You're in Hell. There's no point denying what happens down here. Either you’ll disappear into the ether, consumed by our very realm, or you’ll be one of us.”

“I'd rather be destroyed.” His voice lacked zeal, but she suspected he was rationally committed to fighting the change.

“Would you really? Because I think you'd rather kill demons and that's just the kind of demons I'm looking for.” Kay pitched her offer again. “Lilith's forces are on Earth and I want to send our own forces to stop them. You hunters know the territory. You know how to fight demons. I just want to give you a second chance to make a difference. Would you rather be tortured into nothingness or would you like to go wipe Lilith's demons off the face of the Earth.”

He stood silently considering her proposal for a minute. She suspected he hadn't even noticed the crack spreading up his chest toward his neck.

“What do you want from me?”

“Your loyalty, but I'd be willing to start with three little words.”

His brow furrowed as his posture turned inward in embarrassment, then he guessed, “I love you?”

“You're sweet and entitled to devotion if you feel so inclined, but that's not what I had in mind.” Her smile was completely sincere by that point. “I’m a demon.”

“What?” He blinked at her in confusion.

“Say it.”

“I'm a demon.” The soul spoke weakly as he trembled.

“Mean it,” she ordered.

“I'm... a demon.” The crack spread a bit more, but not as much as she'd expected. He was still resisting her.

She stood up, then cupped his cheek with her hand. The claw on her thumb touched the wet, pink flesh between his tear duct and eyeball—he was such a young soul that he probably didn't even realize the tender spot was a figment of his own imagination.
“It's okay that you don't feel it right away.” Her voice was soft and confident. “No one does... but they always do eventually. This doesn't have to hurt the same way it did before.”

She leaned in close so that she could speak at little more than a whisper.

“I'm gonna let you in on a secret: I don't like hurting people. But as much as I dislike the whimpers of pain that would escape you—instilling order, even through the most fierce violence you've ever witnessed—that order is everything to me.” She removed her claw from its threatening position at the corner of his eye. “I expect you're a good man. That's why this is so hard for you. Because you don't deserve to suffer, but the truth is that I didn't put you here. None of the demons in Hell put you here. Some terrible combination of chance and choice brought you to me and all we can do is keep this machine running because if we didn't chaos would flow up from the cracks and drown the Earth. And I can't have that because the true ruler of Hell isn’t some queen or cruelty; it's order. Now, say it again.”

“I'm a demon.” He started crying as he spoke, but he didn't hesitate.

“You're going to survive this.” Kay caressed his cracked cheek. “And you're going to be so much more for your suffering, I promise.”

“Thank you.”

She could see him shattering below his tears. He actually was grateful to her on some level and that alone was breaking him.

“Belmon, take him to sorting and see that he's given proper training. I want him topside-ready ASAP.” Kay signaled for him to be taken away through a different door than where they had entered. “Bring in another.”

A second hunter soul was literally dragged in before her. He was putting up a fight from merely being directed into a new scenario, which didn't bode well. She could tell by the degradation of his soul that he'd been there for some time, probably at least a month or two Earth time. The soul was stubborn, a potential strike against.

“Tell me what you know of Winchester,” Kay instructed, but the soul didn't respond right away.

Instead, he looked around at the fact that he was surrounded, then scowled at his predicament before saying, “Ex-hunter. He was running around doing that bitch Lilith's dirty work.” He spoke with a certainty that was worrying. “We tried to stop him, but he's something else.”

“Did he kill you?” She leaned forward with interest. The soul thought that Sam worked for Lilith and Kay had just told him that Lilith was her enemy. His assumption had just given her an advantage over him. “Are you ready to make him pay?”

“The fucker broke my neck.” He spoke with a vicious enthusiasm that reminded her of a Cruciare. “You bet I'm ready to take him down.”

“You said ‘we.’ Do you have any friends I should try to find for you? I can make sure you don't get split up,” she offered with a smile.

“Drew Reed and Winston Vance.” He nodded toward the room where the dozens of hunter souls were queued up. “Drew’s out there.”

“Thank you. That's very helpful.” Kay waved over an assistant, then pointed to the soul. “Strip him down to the bare functions. I want the name Winchester to not even register as words in his
“What?!?” he shouted, then he tried to rush her. She held him in place with telekinesis and he started sputtering. “I'll kill you! You cunt!”

“Gag him,” Kay ordered.

Two assistants tackled him. They pulled a piece of leather from the chest of equipment, lashed it over his face before binding his wrists behind his back, and dropping him hard onto the jagged, stone floor. Kay stood over him for a moment.

“You're wrathful and rabid, but you still hold onto your vendetta. I can't use you while you're like this.” She leaned down to examine him closer. “You have too much rage to be a person and you have too much mind to be a beast… and unfortunately for you, Hell doesn't have an anger management program.” Without breaking eye contact with him she told an assistant, “Give him to the hounds. Maybe they'll have more pity on him than me.”

As one of the assistants dragged him away, Kay instructed the others, “Bring me Drew Reed next.”

Sam sat on his bed staring down at Kaylee. He tickled her stomach, which made her wriggle slightly, but she was still too young to react much beyond that. She wasn't quite sure how her limbs worked and her eyes wouldn't focus on a face that was more than a foot or so away.

“Are you happy?” he asked the newborn. The corner of his lip curled up as he realized how little her concerns must be. “You don't have a care in the world… aside from occasionally gas.”

He leaned down so that she could see him better. Her curious eyes followed him in a way that drowned out some of his own worries. A little arm jerked clumsily upward, trying to reach for him, then fell back down to the bed. He put his thumb right next to her palm and she gripped it. He marveled at her tiny hand before giving it a soft kiss.

“So, I just found out something that's… exciting,” He wasn't so sure that was the right word for it, but she wasn't about to correct him.

“You're going to grow up to have claws. Claws are little pointy nails.” He felt the need to elaborate, despite and for his limited audience. “Which are the things coming out of your fingers.”

Her gently touched her fingertips.

“Which are the things coming out of your hands.” He wiggled his thumb that had her hand still attached to it. “Which are the things coming out of your arms, which come out of your torso.”

He tickled her again. Her eyes widened and she huffed. He suspected that she was more startled than anything else.

“I can't wait until you can laugh.”

He pushed some of her hair back, away from her forehead and tried to imagine what baby horns looked like. Presumably they wouldn't start off proportional to the ones he'd seen on Kay. They'd probably be nubs at first. That's what he'd seen on nature shows. The thought that he was referring to wildlife documentaries for insight into his daughter made his lips purse.

“You okay?” Ruby asked as she walked into the bedroom. “You've got this pessimistic,
constipated look on your face.”

“I'm fine, just trying to imagine what she's going to be like.”

“I think you've got a bigger head start than the rest of the parents in the world—maybe not Dean.” Ruby shrugged.

“I know that she's going to be like Kay in a lot of ways, but... she's not her. I don't want her to be just like Kay.” Sam’s mood dimmed a bit imagining what Kay’s childhood must've been like. “I just want Kaylee to have a happy life.”

“Well, that's fair, but you should want one for yourself too,” Ruby commented. She carefully picked up Kaylee, but the newborn wouldn't release Sam's thumb. He shifted around on the bed to accommodate her grip while Ruby attempted to sit down. Once they found the comfortable position of sitting, him nearly spooning Ruby, Kaylee began nuzzling around Ruby’s chest looking for a nipple. “God, it's like you and guys only have one thing on your mind.”

Sam leaned forward, wrapping his free arm around Ruby’s waist and pulled her to him in an awkward embrace. Whatever fears he'd had about Ruby recklessly running off were far from his mind. She was in his arms, helping him care for their daughter. He rested his chin on her shoulder and watched as Kaylee’s dark brown eyes looked back and forth between the two of them while she nursed.

“I think....” Sam nodded ever so slightly to himself. “I think I have a happy life.”

“Really? With everything up in the air and on the brink, you have a happy life?” She turned her head to smirk at him doubtfully. “You always did defy the odds.”

Her accusatory grin was only an inch or two from his own lips. Despite the teasing tone of her voice, in her eyes all he could see was sincere admiration. He was transfixed, unsure if it was his own feelings mirrored back at him or if there was something more. His heart skipped and for a second he was completely dazed, struck by an emotional epiphany. He'd thought about being in love. He'd suspected that he was in love. But in that moment he was completely awed by something beyond rationalization or reason. Without a doubt, he knew that he was in love with her.

Sam cupped the back of her head with his free hand and kissed her. Ruby reached up, touching his cheek, then bit his lip. They broke their kiss when Kaylee started wriggling again and tugging at Sam's thumb. He looked down at her and smiled.

“Right now, yeah. I have a happy life.”

After putting Kaylee down to sleep, they spent some time together in bed, though they didn't manage to actually have sex. Ruby started playing at giving him head, but that was quickly thwarted when Kaylee started fussing in her crib. By the time Sam had got her back to sleep he was fairly exhausted and Ruby had already started reviewing a guide to 14th century German alchemy. Sam crawled into bed next to where Ruby was sitting up reading and fell asleep.

Part way through the night he woke up to find that he was hugging Ruby’s midsection while she read. She didn't seem to mind at all. When he shifted, her hand moved down to caress his hair without her taking her eyes off the book. On the other side of Ruby, Sam could see Tom curled up sleeping peacefully. So far, there hadn’t been any rude awakenings from nightmares. Maybe it really was the beginning of a happier future?

“May I speak with you for a moment?” Dylaniel asked as he stopped Dean, who was just heading
into his room to try sleeping.

“Sure, you want to—” Dean started to invite Dylaniel in, but the nephilim was already on his way inside. Dean shut the door after them. He could guess what was on Dylaniel’s mind. “You want to talk about the angels?”

“Yes and no,” he replied in his usual unhelpful manner. “I mostly want to talk about you.”

“Me? Shit.” Dean knew what was coming. He sat down on the bed and rubbed his tired face with his hands.

“I would like to help the angels fall, but I’m concerned that the more discussion there is around the fall in my time the more my parents will be discussed too,” Dylaniel explained. He didn’t sit down or pace, which somehow made Dean more uncomfortable with the conversation. “If you want to be the one to tell Castiel about my parents, you should do it soon.”

“It’s not just him,” Dean groaned. “Everyone would know, wouldn’t they?”

“Does it bother you that much?” Dylaniel asked. Dean could almost see the disappointment on Dylaniel's face, though it wasn't clear if that was because he was potentially hindering some plan or because he wasn't living up to another one of Dylaniel's expectations. When Dean didn't answer right away, Dylaniel continued, “I don't want to out you against your will.”

“It's not outing. I'm not even sure what….” Dean hated the idea of Dylaniel suddenly telling everyone that he was bisexual, especially when he wasn't even confident in those feelings. He'd never pursued anything with a guy, so the thought of carrying the full implications of the term was unsettling. “I've barely ever looked twice at a guy.”

“But the idea of it is upsetting to you?”

“I don't even know anymore,” Dean confided, a bit thrown by the realization. “I just don’t want anyone to tell me what I am or what I'm not.”

“I respect that,” Dylaniel conceded. “It's something I can truly appreciate... but there are a lot of angels that I care about. They're my family even if they don't know me. I need to do what I can to parse the ones who can be saved before I'm forced to kill them. I don't want to cause you problems, but I don't want their blood on my hands if it's avoidable.”

He couldn't blame the kid for wanting to save his pseudo-family, especially after he’d just lost nearly all of his actual family. It had been surprisingly considerate of him to even warn Dean that the subject of Dee and Cas might come up. The fact that Dylaniel was making an effort to help him made Dean want to return the favor, even if he didn't know how.

“You're not really into sex or romance are you?” Dean asked, searching for some sort of insight into what it was like to be non-heterosexual.

“They don't hold the appeal for me that most people seem to feel,” Dylaniel replied.

“How'd you realize that you were like that?” Dean was trying to imagine what it meant to not feel attracted to anyone. His stomach knotted a bit at the thought that maybe it should've been easier to imagine if he was categorically not attracted to men.

“Romance is something that either sparks in you or not. I couldn't figure out how to seriously try it. It's just never happened and I'm fine with it being that way.”
The mention of trying romance confused Dean. It was strange to consider such a powerful, and what he’d assumed was natural, emotion being treated in such a clinical way. Dylaniel was advocating some sort of general theory of exposure and experimentation. Dean blinked at Dylaniel for several seconds, train of thought having been completely derailed.

“Have you had sex?”

“I'm not going to talk about it,” Dylaniel replied in a particularly discouraging tone.

Dean stared candidly at the unreadable twenty-one year old, trying to get any sort of insight. “I just assumed that you….” He trailed off as Dylaniel gave him a very unamused look.

“I’m not specifically recommending that you go seek out homosexual sex, but you may want to at least make an effort to overcome your bias,” Dylaniel continued, avoiding further discussion of his own sex life. “Otherwise you won't be able to properly consider your feelings.”

“You're telling me to get over it.”

“Get over it fast,” Dylaniel corrected.
Kay’s campaign through the Upper Pits took roughly three weeks local time, which was considerably faster than she had expected. When she approached the western gate to Central District she had an army of approximately 30,000 demons and nearly 100,000 souls. With a little effort she took the five dungeons that created a semicircle around the entrance to Central, heavily fortified them, then had her new Torquean recruits get to work processing souls.

As she walked toward Central to finally enter Hell’s metropolitan center, she noticed a commotion in a nearby camp. When she got there she immediately recognized Joseba. He was his usual imposing form with messy black hair that partially camouflaged his horns and his prized claymore in hand. She couldn't tell if he was there to fight or swear loyalty until he saw her. Below the knight’s shell, he nearly hummed with admiration while he looked her over.

“You must be the queen,” Joseba greeted her. He rested his massive sword against his shoulder with his offhand, then took her hand. Watching to see that he wasn’t offending her, he leaned down enough to pull her hand up and kissed the back of it. “Joseba, at your service.”

Her lips curled into a small smile. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Most of our people are too young to appreciate this moment.” As he released her hand, one of his fingers gently caressed her claws. “But I can't begin to tell you how much it means to me, having the First Light return to us.”

“I look forward to working with you.”

“Closely, I hope.” Joseba smiled back at her.

It may have been her imagination, but he made himself a few inches taller. With a little start she realized that he was unabashedly flirting with her. In her time she'd always thought of him as a good guy, but he had never shown a personal interest in her. The other Joseba had known her since she was a child. This one had only just met her as an adult and powerful Queen of Hell. She could feel herself blush slightly, causing her to unconsciously straighten her coat while her brain tried to catch up with the development.

Joseba smirked a bit at her reaction, but was promptly knocked over sideways by an unseen force that materialized as a concentrated black cloud. Kay recognized Tora, another knight and long-time friend of Joseba. Tora kicked some dirt onto her downed comrade.

“He is an oath-sworn servant to the Seat of Hell.” Tora's voice was clearly unamused by her friend’s advances. “Keep him in check.”

“I don't even know what you're talking about,” Joseba said innocently as he got to his feet.

“I have no problem cracking the whip if need be.” Kay’s assurance to Tora just made Joseba raise an intrigued eyebrow. “Will you also serve me?”
“I serve the Seat of Hell,” Tora replied unwaveringly.

“That’s the best answer you could’ve given,” Kay said, then turned to address both knights. “How many knights are awake and how many have sided with Lilith?”

“As of yesterday, thirty-eight are revived. Of those the last I’ve heard was that seventeen followed Abaddon to Lilith,” Joseba answered.

“Daermet sided with her a month ago,” Tora corrected.

“Okay, so eighteen went with Abaddon,” Joseba continued. “Aside from us and Mir, sixteen are waiting to see how the war comes out.”

“Where are they waiting out the fight?” Kay asked.

She had been surprised to see so few knights over the last couple weeks in the field. Until their conversation she’d suspected that not very many had woken, but that wasn’t true. More knights were in play than in her timeline’s 2009. It’d taken Alex’s death to raise enough knights to surpass their current predicament. It wasn’t clear what the exact standard was for bringing knights into action, but it was generally the need of the realm—whatever that meant. She didn't like the idea of Hell knowing how desperate the situation was. It felt like a personal criticism.

“Thirteen went up to Earth,” Tora answered.

“There are thirteen knights on Earth right now?”

“More than that. Those knights are just unaffiliated—”

“Lilith’s knights are on Earth.” Kay sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Yeah, she only has three down here based on what I’ve seen. I’m not sure what she's thinking,” Joseba commented. “She can't be serious about an attack on Earth, not with her army split like this.”

“She’s running special operations on Earth.” Kay decided to not bring up Lucifer around Joseba and Tora so early in their relationship. “Abaddon is definitely upstairs?”

“If she was down here your march would've been more exciting,” Joseba replied.

“Point taken.”

“Are you going to kill Abaddon?” Tora asked.

Kay raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that a problem for you?”

“Not if I can watch.”

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Kay returned to the Citadel to see how much goodwill her conquest had won her with the High Council. She opted to have Joseba and Tora escort her for the time being, to give her that extra air of a queen. The archdemons had gathered in the throne room at the news that she’d returned and was heading their way. Rather than addressing them while standing among the crowd of arches and advisors, she sat down on the Seat. It had been a long time since she’s been able to get comfortable. Not to mention, the transformation of the tree helped silence the whispers.

“Have we gotten results on the valuation?” She wanted to get some more intelligence rather than
immediately jump back into bickering about their internal power structure. At the first meeting with the Council she’d asked for permission before taking action. Now she was leaning more towards asking for forgiveness after the fact—that had worked for her father as long as she could recall.

“Over two-thirds of the Arbris have returned from their first diplomatic missions to the Pits,” Crowley reported in an attempt to start the conversation out on a cooperative note.

“We won't get back the last third,” Halphas complained. “You've executed a precision attack on dungeons. Who in their right mind would tell us what they're holding now?”

“The smartest and most self-interested 51% of Lilith's troops,” Kay replied. She could feel most of the room’s confusion, but the handful of Crossroads demons’ ears perked up at her statement.

“What?”

“We're going to offer to buy the first group’s souls at a generous price,” Kay explained. “We’ll pay them with cross-tranche deals. If they have souls with a high rate of return we’ll give them comparable souls plus a higher grade of quality.”

“You're going to bribe them?” Opeth asked.

Crowley answered for her, knowing exactly what she was getting at. “No, she's going to threaten them.” “How's paying them a threat?”

“She's only going to deal with the first group of demons to accept our offer, up to just over half of Lilith's side. The remaining demons don't get the deal,” Crowley speculated.

“And we know where a good number of their assets are.” Kay smiled at him.

“You're going to create a run to sell.” Crowley noted for the class. “If we set our purchase prices on an actuarial table we might actually be able to do this without destroying our own holdings.”

“I don't care about profits or holdings. We’re in a war,” Halphas said in continual annoyance at the situation.

“This offer to buy is basically a way of saying, ‘The first half of you to betray Lilith will be rewarded and the other half will have your dungeons targeted,’” Kay elaborated for the rest of her audience’s benefit. “We can't shake the Luxia caste and the other zealots, but any other mid-to-upper level demon with any personal assets will be gambling that their allies don't cross them first.”

“It's a variation on a classic form of hostile takeover…. This is just a slightly more hostile version,” Crowley mused aloud.

“You really think we’ll win this war by holding more souls?” Halphas asked doubtfully.

“When we buy the souls the demons will come along too,” Kay replied. “Lilith isn’t going to trust anyone who’s dealing with our side. They’ll have to go all-in with us if they want any of the payoff. Depending on the situation we can even sweeten the pot with future interests that will vest well after the war is complete.”

“Trust that the Crossroads will do whatever we can to close deals to our favor,” Crowley assured the other arches.

“If the realm currently has sufficient resources, we could offer to pay a premium now on the
speculation that the market rate will drop—” one of Crowley's subordinates started suggesting, but Kay cut zir off.

“No way.” Kay knew exactly where that line of thinking was going. Leave it to a Crossroads demon to try to short Hell’s own economy. “The last thing we want to do is fuck over every demon that just got done stabbing Lilith in the back. Yes, we want to make beneficial contracts, but more than that we want to prevent any future coups. We’re not just looking at the immediate situation. We also need to consider the long-term stability of the realm.”

A small flurry of discussion broke out among the archdemons and the Crossroads subordinates when the topic of how their private holdings would be affected by Kay’s proposal. While the majority of the floor was distracted, Kay caught Crowley’s attention and signaled for him to come closer.

“Do you think they’d be willing to give me some troops to send to Earth?” Kay asked quietly. “We need to start pressing Lilith up there, even if we don't know where the seals are yet. If we can take her people off the board it’ll help.”

“The seals may be an issue,” Crowley said to her at little more than a whisper.

“How so?” Kay replied.

“I'm in full agreement with you when it comes to keeping Lucifer out of the equation, but some of the others might not feel as committed. A small majority of the realm worships him.”

“How devout are they?”

“It depends on the caste.” Crowley tilted his head from side to side indicating any number of people in the room. “We might be able to passively encourage secularism or alternate faiths, but I wouldn't go around bragging about keeping the creature that made our whole species locked in a cage.”

“Are the other archdemons aware of the situation with the seals?” She watched the crowd, wondering just where the limits of any given demon’s loyalty lay.

“Yes.” Crowley offered her that minor comfort. “As devout as the archdemons might pretend to be, maintaining their current positions of power seem to be a stronger motivator.”

“So I need to be careful not to make them feel like I'm stepping on their toes, lest they find faith anew?”

“Make them feel respected.”

“I do respect them.” Kay shot back a little hurt by the insination that she was insincere.

“Make them feel it.” Crowley emphasized his point. “And after enough time they’ll be too much an accomplice to turn on you.”

“Optimist,” she muttered as some of the other archdemons turned their attention back to her.

“If you're attempting to recruit from Lilith's side with bribery for the moment, we probably shouldn't immediately go on the offensive in the Pits with our newly-acquired troops,” Crowley suggested, loud enough for the others to hear.
“I agree.” Kay took the soft pitch. “I’d actually like to allot 10,000 of our troops to Earth to
counter her efforts up there.”

Opeth stirred uncertainly in his shell. “You really think we should spend so many people on a
different plane?”

“She's moved the overwhelming majority of her knights to Earth. She's running operations and we
need to counter her where we can.” Kay trusted that the archdemons in the room understood the
implication that the seals were at risk.

“We can spare 10,000 for Earth, but we should reinforce our borders with the remaining 20,000
that you provided. We can send more troops up if you can produce sufficient numbers of new
recruits or victories going forward,” Opeth agreed after consulting the other arches. “Her activity
on Earth is... worrying, but Central’s defense is our main concern.”

Kay nodded. “I understand.”

“We’ll get the companies formed.”

“Remember, we're doing precision work on this. I don't want our people running around raping
and pillaging,” Kay warned. “Their mission is to locate and kill Lilith's troops, disrupt their efforts
wherever possible.”

“What about her knights?” Morrison nodded toward the knights in the room, acknowledging the
honored guests. “Our troops won't be able to do any lasting damage to them.”

“If they locate a knight I want them to report it and monitor the situation. We can send a heavy-
hitter in if it seems appropriate,” Kay answered. “I want to avoid knights dying whenever
possible.”

“You really think it might come to that?”

Mention of the improbably-difficult task of killing a knight made the entire room turn quiet. She
had to remember that she was the only person around to have actually seen a knight die.

“I hope not,” she confided. “This fight with Lilith won’t last forever, and we’ll need every
advantage we have once the other planes realize what’s happening.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Denerus asked. “Earth and Heaven have for the most part left us
alone since our inception. It’d be unprecedented for them to attack us.”

“Lilith has poured thousands of demons across Earth. Anyone with an ear to the ground is going to
find that alarming,” Kay replied.

“We're about to do the same thing.”

“In a perfect world the distinction between our factions would mean something. Unfortunately, we
have to act regardless.”

“It's too bad we don't exactly have a PR department,” Crowley commented, causing Kay to look
around the throne room.

“Where's Shola?”

Sam spent most of his morning and early afternoon helping set up a wifi network and several stolen
laptops in the bunker’s library and command center. Bobby, Jody, and Dean had all taken an
earlier lunch than him and resumed mapping out omens. At about two in the afternoon, Sam finally
took a break to grab a quick meal while spending some time with Tom and Kaylee. Ruby had
offered to watch the baby while he was dealing with the tech support, but he excitedly collected her
at the first chance.

He was walking around the bunker to stretch his legs when he saw a woman he didn't recognize
standing in the hallway near the library. She wore a light grey business suit and a lilac hijab,
which contrasted with her umber skin. As far as he could tell she was unarmed, though a large
messenger bag hung on her shoulder. Sam turned his body to shield Kaylee from her before calling
out to the woman—the demon.

“Who are you?” Sam readied himself for a fight. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm a friend.” She raised her hands defensively. “My name is Shola. Kay sent me.”

Sam's body relaxed slightly at the reasonable explanation, though he continued to hide his daughter
as best he could. He didn't care for the idea that even more people knew where they were staying.
Though Kay undoubtedly had good reason for trusting her. The fact that she knew Kay’s name
was something other than Lucian implied a certain level of confidence. Actually, she seemed
familiar somehow.

“Have we met?” Sam eyed her, trying to place the feeling.

“I don't think so.”

“Shola?” Dean asked as he came out of the library at the sound of voices. “If you keep showing up
around me without a summons I'm gonna start thinkin' you're here for more than deals.”

She rolled her eyes at his smug grin. “You aren't that good a kisser.”

“You're a Crossroads demon,” Sam guessed.

“I'm the one that helped Dean locate you.”

Suddenly the strange feeling of familiarity made more sense. She'd been the powerful demon that
Sam had sensed shortly after Bobby and Dean rescued him. It was nice to be able to place an,
albeit temporary, face and name to the aura.

“You were at Bobby's?”

“I stopped in at Robert—Bobby's home on several occasions,” Shola confirmed. “I'm glad to
finally meet you. It's always fascinating to see what is worth all the trouble when the dust settles…
and you certainly are worth every effort.”

She studied him in a way that was unnerving, though he was more bothered when her gaze traveled
to what little she could see of Kaylee. To his surprise, her curiosity radiated with an almost
innocent wonder rather than something more sinister. He'd have expected a Crossroads demon to
be looking for every opportunity to profit, but she was simply awed by the moment. In a way he
could abstractly appreciated how world-shattering the experience must be for her, to see a baby
demon.

“She stays out of this,” Sam told her, though he shifted his posture so that Kaylee wasn't as blocked
from Shola's view.
“Don't worry. I don't have any professional interest in her.” Shola huffed a fatigued chuckle. “Kay is proving to be more than enough turmoil for Hell.”

“How are things down there?” Dean asked, redirecting the conversation away from his newborn niece.

“She seems to know what she's doing, but she's moving at a pace that is tripping up her allies only slightly less than her enemies. I've been documenting intraplanar contracts since the valuation started. I don't think anyone other than her and Crowley realize just how much she's actually been doing.” Shola blinked her eyes black, then reexamined Kaylee. “Are you sure her mother isn't a member of the Crossroads?”

“Ruby as a Crossroads demon?” Sam nearly laughed at the thought. “Definitely not.”

“It was meant as a joke. I did read that Ruby is a Maji…. I assume that Kay's influences came from elsewhere.” Shola noticed Sam's concerned expression at her knowing about Ruby. “It's prudent to investigate new developments.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not about me.” Shola smiled and Sam got the strange feeling of warmth from her. “I don't bite or stab backs.”

“How often do you stab fronts?”

“Less than your average person, demon or human,” Shola answered, then added with a little pride, “that's partially why Kay has asked me to take lead on Hell’s public relations.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose at the idea that Hell might care what anyone thought of it. “Hell’s worried about its image?”

“For millennia our reputation has been defined by the other planes.”

“I kinda feel like the whole tormenting humans and torturing their souls for eternity thing might factor in,” Dean commented.

“Contrary to some scripture, no single soul is tortured for all eternity,” Shola rebutted. “I'm not saying that we don't have a difficult place in the food chain, but think about the public opinion of large cats.”

Dean shot down her analogy. “No one's making a demon their high school mascot.”

“Springville High, our fifth high school, their mascot was the devil,” Sam corrected.

“I'm not planning on meeting with any school boards…. Maybe Stanford,” said Shola, causing Sam to open his mouth to say something, but decided against it. “I'm actually in a bit of a rush, but, Sam, I'd like to speak with you at some point about it.”

“I don't keep in touch with anyone in Palo Alto these days,” he replied.

“I wasn't thinking of that in particular,” she clarified. “Kay seemed to think that you might have… I believe her words were ‘instincts for these delicate matters.’”

“Great,” Sam groaned. “I'm getting a reputation down there and I haven't even done anything.”

“You’ve had a reputation in Hell for years.” Shola pointed out. “It's just that recently it's started to
“Better than the alternative,” Dean said with a shrug.

“I’ll return after my first round of meetings and we can talk in more depth about it then if you’d like. Here’s the location where we will deliver your hunters in thirty minutes.” Shola pulled a business card from her satchel and held it out for either brother to take.

“Thirty minutes?” Dean asked while grabbing the card.

“Several of the hunters were less than cooperative. They’ve been subdued and are under certain protections that take time to loosen.”

“Are they okay?”

“No permanent physical damage. We didn't bother with psych evaluations. You hunters tend to be off the charts even on your best days.”

“Thanks,” Dean muttered, earning an expression of false innocence from her.

“There's a small storage unit two miles from here containing the items you bargained for a few days ago.” Shola placed a labeled key in Dean's palm, then withdrew a brown paper parcel from her bag and handed it to him. “And Kay asked me to give this to you. She said this bunker ‘lacked a decent stock.’ Whatever that means. I should be on my way if I'm going to keep my first appointment. Give Robert my best.”

“I will,” Dean assured her. She stepped forward, then gave him a parting kiss on the cheek, to which he said, “That wasn't a deal.”

“Sam, it was nice to finally meet you.” She offered her hand to Sam, evading Dean’s reaction to her ambiguous gesture.

Sam accepted her handshake. “Likewise.”

She was gone before he’d even let go.

“What the hell was that?” Dean asked about the kiss, then looked down at the parcel he was holding. “What the hell is this?”

Sam watched as Dean unwrapped the package. Under a thin layer of paper and a thick layer of plastic, they found the unmistakable dried green form of a large brick of weed.

“Seriously?” Sam had smoked in college, but never had he seen such a large supply. “What, are you planning to open a dispensary on the side?”

“In Kay’s time, it looked like everyone got high about as often as they drank,” Dean explained while sniffing the brick. “The other me used to keep a stash on his nightstand.”

“The other you was a pothead?” Sam stared at Dean, amused by the idea. “I didn't know you smoked.”

“Before going to 2039, I hadn't smoked in years. In the last few days…” He tried to recall all the times he'd gotten buzzed or full-on high in the future. “A good amount actually.”

“Well, at least your liver caught a break for once.”
"You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

"This is a bad idea," Sam muttered while pacing outside the abandoned flooring showroom that Shola had given them the coordinates for. "Pascoe and I shouldn't be here. We're going to scare them off."

He checked his watch. They had finished placing the bloody angelic wards around the building a few minutes earlier. At any moment the surviving members of the hunters’ network would arrive inside the showroom, where Bobby and Castiel were currently waiting. Sam and Pascoe had both decided to get some last minute air outside and Dean had followed them.

Sam wasn't exactly scared, but he wasn't really thrilled by the prospect of being surrounded by hunters. Though, if things took a bad turn he felt like he was at least able to defend himself. He doubted that Dean or Bobby were in danger even if they had ended up hanging out with what the hunting community thought of as undesirable elements. Pascoe was trained to fight hunters, though it wasn't clear if he was remotely capable of fighting multiple hunters at once.

"Come on, they're adults. They can handle a little complexity," Dean replied, though his eyes flicked around a bit too much. "Anyway, we don’t have a ton of time to make the gentle, drawn-out pitch. If they scatter to the winds it’s gonna be a huge pain in the ass to get in touch with them again. We’ll lay it all out, ask for their help, and hope that something finally goes our way."

“I know this may be hard to believe, but things have been going our way,” Sam pointed out. "We're pushing our luck."

“Speak for yourself when it comes to luck,” Pascoe interjected.

“Sorry, I’m just saying we should be careful. Things could get a lot worse fast.” Sam glanced at the door. "How many are there going to be?"

"It’s supposed to be twenty-six," Dean answered, then pulled a joint from his pocket, lit it, and took a puff.

Sam blinked at the fast turnaround between receiving the gift and assembling joints, which Dean was apparently keeping on his person.

"Yeah, you're feeling calm." Sam reached for the joint, which Dean handed off. He took a hit, then offered it to Pascoe, who happily accepted.

“It’s just a little performance anxiety. It’s perfectly normal,” Dean countered.

“That’s what they all say,” Pascoe added with a wink, earning an amused smile from Sam and an uncomfortable cough from Dean. Pascoe took a quick puff, then handed the joint back to Dean. "You need to loosen up some more."

“Just don’t get too messed up. We need you to boost our credibility,” Sam warned, then cautiously asked, "Did Ellen and Jo make it?"

Sam cared about them both, but the last time he'd seen Jo had been complicated…. Technically he hadn't seen her the last time she'd seen him. Meg had been in control of his body. Dean hadn't been very forthcoming with details when he recounted the possession, which meant that it’d probably been a very unpleasant experience all around.

“They're on the list,” Dean confirmed, but he pursed his lips in a move that betrayed his own
discomfort with Sam and the Harvelles’ relationship. "Do you remember Tamara, from when we fought the sin demons? She's supposed to be coming too."

Sam was about to comment when he saw Ruby turn a corner and approach them. Last he knew, she was staying at the bunker. The idea of exposing himself and Pascoe to a large group of hunters was bad enough, but at least they were more-or-less human. Over the last few months he’d been doing everything in his power to keep Ruby away from hunters, now she was getting ready to walk into a den of them. He hurried up to her to speak with her away from the others.

“What’re you doing here?” Sam asked before catching his tone of voice. “I mean, we’ve got this if you want to head back to the bunker.”

“I’m your only demon on hand. If we want them to play nice with Team Hell, it’d be good for them to meet a friendly demon,” she replied.

“We could have someone else come up.”

“This might come as a surprise, but if the occasion calls for it, I can play nice with a few hunters.”

“I’m not worried about you playing nice with them.” Sam glanced back over his shoulder at the building.

“Well if things go sideways, then all the more reason for me to be here,” she countered before grinned at him. “You and me fighting hunters; it reminds me of simpler times.”

Sam rolled his eyes a bit at the thought. He was trying to put his animosity towards hunters behind him. Maybe it was still a good idea to be cautious around them, but he wasn't exactly trying to look back fondly on the memories of killing them either.

“There are a lot of them.” Sam hesitated, unsure if he wanted to risk an argument. “A lot of those hunters know who I am and they know I’m hanging around. I should be here. But they don't know you specifically. You don't need to be here, Ruby. It might not be safe.”

“Then why would you think I'd let you go in there without me?” Ruby’s brow furrowed for a moment then she stepped closer to him and lowered her voice to make certain Dean and Pascoe couldn't hear. “I thought we were good. Last night, you weren't so grumpy.”

“I'm not grumpy.”

“Okay, sensitive,” Ruby corrected.

“I wasn't—you were being…..” Sam pursed his lips trying to find the right way to explain his feelings. “You’re the one—”

“They're ready for us!” Dean shouted to them, interrupting the argument.

“This conversation isn't over,” Ruby warned him.

“That's for sure,” Sam agreed.

The hunters were actually in better shape than Shola had led Sam and Dean to believe. Aside from a few cuts and bruises they all seemed to be in good condition. The group took in their strange surroundings, then relaxed a bit at the familiar faces of Bobby and Dean. There were murmurs of confusion, but through some miracle no one was trying to improvise a weapon or run for an exit.
Sam could see that several of the hunters were watching him in particular. With Castiel, Ruby, and Pascoe unidentified as potential threats who were being ignored, the lingering stares were telling. They'd heard some of the rumors about him. The only questions were which rumors and how deeply ingrained were they.

“Bobby, what the hell is going on?” one of the hunters nearly shouted.

“We have a bit of a situation—” Bobby began.

“Understatement,” Ruby critiqued, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Okay, we’ve got an apocalyptic-scale situation,” Bobby corrected. The hunters seemed confused, but didn't interrupt. “There’s an archdemon named Lilith trying to start the Apocalypse.”

“The Apocalypse?”

“I mean, real biblical end-of-the-world apocalypse,” Bobby continued. “She’s trying to unleash Lucifer on the Earth—”

“Lucifer?” Tamara asked while taking a step closer to make sure she’d heard him.

“You all know that demons are real—well, so are angels,” Dean started explaining. “But they aren't the good guys either. We're taking hits from both sides on this. It isn't about old ideas of good versus evil. This is about the people who want to save the Earth versus the dickbags that want to destroy it. I know this is a lot to take, but we don't have a lot of time to hold your hands.”

“Bobby….” Ellen looked at him with an almost pleading expression of concerned not-quite disbelief. “This isn't funny.”

“I was dragged out of my home,” a hunter complained.

“I think someone drugged me,” said another.

“You all were in danger, so we had to take some extreme measures to get you to safety,” Bobby said, not exactly improving any of the hunters’ moods.

“Extreme measures?”

“We had to cut a deal with a Crossroads demon to get you to this safe house,” Bobby replied.

Sam noticed that he’d glossed over Kay’s involvement and entire existence.

“No fucking way—”

“Like I said, it's not about good or evil, it's about us saving lives.” Dean pointed toward Castiel and the others. “He’s an angel, he's a witch, and she's a demon—and they’re all working to save human lives.”

Sam moved a bit closer to Ruby, ready to help defend her if need be. The hunters stared at Castiel with confusion, but they treated Pascoe and Ruby with distinct wariness that bordered on disgust. When he took a defensive posture near Ruby, a few murmurs spread through the group.

“What about Sam?” asked a hunter that he didn't even recognize.

“What about him?” Dean replied.
“He's killed hunters. We're just putting that aside?”

“It was self-defense,” Dean countered.

“Some of the stories I heard….” A second hunter shook her head at the situation. “Bobby, rumor was that he wasn't in your call book anymore.”

“I left because I wanted to hunt the same archdemon that we're looking for now. I was reckless back then, so I took off on my own.” Sam tried to distance himself from Bobby and Dean. If the hunters couldn't learn to work with him at least he could try to not poison things for the others. “We only met back up a week or so ago. He wasn't hiding me anywhere.”

“You don't know what he's been up to and you expect us to trust him?”

“We trust him and, if you trust us, then I guess you're gonna have to take a leap of faith,” Dean explained, somewhat defeating Sam’s attempt to disassociate himself.

“You weren't alone for long, though,” the first hostile hunter told Sam. “You made some sort of demon deal or something.”

“I didn't make a deal.” Sam denied the accusations. He wanted to keep himself calm and non-threatening, but being put on the defensive like that was unsettling.

“You aren't human. Half the east coast hunters heard you snapped Yabes’ neck from across the room. You've been running around with packs of demons. I heard your eyes even turn black.”

Sam shook his head. “That's not true.”

“If we laid down a salt line could you even cross it?”

“Carl, stop giving him shit,” Dean told the hunter that was leading the attack on his brother.

“He's killed hunters!” Carl yelled, earning some surprised whispers from a few of the other hunters. “He's not even denying it. So don't act like I'm in the wrong here.”

“If we can just calm down—” Bobby started trying to deescalate the situation, but he was cut off.

“You did kill them, though. Just admit it. I know Matt was a hardass, but I just want to know if it's true.”

“I killed some hunters,” Sam admitted. “I don't know their names.” He could see Dean cringe at the turn in the conversation, but there wasn’t a way of putting the cat back in the bag.

“He was a stout guy with red hair,” Carl said. “They found him in Philly.”

“Yeah, I killed him.” He didn't even know how to show remorse for those people. At the very least every hunter he’d killed had wanted to kill him, but at the worst they'd wanted to kill Ruby and their daughter. That was so far beyond the line that he couldn't pretend to care about the dead.

“How?”

“Blunt force trauma,” Sam said flatly. “Are we done?”

“Why? What the fuck happened?”

Sam was nearly scowling. He could feel the hunters’ judgment. As far as he was concerned he
didn't owe them anything let alone an explanation for defending himself. In the corner of his eye he could see Ruby solemnly watching him.

“His partner was torturing my friend and he was holding me at gunpoint. I managed to rush them. There was a brawl. We fought over a gun. He got to the gun first, so I just grabbed what I could and got him before he could get me,” he lied.

He’d only actually killed Matt’s partner. Ruby had been the one to kill him by bludgeoning him with a brick as Sam was passing out. Sam had indeed lost the fight for the pistol, but Matt had gotten a shot off, injuring Sam. He tried to stay close to the truth, yet he didn't want to get into the unconfirmable details or bring Ruby into it.

“The others?”

“They came after me. I was just trying to stop this archdemon and those hunters decided they needed to kill me. They were hunting me. I tried to only incapacitate them, but sometimes there were accidents.” Sam sighed, allowing himself to show a little more emotion about the whole thing. “I don't want violence. I don't like to fight…. I just want to be left alone. But I can't do that right now, because I need to help stop the world from ending. I'm willing to overlook the fact that a bunch of misguided hunters have been trying to kill me for over a year now. I hope that you all are willing to overlook your own prejudices.”

“We all know there are some bad apples in the barrel.” Bobby tried to bolster Sam's account and credibility. “Us hunters try to do what's right, but sometimes we go after the wrong thi—people. We can't stop this thing by ourselves. We need help. When it comes down to it, it doesn't matter whether they can cross iron or not when they're trying to save the world.”

“You're asking us to put our lot in with demons, against angels.” Rufus experimented with the statement in a wary but not overly-critical tone.

“The angels that were spying on you?” Dean pointed out, earning a nod of acknowledgement from Rufus.

“The demons fucking grabbed us,” Carl complained.

“To keep you safe.”

“The angels would've probably killed you eventually,” Pascoe added. “They were watching my coven, just like they'd been watching you, and massacred them.”

“That's a coven though,” Carl said, visibly unmoved by the thought of dead witches.

“It might be a coven, but it was families with dozens of children,” Pascoe snarled. “There are 10 orphans from the attack. Any of you want to adopt Elsie? She's three years old and loves turtles, but maybe you would rather kill her too, just to be sure.”

“Come on man. I know it's tough, but you gotta keep your cool.” Dean put his palm on Pascoe's chest, then leaned in to whisper in his ear. “We need you to be the bigger man on this. We’ve got to make up ground with them.”

“Bobby, Dean.” Ruby spoke without taking her eyes off the hunters for a second. “This isn't gonna work, not with a bunch of trigger happy racists.”

“Ruby.” Sam placed a hand on her shoulder and led her back to look at him. “Come on—”
“No, these hunters are so self-righteous that they're gonna risk their whole fucking species just so they can be stubborn. Meanwhile they're gonna blame us when their bigoted asses get us all killed!” Ruby shouted, then pointed at Carl. “They were shitting on you for saving our lives. They don't even care about the kids. They only care about their fucking backward worldview—being able to hate.”

Sam wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. For a moment her frustration got the better of her, then she let herself be comforted by him. He glared at the hunters before turning away from them. They were staring at a spectacle they’d almost certainly never seen before, a demon in need of emotional support.

“The angels killed kids?” Jo asked as she stepped forward.

“Yeah, a lot of them,” Dean answered. “I was trying to save five kids. They were out playing and by the time I got there one—a little boy, he was dead, eyes burnt out. The angels were gonna go after the other four kids, but he saved us.” He pointed at Castiel, who was quietly listening to the retelling of his familial shame. “He's an angel, but he's trying to help save human lives. It's not a matter of species. I know it's hard to put all the fighting behind us, but if we don't work together and fast it's gonna go worse than you can possibly imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot,” Rufus commented.

“Fine, but I bet you don't want to live it.”

Pascoe and Ruby’s visible distress made most of the hunters reconsider their roles as either heroes or villains. After that the hunters generally became more opening to listening. It wasn’t entirely clear how won over any of them were, but Sam noticed that many of the suspicious expressions directed toward him and Ruby had been replaced by confused or even sympathetic expressions.

While Dean and Castiel were explaining the bone warding, Sam realized that the environment began flickering around him. No one else was reacting to it, cluing him in that it was a vision of some sort. He could tell it was stronger than normal, so he braced himself against the wall with one hand to help ground himself in reality. Rather than resist the vision and risk a migraine or nosebleed in front of the hunters, he just let it in quietly.

There were a dozen men and women in a windowless room, delicately butchering four human bodies. Each corpse was drained of its blood, then the limbs were removed at the joint, careful to not damage the bones. The torsos were being gingerly cut open along the center of the abdomen while a series of candles were set up around the dimly lit room.

When the last torso was being prepared, the door to the room was broken inward. A group of people rushed in, saw the gruesome scene, then charged the butchers. A desperate brawl broke out as several of the first group struggled to light the last dozen candles and finish the last torso. The fight was an incomprehensible mass of blades, blood, glittery purple powder, and solid black eyes. Both sides were demons.

It was almost certainly a fight over one of the seals. Sam wasn't sure why he was seeing this particular scene with such clarity. He’d caught glimpses of seals before, but there was something else going on.

Part way through the brawl, a man and a woman in grey suits teleported directly into the room. They didn't even need to speak or move; Sam could immediately tell by their reserved posture that they were angels. The pair began smiting demons indiscriminately. Near the end, one of the
demons fell to her knees and begged for mercy.

“We’re trying to stop them! We’re trying to stop her! Just—” she begged, but the angel touched her head, killing her.

The angels silently examined the incomplete ritual. The male angel knelt down beside the mutilated bodies, then said something in what Sam assumed was Enochian. He pointed at a few of the carefully positioned pieces, observing some detail.

The female angel warned him against something, causing him to straighten up and cease pointing. She seemed worried or maybe caught in deep thought. After a few seconds she gave what must've been a command because the other angel nodded and stood up.

For a long moment they both waited and Sam almost felt like something might've gone wrong with his powers. He couldn't even tell if time was passing, even if it was, he wasn't sure why he was watching this. The massacre at the seal fit the pattern for his visions, but usually they didn't last so long without excitement. When he was starting to worry about how to force himself out of a vision, something unusual happened.

Another angel in the form of a balding, white, middle-aged man appeared in the room beside the two angels. His presence was intense and they were clearly his subordinates. He asked a question in Enochian, which was responded to at length. As they spoke he walked around the scene, occasionally asking for additional information. After assessing the situation, he made a statement that caused the others to stare, wide-eyed, at him.

The male subordinate spoke to his commanding officer as he pointed to the demon who had tried to reason with them. He was trying to explain something, but the head angel raised a hand to silence him. When the lead angel asked the male subordinate a question, he looked confused and pointed back to the demon in mild exasperation.

The commanding angel reached out, touching the subordinate’s forehead, causing white light to shine from the underling’s eyes and mouth before his body fell limply to the floor among the corpses. Black ash wings marked the floor around him. The lead angel looked to his other subordinate, who'd managed to become even more rigid. He told her something and she nodded in understanding.

“Sam? Sam, can you hear me?”

Ruby was standing in front of him. Her eyes were looking him over for something. When he met her gaze, she sighed with relief.

He glanced around the showroom. Dean and Pascoe were standing to his immediate right. They were positioned nearly shoulder-to-shoulder in an apparent attempt to block him from the view of the group of hunters. Bobby and Castiel were still talking to the crowd, though he noticed a few hunters watching him and whispering.

“What happened?” Sam asked in a low voice. He knew he'd had a vision, but clearly something had happened to worry those around him.

“You tell us. You were just watching nothing for like a whole minute or two,” Ruby explained.

“I had….” His voice trailed off at the thought of talking about his powers in a room full of hunters. “You know.”
“You ever go into a trance on a vision?” Pascoe quietly asked with a professional curiosity.

“No, it wasn't—I don't think it was a trance. I just…” Sam chewed his lip while trying to figure out how to describe it. “The visions all have a punchline; there's something significant. I was watching and it kept going, like there was something important coming up. I was watching a whole scene, not just the flashes. Normally I’ll just split my attention with the real world, but I didn't realize how long it took.”

“Well, flashing images don't usually take as long as a scene,” Ruby pointed out. “Something to keep in mind. You don't want to zone out like that in a fight or while driving.”

“I don't let them in that much when I'm driving,” Sam replied defensively.

“Note to self: do not let Sam drive me anywhere,” Dean muttered under his breath.

“I'm fine. I just didn't know it was taking so long.”

“You need to work on your powers all the way around,” Ruby reminded him, causing Sam to look at her a bit indignantly and Dean to shift uncomfortably. “But for now, what was so important that you got the full playthrough on a vision?”

“It was a seal. Lilith's demons were working on it, but some of our demons stumbled on it. They tried to stop them, but some angels showed up. The angels killed all the demons. Then a… I guess their superior showed up. They were talking in a language I don't understand. I think they had a disagreement. One of the lower angels was killed by the higher ranking one.”

“So the punchline you were waiting for was some angels ganking each other?” Dean asked, the corner of his mouth turned downward. “I hate to break it to you, but that's pretty routine.”

“You are mistaken.” Castiel was suddenly at Dean’s side, startling the group. The hunters and Bobby all turned to look at the angel, who had, in a flash, made them a lower priority, but Castiel didn't even glance back to consider their reactions. “Angels do not kill each other.”

“You've killed angels,” Dean pointed out.

“I'm fallen.” Castiel turned to address Sam. “None of the other angels were ill when I left. To have no illness or confrontation…. It does not sound like a fallen angel. You probably misunderstood what you observed.”

“I saw it,” Sam said with conviction. “The lesser angel was explaining something and the superior one just smote him all of a sudden without warning.”

“If that is true, then something is very wrong.”

Castiel quickly placed the wards on the hunters, then Dean and Bobby established new protocol for communicating discreetly online. When they got back to the bunker, Sam went to find Kaylee. Ruby had left her under Jody’s care since Belda and the other adult witches had their hands full and Jody had been a mother for several years. Ruby must’ve also been planning on collecting Kaylee from Jody because she found him a minute later.

“Do you want me to take her for a bit?” Ruby volunteered. “Until you know you're good.”

“I'm fine. I really am” Sam assured her. “I just underestimated things.”
“Just take it easy, okay?” She moved closer to him. “I know this is all nuts, but you seem extra tense. I can't tell if you need a fight or a fuck.”

“I need some peace.” He somehow felt exhausted just admitting it. “It’s not really in the cards right now.”

“You know the two of us have got a problem.” Ruby looked up at him. “I don't want to fight you, but I'm not feeling too thrilled—”

“We’ve got problems,” Kay said in lieu of a greeting, interrupting the couple. She was followed by Dyaniel and gestured for them to follow her in search of the others.

“What else is new?” Ruby sighed. She caressed Sam’s arm and back in an attempt to reassure him that she wasn't angry at him, then turned her attention to the larger conversation.

“Lilith has almost all her knights on Earth, like more knights than she ever had in our time. I assume they're running down seals, but this is basically new territory on that front,” Kay started explaining when they found Bobby, Dean, and Castiel in the library. “Not to mention that vision; the angels are scooping out the seals. We need more intel on Heaven.”

“You saw that?” Sam asked, surprised that it hadn't occurred to him that she might have inherited all of his powers.

“Yeah, I get all the same visions as you,” she quickly responded to Sam before taking a seat at one of the tables and turning her attention back to the group. “If the angels are gonna defend the seals, awesome, but if not we’re in for a fucking mess.”

“You think Heaven is going to start breaking seals?” Dean softly facepalmed at the possibility.

“Angels cannot willfully break seals,” Castiel interjected. “Lucifer's known supporters were imprisoned after the rebellion, but precautionary measures were also taken in case of… complications.”

“Wait, you're saying that there are Lucifer supporters in Heaven?” Sam asked.

“I do not know if I would say that.”

“There are Lucifer supporters in Heaven,” Kay commented. “Zachariah, the boss angel from the vision, in my time I saw him lead a group of twenty or thirty angels to bring Lucifer into Heaven. One of his subordinates killed him after Luci got barely two sentences out. Half the angels in that group jumped at the chance to join Luci.”

“Pro-Lucifer angels have always been a wild card.” Dyaniel dismissed the concern. “The more alarming issue is that Heaven killed one of their own. That could indicate any number of complications. Do either of you remember what was said?”

“No,” Kay answered as Sam shook his head.

“I told you that you should learn Enochian,” Dyaniel complained to his cousin.

She shrugged off the criticism. “I was pretty busy with everything.”

“When have you ever used Greek?”

“I've used Greek,” Kay said defensively, but her brow furrowed trying to recall a specific instance.
“Anyway, Enochian is way harder.”

“It’s easier than Abyssal.”

“How would you know? You’ve never—”

“Abyssal is objectively more complex.” Dylaniel cut Kay off in a move that reminded Sam of when he’d bicker with Dean. “It was created to be incomprehensible and unpleasant.”

“Don't shit on my mother tongue.”

“It’s a fact that it sounds disturbing,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“That’s not the point,” Kay complained, then started to take a jab of her own. “At least we use consonants—”

“Will you two shut the fuck up?” Dean interrupted what had undoubtedly been an ongoing argument between the two. “There's a dead angel and knights on Earth. Stop fighting over linguistics.”

Kay straightened in her seat, trying to take on a more adult demeanor. Dylaniel maintained his normal pensive standing position, but he shifted his body slightly possibly revealing some embarrassment from the spat.

“Is there any other insights two you can offer from the vision?” Castiel asked in an attempt to help Dean refocus everyone.

“The dead angel, he looked… uncomfortable,” Sam speculated. “Like he wasn't sure about what they were doing.”

“Cas, you told me angels have a lot of clarity,” Dean said. “How often do they have doubt?”

“With respect to prevalence among our population, there's no way of knowing since it is not discussed.” Castiel hesitated a bit to speak of it even then. “It is not discussed because it is one of the precursors to the fall.”

“But that was doubt that I saw…. For some reason Heaven’s already poised to splinter,” Sam mused. “Cas, how many times have angels had full-on military campaigns against a strategic enemy?”

“Aside from Lucifer’s Rebellion….” Castiel thought for a moment. “We have almost exclusively engaged in minor skirmishes.”

“‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles,’” Sam muttered to himself.

“What’re you thinking of, Lao Tzu?” Ruby asked.

“Sun Tzu.” He corrected the citation before getting to his actual thought. “This whole thing is a confusing, emotionally-morally screwed up mess for us, and we know what's going on. The angels have to be seeing pieces of this and they're trying to make sense out of it. The more they try to understand why we're doing what we're doing, the more personal doubt they're going to have.”

“Personal doubt?”

“I don’t know what to call it.” Sam chewed his lip. “It's like empathy, but not really sympathetic.
In order to try to anticipate us, they have to understand us to some extent.”

“They’re trying out new perspectives,” Ruby synthesized.

“They probably don’t even understand what they’re doing to themselves,” Dylaniel suggested.

“That’s their vulnerability. They’re curious.”

“That’s an interesting idea, but even if it’s true, what does it get us?” Bobby asked.

“I know how to trigger the fall,” Dylaniel replied.

Kay raised an eyebrow. “How’re you going to do that?”

“I’m going to play to my strengths—”

“I’m not really an angel expert, but killing them doesn’t seem like the best way of making them fall from grace,” Dean said as a half-hearted joke, earning an eerily identical look of disapproval from both Dylaniel and Castiel.

“No, I plan on inspiring them,” Dylaniel corrected him, causing Kay to smile at her cousin.

“I do not expect my siblings still loyal to Heaven to find a nephilim remotely positive, let alone inspirational,” Castiel warned.

“You misunderstand me,” Dylaniel replied. “It won’t be voluntary.”
Dean was lying awake in bed, trying to convince himself to fall asleep, but he was too nervous about tomorrow. Dylaniel's plan objectively wasn't half bad, except for the fact that it was a gamble in multiple aspects. Aside from any physical risks, it would leave Dean somewhat exposed. Maybe it would be little more than his current state, but the other Dean’s personal life would be brought up… and then his own personal life would be fair game.

Everything was escalating too quickly. Even if he was feeling particularly bold, he only had a few hours to discreetly try out Dylaniel's advice of expanding his views on his own sexual orientation. For a few minutes he debated taking a hot shower and trying to think about a man while jerking off. He wasn't sure whether he felt comfortable thinking of Castiel like that. The angel’s subtly muscular chest had been a positive surprise while he was patching Castiel’s wounds, but there was a small voice in his head threatening to invade any pleasant imagery of Castiel with the visual of Cas’s corpse.

There was a knock on his door. He sat up, pulled on some jeans, then opened the door. Pascoe was leaning against the door jamb. The witch was ever-so-slightly dressed up in a dark blue suede jacket that barely fit him. His left hand held car keys.

"You're awake." Pascoe’s eyes swept down at Dean's bare chest and he smiled before looking back up at his face. "I can't take being stuck inside this much and this is the first time in ten years that I've been a short drive from the downtown of a real city. I'm sneaking out for some fun. You want to come with me?"

"We just went out this afternoon," Dean pointed out.

"Hangin’ with a bunch of hunters isn't what I call fun."

"You know I'm a hunter, right?"

"Nobody's perfect." Pascoe smiled at him with an almost predatory quality.

"If I go with you are you gonna be hitting on me all night?" Dean asked quietly after checking to see if anyone was in earshot. He decided against inviting him into his room to talk in private. That could send mixed signals.

"I’ll stop if you ask me to."

Dean pursed his lips. He didn't like the idea of being put on the spot like that, to explicitly silence Pascoe's playful flirting. There was almost no chance he'd be won over by the advances, but he didn't want to be a complete prude about it. He was trying to get more comfortable with men, that included not becoming defensive about casual compliments or advances. With a little effort he stopped himself from imagining all the demeaning things his dad might call him for allowing Pascoe to continue. He reminded himself that he didn’t have anything to be embarrassed or worried about.

"Jesus, just don't be so damn aggressive," Dean said as he grabbed a shirt from his dresser and slipped it on. "Where're you going?"
"A bar. Nothing too exciting. I just need a Saturday night out," Pascoe answered.

Dean picked up his leather jacket, turned to leave the room, then hesitated. "Are you gonna be cool about this? Because I don't want to have you hounding me all night."

"I can be cool." Pascoe raised his hands. "I'm not even going to make a joke about hounding you all night."

They borrowed a black '57 Hudson Hornet from the bunker's garage. Dean drove while Pascoe navigated using his phone. When they arrived at the bar, Dean noticed the rainbow flag hanging from the awning and his stomach knotted.

"This is a gay bar, isn't it?" Dean chewed his lip at the deep end of the pool that he was now standing before. Having a drink and getting hit on by Pascoe was one thing. He could deal with that. Being immersed in an environment where there would be a presumption that he was into men, that was a whole other level.

"Yeah," Pascoe replied. "Do you know how hard it is to find queer men at a straight bar?"

"Probably as hard as it is to find straight women at a gay bar," Dean shot back.

"Maybe you'll get lucky and a bachelorette party will drop in for giggles," Pascoe suggested as he clapped Dean's shoulder while climbing out of the car.

"Hey, wait!" Dean yelled to Pascoe, but all it earned him was a mischievous smirk before the witch slipped in the bar entrance. Dean sighed and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He was a little annoyed at being tricked into going to a place like that, but he wasn't prepared to just ditch his new... was friend the right word? He kinda wanted to smack Pascoe in the head, but that was actually a recurring theme among many of his long-time friends.

After a few minutes of hesitation, he entered the bar and spotted Pascoe perched on a stool at the counter. Dean glanced around. There were about a dozen men and a few women at small tables and booths. Some fairly inoffensive music was playing in the background while a TV behind the bar silently played the Blues-Penguins game. He walked over and stood next to Pascoe, but didn't sit down.

"Seriously? You tricked me into going to a gay bar. You're right out of a fucking sitcom," Dean muttered.

"I said 'bar.' It's a bar." Pascoe shrugged. "If you really came out with the specific intent of finding tail, then I'm sorry. But if you want drinks, this place does have that. And it also has what I came out for."

Dean rubbed the bridge of his nose. He hadn't actually been planning on prowling for women. Getting out, away from all the apocalypse drama had been his main hope. Aside from Pascoe, the bar was presumably full of people who knew nothing about demons and angels. He could have a drink and watch a hockey game without having to worry about someone trying to talk to him about anything serious.

"I'm not here to check out the goods. I'm gonna have a drink and enjoy the next two hours of no one asking me about the end of the world." Dean sat down on the stool next to Pascoe. "You, do what you gotta do."

“I'm working on it,” Pascoe replied quietly while scanning the room.
He took off his jacket and positioned himself so that he was almost flexing his arms. Dean rolled his eyes at the effort, flagged down the bartender, but when he turned to ask what Pascoe wanted he was already walking across the bar toward a fairly buff man sitting at a table alone.

Dean turned back to the bar in an attempt to not stare. He'd never really watched two men flirting. The prospect intrigued him, but spying on them felt too much like watching some science experiment under a microscope. This wasn't the place for candid observation. It was a bar; it was a place for organic, booze-aided embarrassment in the sanctity of dimly lit corners. He finished his shot of whiskey, then pushed the empty glass forward.

"Excuse me. Could I buy you a drink?"

Dean turned to see a man of Southeast Asian descent in slim, black suit pants and professional-looking shoes that hinted he'd come directly from work. A little bit of a tribal-style tattoo peeked out where the collar of his purple dress shirt had been loosened. He smiled and rested his hand on the back of the seat next to Dean's, silently asking for permission to sit down. Dean knew exactly what the question entailed. He'd tried it on women all the time. He could say no, but this was a chance for him to be more open-minded without lingering repercussions.

"Sure." Dean tried not to let his nerves slip through in his tone of voice or body language.

The man sat down next to him and turned his body slightly toward Dean, inviting conversation.

"I'm Jeremy."

"Dean."

Jeremy signaled to the bartender to give them both another round, then said, "I haven't seen you here before."

"This is my first time here," Dean explained. "Actually, this is my first time at a bar like this. My friend dragged me along."

Jeremy paused for a second uncertainly. "Are you straight?" His smile turned a bit uncomfortable at the possible miscommunication. "I mean, the drink's still on me if you are. I just won't..."

"Break out any of the special moves?" Dean chuckled as he remembered several futile attempts at hitting on disinterested women. "I... I don't know what I'm doing. This whole thing is new and I'm trying to figure it out."

"Ah, yeah." Jeremy nodded in understanding. "That's definitely a weird place to be."

"Have you been at this long?" Dean asked.

"You make it sound like a job." Jeremy sipped his whiskey rather than pounding it. "It's not like I'm panning for gold—well, I guess that's more or less what dating is, but it's not exactly like 'Oh yeah, I've been gay for ten years. It's going well.'"

"Sorry, I didn't—" Dean shifted awkwardly. "I just meant do you know the scene or what's common? I'm way out of my element here."

"I've known I was gay my whole life and I've been around this scene since I moved here six years ago." Jeremy offered his credentials. "If you want to know, just ask."

"You ever get shit for it?"
As soon as Dean had asked the question he thought it was a dumb thing to say. He knew just fine that the world could be cruel. The other Dean had found that out and he'd lived in a different time that seemed less focused on people's bodies.

"Oh man, do I ever." Jeremy finished his whiskey. "My parents are from a podunk little town in Vietnam that no one's ever heard of."

"Which town?"

"Do you know much about Vietnamese geography?"

"Some. My dad was in the Vietnam War."

"Ever heard of Si Ma Cai?" Jeremy asked, causing Dean to shake his head. "That's fine. Anyway, my parents don't approve of my orientation. I can't remember how many Vietnamese girls they've tried to set me up with—and not Vietnamese-American girls. I'm talking full-on Vietnamese. I've never been to the country, just sort of speak the language, and am only interested in the kind of pussy that meows."

Dean chuckled into his whiskey, spilling some of it. The bartender looked over at them and Dean shrugged apologetically before signaling for two more.

"Yet they keep trying," Jeremy continued. "Do your parents give you any shit?"

"Both my parents are dead," Dean replied.

"God, I'm sorry I—"

"No, it's okay. My mom died when I was a kid, my dad a few years ago." Dean finished his partially spilled drink, as the bartender delivered their next round. "We were on the road a lot growing up. Hell, I've been on the road a lot my whole life. So long-term relationships haven't really been on my radar. I'd go have one night stands with women I'd meet at bars. My dad had this whole macho thing about him. It made that seem like the right way to live, to be a man."

Jeremy leaned sideways against the bar, giving his full attention to Dean. "You said he fought in Vietnam. I take it he was a tough guy?"

"The toughest."

"Was he closed-minded?"

"About most things, no. About this…" Dean turned to face Jeremy more then waved his hand around at the setting and circumstances. "Yes."

"You worried he's rolling in his grave right now?"

"Not really," he said coolly. "We cremated him."

Jeremy laughed and Dean grinned playfully. It felt liberating to joke about the situation, for it to not be so serious. It made the whole thing less frightening. The fate of the world or his reputation as a hunter wasn't on the line. It wasn't anything so dire. He was just out having a good time, away from drama, judgment, or responsibility.

They chatted for several hours about a dozen mundane things. To his surprise, the conversation wasn't boring at all. With everything else that was going on in his life, it was nice to hear about
what it was like interning at some telecommunications company in Tokyo for a year and where the best BBQ in Lawrence was nowadays. He occasionally interjected comments or somewhat redacted anecdotes, but mostly he was enjoying just to listening to some kind and intelligent person talk about what made him happy.

A few drinks in Dean noticed Jeremy’s fingertip traced the top of his glass and it reflexively made him smile. At one point he caught himself missing part of a story because he was wondering just how much of the slim, quiet accountant was covered in tattoos. These little moments registered in his mind, but the alcohol and separation from all things familiar made his normal fears roll off of him easier. Then after an incredibly corny pun that made Dean nearly tear up, Jeremy placed his hand on Dean’s thigh. Dean’s heart was pounding as Jeremy leaned in a bit.

"I had fun," Jeremy said. “It's not exactly what I was picturing when heading out tonight, but...."

"Not what I was picturing either, but yeah.” Dean nodded. “It was good."

Jeremy move in a little closer to him, cautiously trying to read any signals to stop. Dean could feel himself blush and hoped that it wasn't obvious in the bar's poor lighting. He swallowed, then licked his lips anxiously. For a moment he thought about pulling away, but he pushed the doubt from his mind.

They kissed so softly that it made them both feel a little awkward. Dean wasn't used to closed mouth kissing. His normal move involved going in for the kill right off the bat, but this time he was so nervous he felt like a teenager all over again. Jeremy pulled back an inch.

"Are you okay?" Jeremy checked in a move that Dean genuinely appreciated.

"Yeah," Dean answered, surprised that it was the truth.

This time Dean moved forward to meet him. They kissed again, but with less inhibition. When Jeremy parted his lips, Dean only hesitated for moment before parting his own.

As they kissed, Jeremy's hand gently slid up Dean's thigh and wrapped around his lower back. In a move that Dean had to admit was pretty smooth, Jeremy slid off of his own seat while pulling Dean to the edge of his, leaving Dean still seated but quasi-straddling him. Jeremy broke the kiss, then leaned in close to Dean’s ear.

"If you want, I'd be happy to relieve a little pressure."

Dean wasn't sure exactly what he had in mind, but even a handjob was way more than he was prepared for at that point.

"Rain check?"

"Looking forward to it.' Jeremy pulled a pen from his pocket, wrote his number on a napkin, then placed it into Dean's left palm. He merciful didn't include his name and Dean smiled at his discretion.

Dean found Pascoe smoking in the alley behind the bar with the man he'd been talking up earlier. Pascoe nibbled the man’s ear as he said goodbye. While walking back to the car Pascoe nearly had a spring in his step. Dean didn't want to ask why he was so pleased with himself. He didn't need graphic details. He didn't need to judge what had happened. They both had gone out and had a little fun to take their minds off everything. It didn’t have to be more than that.

When they got back to the bunker, Dean said goodnight to Pascoe, then closed his bedroom door.
Taking off his shoes, he realized he was smiling. It wasn't that he was excited for some future meet up with Jeremy, though the guy seemed nice enough. It was that he'd had a better time than he'd expected and he wasn't particularly scared about what anyone would think of him. The other Dean had been out and nobody important to him cared in the slightest. He had been commander of one of the most powerful armies the world had ever seen. He'd had a kid. He'd killed a knight and seraphim.

Dean looked at himself in the mirror and took a few seconds to really consider what he’d just done. Yeah, he'd just kissed a guy and it didn't have to be a big deal. It didn't make him weak or a failure in any way.

Earlier that afternoon, after Dyaniel had described his plan, Castiel had gone to visit Anael. The angel had wanted to explain what was about to happen and also help her translate the seals into English for everyone to comprehend. Dean decided that when Castiel returned he'd try to find a good moment to talk to him about their alternate selves. He wasn't looking forward to the conversation, but it had to happen and at least now he wasn't completely terrified… just moderately anxious.

Dean was talking to a woman at a bar. She had black hair and dark eyes. She played with her drink seductively, then stroked his thigh. He leaned in and started kissing her. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close.

He broke the kiss for a moment to realize that the person he'd been kissing was actually Jeremy. Without missing a beat, Jeremy leaned in, kissing and nibbling on Dean's neck. Dean thought about pulling away, but didn't. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the how good it felt to have someone want him at all. His left hand slid up Jeremy's leg and up under his jacket. Dean could feel himself starting to get hard. His heart was hammering as his right hand moved around Jeremy’s back to pull off his shirt, but he stopped suddenly when he felt something wet. Pulling his hand back, it was covered in blood.

Jeremy looked up from kissing him, but it wasn't Jeremy anymore, it was Castiel. Brilliant blue eyes looked at him from only inches away. Castiel began to move back in for another kiss, but stopped short when a little blood trickled from his lips.

Castiel started falling and Dean really saw him for the first time. The angel had been stabbed through the chest. His leather jacket had been pierced—not the suit jacket and trench coat. It was the other Cas. It was the one who'd, on some level, loved him. Dean caught him, then lowered him to the ground.

“You're gonna be fine,” Dean said while looking him over with growing panic. There hadn't been a flash of light or ash wings, yet the blood kept flowing and Cas’s eyes didn't seem as bright as they usually were. “Come on, stay with me.”

Dean tried to find the stab wound in order to apply pressure, but he was struggling to remove the angel’s jacket and shirt. As he worked to try and save him, the blood pumped obscenely and pooled around them, spreading out across the stone floor. It flowing into patterned grooves in the stone floor that Dean hadn't noticed before. Trembling at the sight, he could hear the far off sound of screaming souls. They were in Alastair's private dungeon.

His instincts told him to flee, to leave the burden of the injured Cas behind, but he didn't. Cas was counting on him. Cas had died for him before. He wasn't going to let him die again. Too many people had died for him, too many people who had loved him. He wasn't going to leave someone else to face Alastair. It was his fight, his demon to face. Knowing that he didn't have a weapon,
Dean just held Cas close and listened for footsteps.

“How the mighty have fallen?” He knew it was Alastair even before he turned to see the archdemon standing over him. “So to speak.”

Alastair was the tall and gaunt embodiment of pain. There wasn't a gentle curve on him, instead every edge was a razor. His appearance was so unsettling that anyone gazing upon him instinctively wanted to look away. Like an old reflex, Dean’s eyes nearly shut and his head lowered in an unintentional bow. After realizing what he'd done, he forced himself to lift his head despite the terror it produced in him.

“This place will kill him,” Alastair said while eyeing Cas. “Just being with you will kill him. You can't save him. You can't save any of them.”

“I can save them. I have to.” Dean spoke softer than he'd hoped, but the mere act of responding at all was a huge step forward.

Alastair crouched to be at eye level. His hand cupped Dean’s chin, clawed fingers dragging menacingly along the surface of his throat, thumb threatening to cut down through his lower lip. Dean tried to stay as calm as possible, but having his old master touching him again, being forced to sit there helplessly while Cas bleed to death in his arms, it was too much. He began to silently cry.

“Your father would be so disappointed with you.”

“I don't care.” Dean managed to whisper despite the claw on his lower lip.

Alastair's eyes widen in surprise at his attack not landing as he'd expected. “If you want to save the world you can't be weak. This is what he warned you about, these feelings creeping into your heart.” He released Dean’s head and slowly dragged his hand down to Dean’s chest. “And making you soft.”

“I don't need to be made of iron to beat your demon ass,” Dean replied.

“I barely recognize you, pet.” Alastair’s thin claw-like fingers traced small shallow slices over Dean’s heart. “But aren't you eager to see if the real me recognizes you? Your master is on Earth, and he's looking for you.”

“I’ll kill him.” Dean’s voice broke and he thought he might throw up. The prospect of seeing Alastair for real, that he might be prey to something other than angels was terrifying. The Holy Host may have been a powerful foe, but Alastair had been a foe who had once held power over him. The others wouldn't understand. They couldn't understand. It was his responsibility to kill the archdemon; it was something he needed to do himself. “I can stop him.”

“Good luck with that.” Alastair glanced down at Cas. “You know how he feels about spoiling pets. He's going to enjoy taking away all your toys.”

Dean sat up in bed. He was panting and sweating. His eyes frantically scanned the room for threats. For a few seconds he tried to calm down, but the dream flickered in his memory: Cas bleeding, Alastair threatening him, Alastair threatening the people he cared— He grabbed the napkin and his cell, then called Jeremy.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it's Dean.” He realized it was the middle of the night and mentally kicked himself. “Sorry, I
know it's late. My friend told me a guy got jumped near the bar. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I'm fine. Thanks for checking on me.” Jeremy's voice was groggy, but lighthearted. “That's really sweet of you. Are you okay?”

“I'm just a little shaken up,” Dean replied while his trembling hand searched his nightstand for a joint and his lighter.

After a moment of rustling, Jeremy told him, “I know a place that opens in a half hour. They make the best chicken and waffles in the state. If you need some company.”

Jeremy was asking him on something like a date. Dean’s brain hiccuped. He hadn't expected to actually talk to the guy again, let alone potentially go out with him. It was too soon, especially after dreaming about the danger that merely being in his orbit entailed.

“I'm meeting up with my brother in an hour,” Dean lied. “Thanks though.”

“Maybe another time.” Jeremy let him off the hook.

“Jeremy,” Dean said in a hasty attempt to stop him from hanging up. He bit his lip, then ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated by his own cowardice. “I've got some work stuff that's gonna keep me pretty busy for a week or two at least—probably longer, but… how about I call you once things slow down?”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

Sam waited until well after dinner time to head down to the bunker’s kitchen. He wanted some privacy while he was trying out his little experiment. After a couple minutes of searching he found a container of table salt. He pulled it from the pantry and stared at it.

It would take hardly any time to pour a line of salt, but it was the part after that that intimidated him. Personally, he almost didn't care whether he could cross a line of salt or not. Ruby couldn't do it and that didn't bother him. He didn't care that she was a demon. It was such a vital part of who she was as a person, not because her species defined her, but instead because she embraced that part of her identity.

When it came right down to it, he didn't have that confidence or identity anymore. Months ago he’d felt good about his place in the world. Maybe it would've been nice to settle down and prepare for Kaylee without running around all over the country, but in a lot of ways he’d felt more grounded.

The only person whose opinion he'd cared about was Ruby. She'd supported him and been on the same page as him for over a year. It had been deeply comforting to have someone accept him exactly as he was. He hadn't even needed to hide his past from her like he'd had to with Jessica.

But now everything was complicated. There were so many more people in his life and it felt like nothing was going to plan. So much had changed. Even ignoring the possible destruction of the world, he had new responsibilities and relationships. The different potentialities before him were terrifying: the height of having a real family with Ruby; the depths of becoming a creature of unfathomable destructive power; and everything in between. It was hard for him to even sort through all his worries. Some unknown number of them lurked in the shadows of his mind, seemingly ready to pounce.
“God, I hope things between us aren't that bad,” Ruby said as she entered the kitchen. She carried their daughter in her arms, though a messenger bag was slung over her shoulder. When he looked at her in confusion about the statement, she nodded at the carton of salt.

“No, it's for—it's nothing,” Sam assured her while putting the salt down on the counter, then quickly added, “I'm not mad.”

“Same here,” Ruby agreed.

“I know we're… not seeing eye-to-eye, but I'd never—”

“Don’t worry. It was a joke, since I’m the only demon around.” Ruby shrugged.

“You forgot Kay.” Sam nodded to their daughter while adding, “And there’s Kaylee.”

“Even if she wasn't your kid, I'm pretty sure you aren't the kinda guy to salt a newborn.”

“That's not—I just meant there are other demons around. With Kay doing her thing down in Hell….” Sam’s voice softened. “You don't have to go it alone. It's not just the two of us out there on the road. It's okay to get help or let others put themselves out there.”

“Yeah, well some things are too important to let someone who isn't as good do it.” Ruby shifted Kaylee to one arm and unconsciously adjusted her messenger bag full of reagents. “If you've got a better idea for how to pull off tomorrow—”

“I'm not talking about Dyl’s plan, not really.”

“Then what?”

“I mean, just in general….” He contemplated just pushing forward and addressing the way she'd repeatedly taken off without checking with him, but he hesitated. It was clear that she was having trouble with his reasoning and a voice of doubt in his mind whispered that she didn't feel the same parental bond with Kaylee that he did, that being around to raise their daughter wasn't a priority for her in the same way it was for him. Dean had said that Kay’s mom had been around, but he hadn't explained the interpersonal dynamics much at all. Granted, everything from the other timeline was up in the air… but in this timeline Ruby had expressed concern about whether she'd be the motherly type. He needed to try to figure out whether she was sincerely adopting the role or whether she was just doing him a favor. If it turned out that he was the only reason she was staying, then he didn't want to push her too hard or fast, and risk pushing her away. “I'm just stressed.”

“That's fair,” she replied, but eyed him.

“I don't like this plan. Dyl is going to be exposed for too long. If anything goes wrong…” He felt like he'd been naysaying every plan the last few days, ever since the fight at the coven.

“Kay and I are gonna help him scope the place out and get everything ready. You know she isn't gonna be taking any chances with him and I've got the technical know-how to make sure there isn't anything around to trip him up.” Ruby smiled at him in an attempt to be reassuring. “Kay and I will be out of there long before the show starts.”

“I know.” Sam leaned against the counter and ran his fingers through his hair. “I'm also worried about Dyl. He's a little distant, but if anything happens to him you know Kay would be a wreck. And Dean… I don't even know how Dean would react.”
“You think he's feeling all….” She chose her words carefully. “Protective of Dyl?”

“Maybe not like his dad, but yeah. I mean I think I’m kind of that way with Kay. She's something to me, even if I'm not sure what exactly,” Sam admitted. He realized that the feeling was potentially a manifestation of some sense of longing for family. It might offer insight into Ruby’s feelings. “You don't feel like that?”

“I'm not sure how protective I am. Kay seems more capable than 99.9% of the world. I like her, but I just don't know her that well,” Ruby confessed. It wasn't really the answer he'd wanted, but he couldn't blame her for feeling that way. When she saw his brow furrow and lips turn downward in disappointment, she rested her hand on his chest. “You care a lot and you do it so fast. You're like a puppy.”

“Hey.”

“It's not a complaint. The way you care about people… it's something not many people have and it's important. I like that you're that way,” Ruby assured him. “A lot of people barely care, if at all. It's harder for some of us or maybe we just don't try enough. We’re like cats.”

Sam smiled at her metaphor despite its actually meaning. In hindsight he could see where she'd have trouble bonding with people. A huge amount of her existence had been spent as an outsider facing adversity. Even within the demon community she hadn't really made lasting relationships. He suspected the only reason she'd stayed with him long enough to become his friend was curiosity. From what she was saying and the greater context, it must've taken a concerted effort on her part to forge and maintain the bonds that she currently had.

“You try like hell,” he told her.

“Eh, I try for you.” Ruby shrugged, then tugged at his shirt. “It turns out I've got a soft spot for puppies.”

“I bet if you spend some time with Kay you'd like her.” Sam tried to bring the conversation back around to a place where she could start warming towards Kay. Hopefully that would shed some light on her feelings toward their own daughter. “She reminds me of you.”

“Are you kidding?” Ruby raised an eyebrow. “Kay is so much like you it's scary.”

“What?” Sam stood up from the counter, a little surprised by the comparison.

“Well, she looks like you.” Ruby started ticking off characteristics on her fingers. “She knows everything about anything.” Kaylee reached for her mom’s fingers from her half-swaddled position in Ruby’s other arm. “Not to mention the powers. Watching you two hurl books at each other is something else. I've seen some scary greater demons use telekinesis—”

His eyes glanced anxiously to the kitchen doorway at the comparison to powerful demons. He caught himself feeling some relief at knowing that Dean and Bobby hadn't overheard that. The extent of his demonic nature had been largely sidestepped by those around him. He wasn't sure if that was because the others thought it was something to be ashamed of or if they just assumed he was ashamed of it—though that assumption on their part would be its own subtle judgment. Either way, being called out in front of Dean and Bobby earlier in the day had shaken him.

“Don't listen to those hunters,” Ruby told him. “They don't know you.”

“They don't know you…. They don't know what demons are even like, and who wants to learn that you guys have real personalities and feelings?” He sighed at the thought that Ruby and her
entire species were treated as tired archetypes. “In the last three years you've done more good than most hunters do in their whole lives.”

“I've done a lot of bad too.”

“People change.” Sam brushed a little hair out of Kaylee’s face, then softly touched her cheek, causing her to lean into his hand. “You're a person. You're not some boilerplate monster from a bedtime story.”

“I don't care what some hunters think of me.”

“Most of the time I don't care what they think either. But when we need their help, I care. When they might hurt you or us, I care.”

“You really think we’ll be able to get that future with the reasonable hunters without the whole Templars and apocalypse thing?” she asked.

“I don't know.” Sam couldn't even begin to imagine what the world would be like a year from then let alone thirty. “I wish everything could be simple.”

“No you don't. If it was simple I'd be that boilerplate monster and you'd have died in Cold Oak or become a fucking tax preparer—not sure which is worse,” Ruby teased. “You wish that people wouldn't hate you and you wish you knew what to do.”

“Fair enough,” he admitted. “How are you so smart?”

“It's part of the burden of being this awesome.” Ruby smiled up at him, then added pointedly, “And I try not to lie to myself. It's too much wasted time and effort.”

“I'm honest with myself.”

“Then why are you scared of a little salt?” Ruby picked up the carton of salt and handed it to him. “I get that you're confused about everything that's going on, but you need to start planting your feet and finding a way to make things simpler. You are whatever you are and not knowing isn't gonna help you. Either way, you're still a good man trying his best to do the right thing.”

She stood up on her toes to give him a kiss his cheek, then turned to leave.

“Wait.” He chewed his lip, then asked, “Can you stay?”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded and leaned against the wall to watch from a safe distance. He wasn't entirely sure why he wanted her there. Maybe to soften whatever emotional blow might occur if he couldn't cross it? She was his shining example that a demon could still be a good person. Though it could've been the much simpler explanation that her company just made everything better.

He poured a line of salt on the floor, returned the carton to the counter, then took a deep breath to calm his nerves. After a second or two’s hesitation, he stepped over the salt. His body passed the threshold with relative ease, though part of him thought there might've been a hint of resistance. He couldn't really tell if it had just been his imagination because he was distracted by the overwhelming sense of wrongness that hit him as he moved over the line. There was clearly some effect on him, but it wasn't outwardly noticeable.

“You made it through alright,” Ruby said optimistically.
“I can pass it.” Sam reached out to hold his hand above the salt, then pulled it back at the unpleasant sensation. “But I can also feel it.”

“You're different. We’ve known that for years.” Ruby tried to reframe his expectations. “See: simple.”

“You have a very strange definition of simple.”

“And you'll notice I'm not the one with insomnia.”

“You don't sleep.” Sam called her out as he grabbed the dustpan to clean up the potential hazard.

“No one likes a smartass.”

“Then how do I like you?”

“Cute. Right back at ya, big guy.” Ruby elbowed him softly in the side. “Come on. I need to go help with that reconnaissance and setup run. If you make it fast I’ll hang out while you put Kaylee to bed, then you damn well better get some sleep yourself.”

Dylaniel stood before the large, wooden double doors and took a few deep breaths. He was unaccustomed to this sort of operation. It wasn't just the fact that he was hoping to avoid a fight, but the entire setting and concept was out of his comfort zone. The prospect of being alone with several dozen humans almost made him more nervous than the prospect of being around the angels. At least angels were fairly predictable.

He walked into the small church. After considerable searching the night before, Kay, Ruby, and he had chosen this church because of its isolated location, stone architecture, and devout congregation. It was the middle of the Sunday morning sermon and the pews were nearly filled.

His parents had never taken him to a house of faith belonging to an Abrahamic religion for the purpose of worship. The closest he'd ever come to this sort of place was when he would occasionally meeting up with Alex outside a mosque in Goddard. As a child he'd admired the beautiful architecture of the mosque and found it less intimidating than holy sites that contained depictions of people he knew. Now, looking up at the large stained glass windows that lined the walls, the winged figures seemed to watch him…. They really would soon enough.

On a far wall there was an ornate statue of Michael. Dylaniel’s eyes narrowed as he studied the depiction of the archangel. Chin-length golden locks of hair framed the beautiful face. His wings were white with airbrushed pink and pale grey accents to soften it. He held a golden spear, which matched his golden breastplate. If the patrons only knew that Michael burned with the flame of righteous fury, maybe they would find that gentle imagery as distasteful as Dylaniel.

He waited at the back of nave until there was a lull, then walked down the center aisle. When he was halfway to the altar, the priest stopped talking and stared at him with curious concern. All eyes were on him.

"Can I help you, young man?" the priest asked.

"I'm sorry that I've interrupted such a lovely sermon.” Dylaniel didn't stop walking towards the front of the church, though he slowed his pace in order to appear non-threatening. “But I was hoping to ask your congregation for assistance."

"What kind of assistance?"
"I would ask that they join me in a prayer, to my family in Heaven."

Dylaniel had managed to make it to the front of the church. He wasn't concerned with the etiquette of the situation. Mostly he just wanted cooperation and it didn't matter whether it was through pity or them simply wanting to avoid him causing a scene. He appreciated the irony of the situation if their motivation really was the latter. The priest seemed a little confused, but wisely decided not to refuse such a simple request.

"Alright... brothers and sisters, let us—"

While the priest was speaking, Dylaniel moved to stand directly in front of the altar, several yards from the closest person. He removed his coat, placing it carefully on the altar, revealing the two long slits in the back of his light grey shirt. A murmur spread through the pews, derailing the prayer.

The priest looked at the tears in the shirt, concerned that the strange young man might've suffered some injuries. "Son, are you alright?"

"Yes. I'm not hurt," Dylaniel replied as he turned to face his audience. "Thank you for your concern though. The cuts in my shirt are for my wings."

There was an uncomfortable silence as everyone replayed the insane statement in their heads. The priest eyed Dylaniel warily. "Wings...."

With a small flex of his shoulders, Dylaniel physically manifested his wings. They were brilliant, golden, and massive. The wings weren't particularly elegant—bulky might've been the right adjective. The feathers were thickly-packed and looked nearly ruffled until he extended the wings to their full thirty-five-foot span. When he leaned forward to help readjust his center of gravity the priest took a few startled steps backwards towards the pews.

"Yes, my wings," Dylaniel confirmed, as shocked silence was replaced by cries of faith. "If you would all join me in prayer, I would be grateful."

Dylaniel had no intention of actually praying, but he thought the humans would prefer to believe that he was devout. There was a scramble of activity while the humans began praying, caught up in the miracle they were witnessing. He didn't doubt that they'd misidentified him as an angel, but the high concentration of people believing they'd seen an angel would raise a red flag in Heaven. Upon any investigation, Heaven would find out that there was a man with wings, a classic instance of a nephilim.

Within seconds, Dylaniel could sense the angels coming. He put away his wings in order to allow himself better flexibility and range of movement. If things didn't go according to plan he'd need to be able to fight and run. He silently touched the sides of several large candles on the altar next to him while gathering his conviction. This was his last chance to avoid confrontation and outing himself to Heaven, but he didn't take the opportunity.

As expected, the faithful members of the congregation consented to become vessels in a heartbeat. In Dylaniel's time it was uncommon for angels to adopt inferior and incompatible vessels because everyone was anticipating a life or death fight at any moment. But in this time the convenience of easy vessels on the scene was more tempting than the threat of some unknown nephilim. Nearly twenty angels stood up in the pews, including four blockers to prevent his escape. The sight of the blockers was actually a small relief.
"I'm just here to talk," Dylaniel told them.

"There is nothing to discuss. Your kind are blasphemous," one of the angels shot back as she moved toward the aisle. Thanks to the blockers the angels were flightless, just like he was.

"I don't want to fight." Dylaniel spoke loudly and with a determination that bordered on threatening. "I will not risk the lives of these humans. I only came to warn you—"

“A half-breed is going to warn Heaven?”

"Yes."

Dylaniel knocked the candles on the altar to the floor, igniting the holy oil Ruby and he had carefully laid out the night before. The flames spread outward to the stone walls, safely away from the wooden pews, surrounding the angels and the humans alike. He was safely apart from a temporarily captive audience.

“The flames will fade shortly,” he said as a small reassure to the humans who were also trapped. “So I will be brief. The leadership of Heaven seeks a war that will destroy this world. If this war is allowed to happen you will watch your brothers and sisters kill each other. You will watch your human charges suffer and die. You will watch your father's most perfect creation be ruined at the hands of a monster.”

Dylaniel reached into his discarded jacket’s inner pocket, withdrew Lucifer's angel blade, then held it high for all to see. He could immediately tell which angels in the group were the most powerful or potentially had met Lucifer before. He could see the recognition in their eyes. Two of the angels even took a step back, recoiling from its presence.

“It can't be!” one of the more powerful angels exclaimed.

“This is the blade of the Morningstar,” Dylaniel announced for the lesser angels’ benefit.

“He's free?” a lesser angel asked in an almost fearful voice.

“I've brought this from a fate that could be. One I hope you will never experience.” Dylaniel trusted that they would connect the dots with the fact that Heaven had undoubtedly observed anomalies in space-time. He didn't have enough time at the moment to get into a more detailed explanation. The sooner he could get out of there the better. After talking with his fleetingly captive audience, he had to get out of range of the blockers’ effects before the holy fire extinguished.

“You're lying,” one of the angels said. “That can't be Lucifer's.”

“Go ahead. Read my mind and tell me I'm lying,” Dylaniel invited.

There was a slight pause. Even with the holy oil barrier between them, the blade had to be radiating its cold wrath, which the stronger angels had sensed immediately. The temptation to try to understand what was happening was probably overwhelming for the angels who had been expecting a simple fight. He was counting on it.

Nephilim weren't telepathic to the same extent as angels. They couldn't reach out and dig through the thoughts of others. If an angel wasn't particularly on guard against mental intrusion, most nephilim could send messages to them, but those were just words which would be recognized as foreign sentiments just as much as audible speech.
Rather than attempting to force finite words upon the angels, Dylaniel invited them to dig into his mind... or at least the small pieces he intentionally left unprotected. These angels had almost certainly never confronted a nephilim and probably assumed that he was as weak-willed as most humans. They had no idea what he’d endured or how much he was capable of staring down without even the urge to blink. More than that, they had no idea how much time he’d spent during his youth contemplating the nature of angels and humans, the relationship between Heaven and Earth, and divine purpose. His teenage angst had been a minefield of angelic existential crises and he laid so much of it out before them.

In their quest to take whatever information from him that they could, he fed them what they weren't prepared for. He fed them the memory of Lucifer burning through a dozen angels indiscriminately while fighting Raphael. He fed them the memory of walking through the smoldering ruins of a human city and finding the remains of an angel’s corpse trying to shield human children from the blast. He fed them the memory of watching the stars at night while listening to the angels on both sides singing the names of their dead in unity. And as they probed, desperate to find the source of this conflict, he fed them something stronger than a terrifying memory. He fed them an emotion.

For years he had struggled to accept that he might not have the same interpersonal relationships as those around him. He’d wanted to make his parents proud by fulfilling his responsibilities. It would have been convenient to fall in love or even just lust. When he began noticing that he wasn't attracted to others he had confided in his parents and Ruby. In an attempt to jumpstart any dormant feelings, his xe had telepathically transmitted to him the raw sensation of romantic love that had infected Heaven years earlier. During his late teens, Dylaniel had appreciated the emotion, but he couldn't find a way to bind it to anything else in him. It was an abstract novelty, that's only value had been to better understand his parents—until now.

While the angels searched his mind, he actively pondered and delved into romantic love, the emotion that, in his time, had infected almost every choir in Heaven, ushering in the fall. It was such an incredible amount of emotional information that, when combined with the memories of Lucifer and the war, he half expected the lesser angels to collapse. His prediction wasn't too far off, as several of the angels seemed disoriented. One angel didn't even seem to notice that she'd dropped her blade.

"I come from a loving union of Earth and Heaven. I fight to defend humans. I fight to defend angels who would accept my help. Most of all I fight to defend love.” Dylaniel put away Lucifer's blade, then slipped on his jacket. “You do not want to make war on me.”

He walked toward the emergency exit at the front of the nave. Once outside he would hop on the motorcycle Kay had left for him in the parking lot and ride the 500 feet or so necessary to get out of range of the blockers. His hand was on the doorknob when one of the angels yelled and broke one of the pews in a telling display of frustration.

“You're the Michaelsword!” he shouted, desperately trying to find some reason to stop Dylaniel from leaving. “Your duty is to Heaven!”

“The Sword of Heaven fights for freedom…. What Heaven fights for? I can't answer that,” Dylaniel replied before walking out the door.

Dylaniel called Kay to let her know he was safely away from the church and would be taking a detour before returning to the bunker. He teleported to the beach house that his family had occasionally used when he was younger. If his parents had ever decided to live apart from Sam and Ruby’s family, he was certain that it would've been their home. His xe and he had always appreciated the way the ocean acted as a mirror, creating the illusion of endless sky, making the
sand the very edge of the world.

He didn't dare to go into the house. For all he knew someone actually lived there in this time. Instead he walked down the beach until he was far from any prying eyes. He collected some dried sun-bleached wood and built a small bonfire. Despite sitting on the beach when it was nearly winter, he wasn't particularly cold. The fire wasn't meant to provide heat. It was a pyre with no bodies.

Dylaniel reached inside the collar of his shirt and pulled off his necklace. He’d worn it everyday since his dad had given it to him for his tenth birthday, but the last few days it held a new addition.

Before fleeing the bunker in 2039, he'd returned to his xe's body one last time. Through the shock, some sentimentality took him over. He’d knelt down and collected his xe's wedding band. After waking up in the AFE infirmary, he slipped the ring onto his necklace for safe keeping. It had traveled with him across time, another physical embodiment of the love he'd just unleashed on Heaven.

He studied the jewelry for a moment. In a way it was comforting to have a tangible reminder of his parents, yet the sight caused his grief to flare. Part of him humored the idea of throwing it into the fire, destroying the strongest ties he had to his home. Allowing the past to fade into the realm of memories. The urge seemed overly dramatic and felt like a very human thing to do. Those were the impulsive and emotional acts that he'd learned to be wary of. Playing bait to the angels had been somewhat reckless and intentionally dramatic…. He would have to stay vigilant against making that sort of thing a habit. His xe always did say that he took after his dad in that respect. Dylaniel put the necklace back on, tucking it back under his shirt, then watched the fire burn down to embers.

A few hours later he buried the smoldering embers, then returned the bunker. When he walked into the library he saw that Sam, Ruby, and Bobby were huddled around a laptop. Kay paced in a clear showing of concern or frustration—probably both. Dean was refilling his glass of whiskey and took a long sip.

"Is something wrong?" Dylaniel asked, drawing everyone's attention.

"Well—" Sam tried to answer tactfully, but Ruby and Bobby cut him off with varying degrees of pessimism.

"Maybe."

"Yes."

Dylaniel looked for any indication of danger or urgency, but the others’ posture didn't indicate the need for an immediate fight. His body relaxed slightly despite him not feeling very encouraged by Ruby and Bobby's responses. Kay had stopped pacing and was staring at him in that same pitying way she would when he'd fall while learning to fly.

"What did I do?" he asked.

"Dyl, you didn't notice the cell phones?" Kay was obviously trying to not sound upset at him.

"Why would I care about the cell phones? None of the humans made any calls while I was there," he explained.

She pointed at the laptop. "Dyl, you're blowing up on YouTube."
"What's YouTube?"

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, this Dean’s first kiss wasn't with Cas. I feel like that might be mildly controversial, but personally I believe that Dean's relationship with himself comes before his relationship with anyone else.

Also, I hadn't intended to ever use Dyl’s aromantic & asexual nature as a plot point. That's just who he is. But when I was writing the church scene I realized that when he was younger and under a lot of pressure to find a partner, he'd have tried to access the “love virus” himself in an attempt to “fix” himself. I don't want anyone to think of these aspects of his character as mere plot devices that have been lying in wait. He's perfectly valid and doesn't need some usage to forward the plot to justify who he is.
Dylaniel’s first instinct upon hearing that video of him in the church had gone public was to go find some isolation. It was tempting to retreat to the bunker’s rooftop or the quiet beach he’d just come from, someplace where he could process the situation without having to worry about interacting with other people. In 2039, he’d had a certain amount of freedom granted to him by his authority and ability to delegate. At worst everyone knew to leave him alone when he was on patrol or meditating. But in 2009 he was part of much smaller group, who didn’t know him nearly as well and was much more dependant on his continual assistance.

Even without spending time considering the implications, he was conflicted about the discovery. On some level he didn’t have a problem with being a public figure. For as long as he could remember everyone had known of him. He mostly didn’t mind being judged, hearing the whispers of others… yet when they’d arrived in this time Kay had assured him that no one knew they existed. She had ended up voluntarily exposing herself to Hell and his attempt to expose himself to Heaven had spread beyond its intended audience.

There was a lot of appeal in staying hidden from the humans. He’d been comforted by Kay’s earlier reassures that in this time the humans didn’t know that they existed. For the first time in his life he’d had the possibility of walking down the street in a human city without running the risk of being recognized—not that he’d ever felt inclined to do that, but it was nice to know it was possible. Now he wasn’t so sure that was an option for him anymore.

Exposing himself to Heaven was a different matter. The probability of being found by angels was much lower. He was heavily warded against their scrying. And, to be honest, he didn’t mind being hunted a little bit. For as long as he could remember he’d always been looking over his shoulder for danger. If it suddenly disappeared from his life he doubted he’d ever stop watching for threats. It was just part of who he was and the prospect of being on guard without the occasional vindication of his fear was its own sort of problem.

Beyond the personal impact, he didn't want to be responsible for unexpectedly making the situation even more complicated and arguably worse. It was still too soon to tell how large an effect would be felt on Earth. If Kay was right about humans doubting the existence of angels and demons, then there was a chance the footage of him would be dismissed as fake. He wasn’t sure whether humans in this time were naturally skeptical, but their willful ignorance regarding non-human natives was somewhat telling.

Everyone else in the room may have been watching him uncertain of how he’d process the discovery, but at least Kay had some insight into the thoughts turning in his head. She took a step toward him, physically bringing him into what would inevitably turn into a conversation. He recognized the move as a very subtle attempt to cut off his possible retreat. As a small gesture of reassurance he tried to relax his posture like a human might upon returning home. Whether she appreciated his effort was another matter entirely.

“Dyl, I’m sorry, but you aren’t going anywhere until we know how bad the fallout is,” Kay dictated. “You’re gonna take this opportunity to study.”

“What?”

Dylaniel looked at his cousin doubtfully, then to the others for their reactions. Sam and Dean exchanged glances, unprepared to insert themselves into the tighter family discussion. Ruby stood from her own seat in front of the computer and busied herself with Kaylee. Seeing that he didn't
have explicit support, Dylaniel crossed his arms and waited for Kay's explanation.

“You clearly don’t know stuff about this time.” She’d fallen into her old tone from when she was his commanding officer, but caught herself. “Dyl, it could be dangerous for you out there.”

“You don’t know things about this time either,” Dylaniel countered.

“I know more than you.”

“Barely.”

“Listen, I got a few extra years on you before it went all the way off the rails. We just got exposed to different stuff growing up, you know that. I’m not saying— It's just this Earth is new terrain and I want you safe.” Kay smiled cautiously. “Hell doesn't change as much and that's my main stomping ground. Meanwhile you're stuck up here.”

“You should still study.” Dylaniel turned the suggestion back at her, earning a fleeting look of annoyance at his point before she conceded.

“Fine. I'll study somehow with all my free time.” Kay pointed at the empty chair in front of the laptop. “I'm sorry Dyl, but you're benched for the moment, so sit down and get comfortable.”

Dylaniel took a little extra time removing his jacket and switching it out for his customary in-home weapon of a single knife. Everyone watched as he approached the computer. All of them except for Kay were silently doubting his competence. He considered asking them to leave, but pride to the point of self-harm was one of the faults he reminded himself to be ever-vigilant against.

“Do you need me to explain how to use the laptop?” Sam asked in as non-judgmental a voice as was humanly possible.

“I know how to use a computer,” Dylaniel said a bit defensively. He sat down, then hesitated. “What networks exist now?”

“Networks?” Sam opened his mouth to express some sort of confusion, but didn't seem to know an appropriately polite way of asking.

“Where I can view archives?” Dylaniel clarified.

“We’re online. You can just open a web browser and google whatever you want to learn about.”

Dylaniel looked up at Kay, who chewed her lip. She almost certainly didn't understand some aspect of the sentence. At least he was in respectable company.

“Okay.” Dylaniel turned to Sam, who was seated next to him. “Please explain everything you just said.”

“Yeah… sure.” Sam smiled sympathetically, then started trying to figure out where to begin.

“Take her—Take her!” Ruby suddenly groaned to Sam as she shook her head. She braced herself against his shoulder and moved to hand off Kaylee.

Sam quickly took the baby, then used his free arm to grab Ruby and help hold her upright. He double-checked to make sure he had a secure grip on both of them before asking, “What's wrong?”

When Ruby opened her eyes they were black and her face was fatigued. “Morrison’s trying to summon me.” Her less-frantic tone was reassuring to everyone else.
“Morrison?”

“My archdemon. He’s trying to pull me down to Hell.” Ruby looked over at Kay. “Any chance you can get me out of jury duty?”

“I’ll try,” Kay replied. “I’m not sure how much influence I have over him at this point, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Sam unconsciously held her a bit tighter. “He can't actually make you go back, can he?”

“Anybody else, I'd say they couldn't do anything, him…. ” Ruby considered the possibility a bit too long. “He's having trouble now, but he's one of those guys that if he really puts his mind to something.... I should go talk to him.”

“Is that safe?”

“It's safer than him accidentally yanking me off the whole fucking plane when I'm holding the kid or in a fight,” Ruby pointed out. “You gonna be okay without me?”

“I have to be,” Sam said unenthusiastically.

“That's the spirit.”

“Fuck,” Kay muttered with an expression of mild discomfort on her face. “Crowley's calling me too. There's no way that's a coincidence.”

“I’m guessing Hell has internet access,” Dean speculated.

Shortly after Ruby and Kay went down to Hell, Tom wandered into the library in search of either Sam or Ruby. When he saw that Sam was giving a demonstration on using a computer, the boy walked over to watch. He hovered behind Sam and Dylaniel for a moment, but couldn't see very well, so he squeezed between them and climbed onto Sam’s lap.

In order to accommodate having both children, Sam positioned Kaylee on Tom’s lap, then wrapped an arm around the two of them. He caught himself enjoying the strange simplicity of the moment. His knee unconsciously bounced a little to keep Tom and Kaylee from getting restless. As he pointed to various things on the computer, Tom occasionally asked questions. It felt nice to be able to share this new knowledge with the six-year-old as well as Dylaniel.

They checked the news, though Sam redirected their search away from violent articles for Tom’s benefit. Since Dylaniel was using Sam’s laptop the news aggregator initial consisted of 95% homicide stories, a handful of pieces on missing persons, two articles on freak meteor showers, and a study on trends in green energy technology. Rather than risk cutting off Dylaniel’s access by implementing parental protections, Sam just encouraged a more focused searching process through Wikipedia. It was a bit amusing to see Dylaniel skip over the page dedicated to Black Sabbath with the explanation that he was already versed in the band’s history and entire discography—though he had grown up with Dean as a dad, so it wasn’t without explanation.

After an hour or two, Kaylee began fussing. Upon investigation, Sam realized that she was probably hungry. Tom made to follow him, but he assured the boy that it was no big deal and whatever Dylaniel was looking at online was probably more entertaining.

Sam went to the kitchen and heated up the bottle of milk that Ruby had left for him. It took a little trial and error to get the temperature just right. He pulled up a chair at the narrow kitchen table,
then tried to get Kaylee to use the bottle, but she whimpered in protest.

“Come on. Please eat,” he pleaded with her.

Ruby and Kay had been gone for several hours, which was more than a bit alarming. It'd sounded like Ruby had been only planning on having a short chat with her archdemon. He wasn't sure how much longer to wait or what to do if it fell on him to get her back. He decided that if he hadn't heard from her in another hour, he'd ask Dylaniel about how to contact Kay.

“She just let me be able to do this for you. I need to be able to take care of you on my own, so just work with me on this.”

He put down the bottle and just cradled her in his arms for a minute. Rationally, he knew that Hell wasn't dangerous to Ruby in the same way it probably was to most people—or at least the part she had gone to. Kay had spent a considerable amount of the previous day down there without a problem. But it didn't stop him from worrying.

Beyond his own longing to be with Ruby generally, the thought of taking care of their daughter without her was upsetting. Seeing Ruby injured after the fight at the coven and each time she was in danger since then, a fear whispered in the back of his mind that he couldn't do this without her. He didn't know how he'd keep going if something happened to her, let alone how he'd take care of Kaylee or maybe even both her and Tom…. But he needed to be able to take care of Kaylee, no matter what. He picked up the bottle and tried again.

“Try turning her toward you more,” Dean suggested as he entered the kitchen. The older Winchester dug through the fridge for a beer, then watched Sam struggle. “You gotta relax. When you were a baby you never ate when I was stressed out.”

“You used to feed me?” Sam glanced up at the strange thought.

“Somebody had to.” Dean shrugged while sitting down in a free chair. “The first year dad was so caught up with researching what happened…. It made sense that I did that kinda stuff a lot of the time.”

“I'm sorry you had to spend so much of your time taking care of me.”

“It's better than the alternative,” Dean commented while opening his beer and taking a sip. “Maybe I complain sometimes, but overall I'm glad you survived infancy.”

“You've almost…. You've got it.” Sam spoke quiet words of encouragement as his daughter finally latched onto the bottle. “See. That's not so bad.”

“Easy, right?”

“I wouldn't go that far,” Sam replied without looking away from Kaylee. He watched her for a moment to make sure she was okay, then returned his attention to Dean. “How bad are things with the hunters?”

“A couple split and aren't returning our calls. Bobby cut off their access to the forums we're using. We'll have to be careful not to let them back into the loop, but we've got a little support.” Dean tried to turn the conversation to the positive results. “Rufus, Tamara—Ellen is gonna reach out to Tara, an old friend of dad's who might have some connections. It's not as bad as you'd think.”

“I'm sorry I messed things up for you.” Sam pursed his lips. “I should've tried harder to keep calm. It's just with everything that's happened….,”
“You didn't break anybody's face. That's better than I would've done in your position.”

“Yeah, well it might not be enough…. I don't know how we’re supposed to find Lilith with so few hunters.”

“We’ll make more connections. With Tara—and Jody might be able to get us in better with the cops.” Dean chuckled at a thought. “Fuck, I bet Hell has some real Feds on the payroll.”

“I'm just worried about the timing.” Sam rocked Kaylee in an unconscious display of his concern. “Kay and Ruby both bolted downstairs. I'm sure it's nuts down there right now. Who knows what's going on with Heaven…. I wish we had the full list of seals.”

“Cas and Anael are working on it,” Dean replied.

“I'm running up against some unknown deadline and after that I’m stuck in here,” Sam complained, though having the inability to put himself into harm's way had the minor perk of making his moral dilemma moot… as long as Ruby or Dean didn't find themselves in need of rescuing, then he wasn't sure what he'd do.

“You being stuck at home with the kids. That doesn't really sound too far off from what you're looking for.”

“I want to be here because it's my choice and it's not going to hurt anyone. I want to be here because it's the right thing to do, not because I'm helpless. If there's a chance I could've saved someone….” Sam shook his head at the thought, then decided to change to a less bleak subject. “Are you okay? After watching that video of Dyl you just….”

Sam didn't know how to describe the change that had occurred in Dean. There was clearly some degree of embarrassment. Anything related to the concept of love carried a certain amount of awkward weight for Dean. To Sam’s knowledge, the only serious relationship his brother had ever been in had only lasted a few weeks. Suddenly being any bit associated with a committed relationship was probably jarring.

“I knew that Heaven might find out about the other me, but this is like that and more,” Dean confided. “It's like I know it's not exactly my private life being put out there, but just thinking of people talking about it.”

“No one knows it's you.”

“The angels know he’s my kid—or close enough,” Dean corrected. “They know we're both Michael’s vessels. They'll figure it out.”

“Does it really change anything?” Sam asked. “They’re after you anyway, right?”

“It just feels different.”

“What do you mean?”

“His wings are in the video.” Dean grimaced. “I saw them and I felt… I don't know, naked.”

“Why are the wings such a big deal to you? Yeah, it's weird, but what am I not getting?”

“The color gold, it's a Michael thing. So it's also kinda my thing. I don't know, it's hard to explain. Lucifer has his own wing style. I guess Kay’s look like his. So if you want to know what your nonexistent wings look like talk to her,” Dean suggested. “They look completely different than
Sam stared down at Kaylee. It was strange to think that he'd essentially passed on the genetics for wings. More than that, his wing traits were apparently unique to himself, Kay, and Kaylee.

“I can't picture you with those giant gold wings.” Sam tried to lighten the mood. “I mean it looked like Dyl could barely hold them up. You'd get buried.”

“Dyl’s wings aren't all my side, just the color.” Dean paused as he debated whether to say something. “I'm not sure what Michael’s actually look like. Dyl's wing shape is from... the other side.”

“Are... are you hoping his mom will fall?” Sam broached the subject cautiously.

“I'm not about to start dating anyone just because it happened in another timeline.” Dean rejected the idea.

“If you two were in love....”

“I'm not there yet. I'm not ready to be in love.” Dean spoke firmly, then relaxed a bit. “Right now I just want to be able to look at myself in the mirror. I don't want to screw up a good thing by going in while I'm still screwed up.”

“I kind of feel like I'm screwed up,” Sam confessed.

“You're doing great.”

“No, I’m not, not really. I'm scared I'm gonna mess it up with Ruby. She’s just....” He looked over at Dean and pursed his lips in hesitation.

“She's just what?”

“You don't want to hear it.”

“I don't want to hear what?”

“I know you and Ruby don't get along.” Dean opened his mouth to interject, but Sam cut him off. “So I won't gush about her, but... you spent some time with her in 2039, right?”

“Maybe like a day when you put it all together,” Dean confirmed.

“What was she like?”

“You're gonna love this.” Dean chuckled. “The biggest surprise about her: she was my friend.”

“What?”

“The other me and her were like best friends. My head basically exploded when I found out. I didn't have a clue how to handle it.” Some of the amusement that Dean had at the bizarre situation faded into visible regret, punctuated by a sigh. “I was kinda a dick to her and she only ever tried to help me.”

Sam watched Dean slowly processing some sort of loss that he couldn't begin to understand. It was hard to imagine Dean and Ruby getting along let alone being close. The discovery of a friendly Ruby—and the potential for that in their own relationship, only to be returned to an antagonistic relationship must've been disorienting to him. In hindsight, Sam realized that Dean hadn't been
nearly as hostile towards her since returning. He’d even encouraged Sam to pursue a relationship
with her.

“You really warmed up to her, didn't you?” Sam smiled at the thought of his brother actually
getting along with his… maybe-girlfriend?

“In the end, yeah. I wish I could've done things differently.” Dean distracted himself with his beer
bottle while he spoke. “Hell, she wished it could've been different too…. She made me promise to
keep you, Kaylee, and Tom safe.”

“Was she a good mom?”

“She was like a mama bear. Super protective… but not like smothering.” Dean smile at a
memory. “This one time, Tom wanted me to choke him out—”

“What the fuck?”

“Long story,” Dean said, apparently dismissing the tale. “Anyway, I said no because I was scared
she’d just like pop up right behind me and kill me. She was fucking intense when it came to her
kids.”

“Did she love them?” Sam asked.

Dean became quiet and his eyes lowered. For a moment Sam thought that his sad demeanor meant
that she hadn’t loved the kids, then he answered. “No question about it.”

“I don’t get what’s going on between us, her and me. I just don’t get where she’s coming from.”
Sam gently rocked Kaylee. “I know that we have responsibilities, but Kaylee is the biggest
responsibility we have—I have. I thought we were on the same page, that we'd given up the
unnecessary risk taking. Maybe Ruby doesn't feel that?”

“It's a weird time. She probably doesn't know what she feels.”

“She always seems to know what she's doing.” Sam sighed. “She's not like us. She's not an idiot.”

“Speak for yourself.” Dean smirked. “Half my school report cards agree, I'm just a slow learner.”

“Are we adults now?” Sam looked down at his daughter. “All of a sudden we're trying to save the
world, I've got a kid, and we’re having a mature conversation about feelings.”

“End of the world was remotely foreseeable. Us talking about love….” Dean shook his head.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “No offense, but I didn't really expect to ever have love and relationship
talks with you. This whole thing kinda snuck up on me.”

“I don’t know, maybe love normally sneaks up on people.” Dean scratched the back of his neck.
“I mean, otherwise it'd be easy, right?”

“I guess that makes sense,” Sam acknowledged, then turned a bit quiet. “What if she’s like you?
What if she’s not ready for this stuff?”

“Then I guess you wait and see?” Dean shrugged casually, but his eyes seemed to be more than
sympathetically sad at the thought. “You know that no matter what happens, Bobby and I’ll be
around to help you, right?”

“Thanks.”
“Next time you’re planning on changing the game, I’d appreciate a warning instead of finding out about it from Buzzfeed.” Crowley greeted Kay as he opened the door to his office and gestured for her to enter.

She tried to finesse the situation while taking a seat. “We’ve had an unintended complication.”

“So your quiet blonde friend is an angel or the like?” Crowley speculated. “Is it a law of nature that all things involving angels are a pain in the ass?”

“Generally,” Kay admitted. “They are helpful when they’re on our side though.”

“That’ll be the day.”

Kay redirected the conversation away from Dylaniel and to the heart of the issue. “So what’s the damage?”

The archdemon poured himself a glass of scotch before silently offering one to Kay. She eyed the decanter of high-proof, amber liquid. In anticipation of the looming bad news, she nodded, then accepted the beverage.

“Actually, it’s hard to say whether we’re having a net positive or negative.”

“How are we supposed to be benefiting from this?” Kay asked as she sipped the scotch. She could only think of the potential risks. “Pushing the humans that much further into believing in angels—I’m not seeing it right now.”

“The Crossroads has had a 250% increase in offers from humans and the Maji are also experiencing a spike in business as well.” Crowley lifted his glass toasting their fortune.

“The humans aren’t just looking to Heaven?” she mused aloud.

“I’m sure that the goody-goody humans are doubling down on Heaven, but anyone with a slightly more open mind is looking to alternate support.”

It seemed that Heaven didn't have the monopoly on faithful clientele. Unfortunately, Hell was preoccupied with the painful grind of civil war. She could envision the additional workload leading to a state of panic within the Crossroads and Maji castes. The humans were ready to sell them their souls and more, and with the ongoing war, both castes were desperate to take all the inventory they could, but that placed a huge strain on the castes. No wonder Morrison had resorted to calling down Ruby.

“How’re we responding to this?”

“I’ve authorized all Crossroads demons to take whatever meetings they can. We currently have a queue in the seven hundreds.” Crowley nodded at a massive stack of parchment on the corner of his desk.

“Great, we're putting people desperate enough to sell souls on terminal hold,” Kay groaned. “We’re not supposed to torture them until they’re in Hell.”

“We’re processing requests as fast as we can, but the wait is currently seven hours,” Crowley confirmed.

“How’s Morrison handling the increase?”
“He’s asking all the Maji to double or triple up on their covens and other responsibilities until they can get some new blood.”

“He tried to summon Ruby. She’s meeting with him now,” Kay informed Crowley. She knocked back the remainder of her scotch, placed the empty glass on his desk, and stood up. “I should go check on that situation, then I’d like to discuss our long-term storage plans for souls. With this boom in deals we’ll need to be ready for a surplus.”

“The majority of our Crossroads contracts won’t come due for 10 years and the Maji don’t adhere to a specific term of years.”

“All contracts come due upon death,” she replied.

Crowley raised an eyebrow at her point. “You think it’s going to turn on Earth soon?”

“There’s video of an apparent angel discussing the end of the world circulating.” Kay explained. “I doubt that will resonate with the peaceful and reasonable portions of the population.”

“Before you speak to Morrison, there’s something I’d like to discuss. There's talk about Lucifer returning.”

Kay had been worried that that portion of Dylaniel’s pitch to the angels might have made it into the Abyss.

“Most people don't seem to consider it a realistic possibility,” Crowley continued. “But it is alarming to anyone with an ear to the ground and a brain.”

“How bad is it hitting morale?” she asked knowing perfectly well the crowd appeal that Lucifer had with demons generally.

“Luckily, most of our troops aren't terribly faithful to the state church to begin with. The Crossroads unanimously agrees that he'd be bad for business.”

“Our knights are gonna be the real problem,” Kay speculated.

“The few that we have.”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her face while trying to summon enough mental and emotional energy to deal with the problem before it got out of hand. “I’d like to meet with them… individually.”

“Easier to persuade them one-on-one rather than the whole room,” Crowley agreed.

“More like I can kill one knight,” she corrected, earning a look of stunned respect. “I’ve never tried to fight two at once before. Any idea where Joseba and Tora are?”

“They're out quelling some resistance in the Upper Pits.”

“Could you make sure someone notifies me when they return?”

“I certainly don’t want to be the one to broach the subject with them,” Crowley agreed. “Mir is here.”

“I thought he might be.” Kay rubbed the back of her neck. “I’d like to speak with him alone.”
“By all means.” Crowley gestured towards the door to the hall, then added, “It might not be a politically wise time to kill a knight in the heart of the Citadel.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

Kay walked into the throne room and excused everyone except for Mir, then closed the doors. She stood in front of the knight, who remained at attention. Despite not being as tall as the men in her family, she still was half a foot taller than Mir. Rather than looking down on him, she wanted to meet his eyes at an equal level or even give him the psychological advantage. She got down on her knees and stared up at his unreadable, yet somehow comforting eyes.

“The first time I met you, I was scared of you. I was just this little kid and I’d never been to Hell before. You gave me a horse figurine that you'd carved from stone. When I’d come down to visit my dad, you’d let me ride on your shoulders around the Citadel and we’d go on adventures. I’ve watched you be torn apart on more than one occasion trying to protect my family. And when I first took over as queen, after losing my dad, you came over and held my hand while I sat on the throne even though it burned your hand.” She took a moment to collect her composure before continuing.

“I know you’re a good man. I know that you care—not just about Hell, but also about the people in it. Some people might discount you because you don’t speak, but I know you listen more than anyone else in the realm. You’ve heard the whispers about Lucifer.”

Mir nodded slowly.

“I understand that you don’t know me. Maybe what I’m saying sounds insane in a place like this. But I’m going to trust you... and I’m asking you to trust me.”

After a long pause, Mir reached down, took her hand in his and guided her back to the throne. When she sat down, he looked up at the red flowers. A thin smile of contentment spread on his granite face, then he resumed his normal defensive position beside her.

Ruby sat in Morrison’s candle-lit combination-laboratory-and-office. Her eyes drifted around, curiously exploring the workbenches containing his ongoing projects. She couldn't recall the last time she’d visited her archdemon’s office. She couldn't even remember whether her archdemon at the time had been Verity or Bedros. In general she avoided these private meetings. More often than not they ended with either massive assignments or slow disembowelment. She wasn't sure which she’d prefer at that point.

“You've been away without leave for centuries.” Morrison spoke from his seat across his desk from her. He didn't even bother unrolling her file.

“I've been fighting Lilith.” She tried to establish their common and much more important enemy.

“Since before she started her coup.”

“I'm forward-thinking.”

Her reply earned a small smile from him. “I heard what happened to your coven,” he commented while packing a diminutive silver cup with a mixture of crushed crystals.

Her stomach knotted at the thought of all the rumors that might be spreading. Personally, she couldn’t care less what her castemates thought of her, but to the extent it affected her professionally or her coven, that could prove problematic. “How many of the caste know?”

“At this point, nearly everyone.” His eyes glanced up from his work to assess her reaction, so she
tried not to be visibly shaken. “You lost the head of your coven, who was in line to replace him?”

“She’s dead too,” Ruby confessed. “I haven’t figured out who will take over for him.”

“I could merge them with one of mine,” Morrison suggested while holding the cup over a flame, melting the contents.

“Don’t merge them with another coven,” Ruby pleaded. “They’ve been through too much.”

“They need stability and strong leadership—”

“Once they get relocated they can start rebuilding. Their defense specialist, he could lead them.”

“More than half your coven is made up of children.”

“They’ll be powerful. They’ve been raised in the craft. They’ve seen the wrath of Heaven. There’s no doubt in my mind that they’ll defend Hell,” Ruby assured even though she had no way of knowing if it was true. “If you subordinate them to another coven they’ll lose their identity. Yes, they’re in a bad spot now, but they can recover.”

“We’re experiencing something of a revival in the craft. We need more covens and that means having our best step up.” Morrison held the silver cup below his nose and sniffed what was undoubtedly some sort of mind-altering substance. Knowing him, it was probably a mental stimulant as opposed to Crowley's alcohol-based depressants. He studied her for what felt like several minutes. “A wounded coven might not be the wisest investment of your energy.”

“You want me to work other covens?” Ruby asked hesitantly.

“You've never been a producer of souls,” he acknowledged. “Let’s not pretend you were ever going to nurture more than one coven.”

“I worked in agriculture once; it didn't suit me.”

“Yes, you're too much of an inventor.”

“Give me a problem and I’ll solve it,” she replied. “But don’t ask me to harvest souls.”

“Well, you’re in luck. We have plenty of problems.” Morrison held out the silver cup to her, but she shook her head, declining the offer. “Your partner, the former hunter, how much does he listen to you?”

She stared at Morrison, suddenly even more wary of their meeting than she had been before. Sam hadn't even crossed her mind as a possible topic of discussion. She was the one who’d violated her topside pass, not once, but twice in a row. It was her coven in disarray. He had nothing to do with them.

In a quiet, wary voice she asked, “What do you want from him?”

“The Council knows you two have a child. I can't begin to articulate how important it would be for our people to learn how to reproduce—”

Her voice turned harsher. “What do you want from him?” She already had ideas.

“For him to visit Hell—just a visit,” Morrison assured her. “I'd like to examine him, run some tests —nothing too invasive.”
“No.”

“I don't think you understand—”

“I'm not gonna coerce him into becoming a science experiment.” Ruby crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Morrison stared at her while sighing, then said, “I know you haven't been around Hell in a long time, but I'm archdemon of your caste. You should show me some respect.”

“Morrison, I have a huge amount of respect for you,” she replied. “I always have. It's because you bust your ass and you're one of the sharpest guys in Hell. But don't expect me to start begging on my knees when we're in private.”

“Are you trying to make me punish you?” he asked, mildly exasperated.

“You need me,” Ruby warned. “You're not dumb enough to risk losing your one shot at our people’s reproduction. Not to mention, you know that I’m visdemon material. Fuck, you’re lucky I didn’t lobby for the spot of arch. You’re not gonna play games with one of your best assets.”

“It doesn’t matter how smart you are. If you don’t produce results how can you be one of my best?”

Ruby scowled at him. She didn't have anything to offer him aside from reassurances of future cooperation. He waited for her answer, knowing perfectly well that she didn't have a good retort.

“Sam's rattled. This whole thing has left him in bad shape. I'm trying to help him, but it's just a lot to go through. Eventually, if it looks like he might be open to it, I'll talk to him, but I'm not tricking or forcing him into anything.” Ruby offered that concession as a sign of cooperation, then added, “And no one touches our daughter.”

“What if I went topside?”

“You're not touching her.” Ruby didn't budge. Sam was an adult; he could make his own decisions. Kaylee was too vulnerable. Anyway it was practically a moot point. Sam would probably flay anyone who got too close to his daughter. “Go feel up your queen, but stay the fuck away from my kid.”

Morrison considered her rejection of his ideas. She could see him losing his patience with her. Honestly she couldn't blame him. It was shit like this that had always kept her from pursuing a place in the caste hierarchy.

“I'm torn. You see, I don't know how to use you at this point.” He finally explained his current conflict. “You've always produced spells and artifacts that were of the highest quality, but maybe that's not what we need from you right now.”

She leaned forward at the suggestion that her true skill with the craft wasn't sufficiently valuable. “You're in a war with Lilith—maybe with Heaven soon—and you don't think I should be helping arm us?”

“Now you have a sense of duty to Hell?”

“I have a sense of self-preservation.” She tried not to look at him like he was an idiot. “And if Kay and you all really are reforming, then yeah, maybe I could get behind the realm.”
“You want to help our realm?” Morrison asked rhetorically. “Maybe you would be most helpful tending to the child?”

Ruby blinked at him in confusion while processing his suggestion. Yes, she hadn’t been playing for team Hell over the past few years, but it wasn’t as though she’d been sitting on the sidelines. She was a master of the craft and he was suggesting that she not be utilized to her full potential during the literal end of the world.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Until we understand how the child came about, preserving her safety is of the utmost priority.”

“I want to keep her safe, believe me, but I can do more than nurse a baby. I’m a kick-ass witch and an experienced Maji—”

“Will you let me send a detail to care for her and protect her?”

Once again the thought of Sam fighting to keep Kaylee from falling into questionable hands made her stomach knot. Ruby shook her head.

The archdemon raised his hands in a small shrug. “Then you're unique in your position.”

“I'm more than just her mom,” Ruby argued, though some of the wind had been taken out of her sails. “I can design and fight—”

“No. I don’t want you getting into the middle of this war,” he stated firmly. “You can't risk your life.”

“I'm in the middle of it already.”

“Then pull back.”

“They need me.” She was starting to panic at the thought that without her in the field and with so few people in their core group, Sam might have to step up his own involvement in the kinds of dangerous situations he’d been so desperate to avoid. “I've been fighting with them every step—”

“You're a Maji. Act like it,” Morrison snapped. “We aren’t one of the soldier castes. We are technical and willful support. Don’t think that just because you haven't gotten yourself killed yet means that you have some right to be on the battlefield.”

“Please, Morrison you know me,” she pleaded. “You have to believe that I can do more, that I can fight—”

“No, I don't. I haven't seen you in decades. I barely know who you are anymore. The situation has changed so much. We have to change too.” He shook his head. “And the fact of the matter is that I don't trust you.”

Kay knocked on the door to Morrison’s office before entering. Ruby was seated at his desk with a strangely dejected expression on her face. Kay could sense a faint combination of disappointment and shame radiating off Ruby, but she wasn't sure whether it was appropriate to start a fight with an archdemon without knowing the context.

“Crowley brought me up to speed on the uptick in business.” Kay tried to keep the tone professional. “I see you're tapping all your resources. What's the game plan for Ruby?”
“More of the same, but slightly more house arrest,” Morrison explained. “It's not wise to gamble with anomalies.”

“I'm a person,” Ruby muttered.

“You're a demon,” the archdemon replied.

Kay’s eyes to narrow slightly at his dismissive tone. “Morrison, don’t undercut progress.”

“Don't narrowly define progress,” he countered, earning an unamused downward curl of the lip from Kay.

“Ruby, would you give Morrison and me some time to speak in private?” When Ruby didn't move, Kay took a step closer and said, “How about you go upstairs and I'll see what Morrison and I can work out?”

“Before you return to Earth,” Morrison added before Ruby could leave. “Stop by the High Reliquary and Athenaeum. Bring yourself up to speed on our works. It's been too long since you've been home.”

“I only left enough milk for my daughter for a few hours.” Kay could hear the resentment in Ruby’s voice.

“Cover what you can this trip, then come back later,” Morrison suggested. “I'm not unreasonable…. Unless you'd like to bring her with you.”

“I'll be back when I can.” Ruby stood up, then looked back to Morrison. “Alone.”

“I'm just thinking about the good of the caste and our species.”

Ruby gave a small nod of acknowledgement to Kay as she exited the room. Kay approached the chair Ruby had been occupying. Despite not being entirely thrilled with Morrison’s handling of the situation, she wanted to maintain some semblance of professionalism and didn't take the liberty of occupying the vacant seat.

“May I sit?”

Morrison gestured from her to the chair. “Certainly.”

“I'm going to be straight with you,” Kay told him. “I know that when it comes right down to it you're one of the decent ones down here, so I'm going to try to work with you however I can—but what the fuck was that with Ruby?”

“The Maji are in a crisis right now and I need to reevaluate how we’re operating. That includes reassessing all of our outliers,” he answered in a frustratingly diplomatic way that mirrored her own public bullshit.

“I don't want you threatening her.”

“Is that nepotism I hear?”

“It's many things, pragmatism being one of the biggest.” Kay corrected him. “She works best without constraints. If you want to get the most out of her, you'll give her resources instead of restrictions.”

“I'm having her review the collective knowledge of our entire caste. That's giving her a resource
she hasn't accessed in ages,” he replied. “If she didn’t spend so much time on Earth she'd be on the cutting edge.”

“With full respect, she is a cutting edge, just one that is distinct from the primary one.”

“I'm not a Torquen. We don't hammer down the nail that sticks out,” Morrison assured her. “I just need to know that she's willing to carry her load for the good of our people. In her case, that just might not be your stereotypical Maji work—or at least our recent works.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Millennia ago, my caste headed the efforts to ensure the independent survival of our species and we failed. Now we're facing some foreboding end and there's a small glimmer of hope.” He recounted an all too familiar scenario. “Ruby, her partner, her daughter, your survival—it's all a priority of the caste, the realm.”

“I don't want you tampering with their lives.”

“I suspected you might feel that way, but I'm not sure we have many options.” Morrison shifted nervously below his shell at her subtle invitation by omission. “May I speak with you about a sensitive matter?”

Kay telekinetically locked the door. “Go ahead.”

“Are you fertile?”

His question wasn't wholly unexpected, though she had been hoping it wouldn't come up for several years. She debated deflecting the topic, but that would almost certainly put more pressure back on the others. Also, it wasn't exactly the same as her previous predicament, at least considerably fewer people were about to be concerned with her uterus.

“I need you to keep this confidential.”

“Of course.”

“I've been pregnant twice that I know of.” She spoke with a clinical neutrality. “But miscarried both times.”

“I see.” Morrison nodded. The concern growing inside him worried her. “What species was the father? Human or demon?”

“I don't know for sure for one of the times. I had several partners back then, none were demon. The other time the father was a kitsune.”

“It may have been a problem with compatibility,” he suggested hopefully. “Have you tried conceiving with a demon?”

“I've had sex with demons, but I was trying to avoid getting pregnant at the time,” Kay answered, then decided to stem any suggestions that might be forming in Morrison’s head about the immediate future. “I’m a little preoccupied with the war to be thinking about having a child.”

“With respect, we’ve never had an opportunity for something like this before.”

“I've spent over a decade of my life facing the implications of my situation. I acknowledge its importance, but it is not my favorite subject. I don't want my power to be based on my ability to
reproduce. I want my power to be based on my ability to rule.” She straightened in her seat, attempting to convey her years of leadership experience. “Give me time to secure Hell on something more than sex and I’ll willingly work towards our people’s reproductive future. Just give me some leeway for the moment and turn your attention away from Ruby and her family.”

“I want your respect in front of the other archdemons,” Morrison added to his demands.

“Even when we disagree, you always have my respect.”

When Kay and Ruby eventually returned to the bunker a few hours later, Sam could tell something was… if not wrong, then at least not fantastic. Kay gave him a cautionary look from over Ruby’s shoulder. Ruby’s normal lightheartedness had been replaced by visible annoyance.

“Is everything okay?” Sam asked, probing for insight.

“I'm gonna have to run down a few more times in order to make nice with Morrison.” Ruby picked up Kaylee. “Asshole had the nerve to say I wasn't doing enough. I get that I'm not a team player and it's busy down there, but if he thinks he can push me around….”

“He's mostly bark with very little bites,” Kay told them. “Don't let him get to you. He's just trying to figure out the limits of his power and how the upswing in business affects his responsibilities.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Hell’s business is up?”

“Yeah. My whole fucking caste is buried in want-to-be-witches,” Ruby complained.

“You're going to be working with new witches?”

“No. Morrison's gonna leave me to special duties, but everyone else is in panic mode. You'd think the damn reliquary had been sacked with all the relics that had been checked out,” Ruby muttered to herself more than anyone else as Kaylee started whimpering. “I'll take care of this. Dealing with her shit isn't so bad after taking it from an arch.”

After Ruby had left the parlor, Sam asked Kay, “How'd it go down there for her?”

“Looks like Dyl and I aren't the only ones with homework. She's not about to do any team building exercises, but her caste wants better communication on her end. It's rare that a demon goes off the grid as long as she did.”

“Do they want to punish her?”

“They want to utilize her,” Kay assured him. “She's a huge resource. The question is what makes sense and whether she'll go along with it. Right now she's stuck playing nice while I try to get some pressure off her.”

“Can I do anything?”

Sam’s offer gave Kay some pause, but she recovered fast enough that it wasn’t too concerning.

“Not so much at this point,” Kay answered. “You can't make penance for her—or at least not in a way that anyone would like.”

“What do you mean?”

“Penance….” Kay thought about how to explain her statement. “A standard form of penance in
“Hell is self-flagellation—don't worry. She's not doing that.” Seeing his concerned expression she said, “I shouldn't have brought it up. I was gonna make a dumb joke, but it didn’t really come together.”

“A joke about self-flagellation?”

“I don't know, something about you having enough scars. Like I said dumb.” Kay spotted Sam unconsciously scratching at the scars wrapping around his wrists, then added as an apology, “Sorry about mentioning them. The itching mostly goes away after a year or so.”

“It’s okay, and I know. These might be the big ones, but they aren't my first.” Sam looked at them with renewed thoughtfulness. When he glanced back up at Kay he considered the sizable scar on her right cheek. “I thought angels could heal injuries.”

“Most injuries. This one—” She dragged her finger along her own scar. “It was done by a Knight of Hell. Their damage can only be magically healed by Lucifer, Michael, or God.”

“Does it bother you?” He immediately regretted making it sound like she had anything to be embarrassed about. “Sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s fine. It used to bother me, but it hasn’t in a long time…. Scars can be really important reminders if you let them. Tangible hard fought lessons staring you back in the mirror every morning.”

“What's the lesson there?”

She thought a moment before saying, “Choices have consequences.”

“Sounds like the lesson of most scars,” he commented, causing her to chuckle and nod. “What happened?”

“My uncle—Dean, got in a real bad jam. My dad and Cas got in it deep trying to save him. A few of us had to go get them out of it.” Kay shook her head at the memory. “You want a better lesson? Don't wear warded cuffs.”

“What are warded cuffs?” Sam furrowed his brow trying to imagine such a thing.

“Handcuffs with an enchantment that blocks the wearer from casting spells or using powers. I'm sure there's a pair or two around here somewhere.” When he started looking around the room she continued, “You probably don't want to play with them too much though.”

“Were you wearing some?”

“No. My dad was,” she replied. “He basically couldn't fight with the damned things on.”

“I know I've been using powers more when I fight lately, but I like to think I can still handle myself without them if I need to,” Sam said in his own defense.

“To be fair, my dad was still handcuffed and unarmed in the middle of a really big brawl.”

“Yeah, okay.” He conceded that. “As a general rule I try not to fight with my hands tied behind my back.”

“His hands were cuffed in front of him.”

“Oh, well that should’ve been fine,” he joked, earning a small smile.
“Hey, Sam.” Jody poked her head into the parlor. “I might’ve found something.”

“Neither of you got a vision of this one?” Dean asked while using the rear view mirror to help him adjust his tie.

“Nothing,” Sam confirmed. “Jody caught a red flag on police chatter.”

There were reports of an unusual triple homicide. Two women and a man had been stabbed to death an hour or so earlier. One of the women had a carving on her forehead. That sort of treatment to a body was customary for the conflict between Lucian and Lilith's forces, but this was different. Only one body had been desecrated and it hadn't been positioned in a traditional fashion. Since the crime scene was only a forty-minute drive from the bunker, they decided to investigate.

“As far as I know we don't have anyone in a hundred miles. Based on what we have translated of the seals list so far, there shouldn’t be anything in this area,” Kay added with a shrug, then fidgeted with her suit jacket. “I look like a Crosser.”

“Crosser?”

“Crossroads demon.”

“Yeah, well, in this time you look like a Fed,” Dean assured her.

Sam turned around to face Kay, who was in the back seat of the borrowed Hornet, then asked her, “Have you ever impersonated a Fed or authority before?”

“For all practical purposes, there wasn't a Fed after I turned ten or so,” Kay answered. “Anyway, why would I need to impersonate an authority figure? I am one.”

“Slightly different,” Dean replied. “Feds can't just kill people—”

“Debatable,” Sam corrected cynically.

“Okay. It's frowned upon—civil rights and paperwork or something.”

“I'm not gonna start killing civilians, for no good reason,” Kay said defensively.

“Try the sentence again without the qualification,” Sam suggested.

“You were busting Dyl's ass for not knowing stuff about our time. Now it's your turn to learn about how boring human things work,” Dean instructed. “Just follow our lead. You're here to observe and give us a different perspective on everything.”

They opted to leave Dylaniel at the bunker rather than risking someone identify him from the videos. He didn't seem to mind skipping the investigation, especially after he had found out that the crime scene was at a major hub for human commerce, a shopping mall. Sam and Dean were both secretly grateful that they didn't have to be on guard for the nephilim's cultural misunderstandings.

Kay turned out to be more than enough of a complication. Despite her willingness to fully cooperate by following them, she did run into a few hiccups. Among other things, her nearly falling while stepping onto and off of the escalator was thankfully missed by the crowd of people trying to sneak a peek at the crime scene. At least she was quick on the draw when it came to flashing their fake badges as they were shown to the lead investigator.
“Can you tell us what happened?” Dean took the lead on the questioning while Sam scanned the scene for any telltale signs of anything inhuman.

“Triple homicide: two there—” The cop pointed toward two sheet-covered bodies about thirty feet away. “—and another on the other side of that bench.”

“Anyone get a look at the attacker?”

“Attackers, three… well, two.” The cop rubbed the back of his neck. “We've got a dozen witnesses saying that three men were chasing the woman. She's the one past the bench. They were running after her, two with knives, one without.”

“Are the other victims any of the attackers?” Sam asked without bothering to take his eyes off the location of the bodies.

“No. They're rescuers…. Well, they wish.” The cop shook his head. “Anyway, a group of people from the sporting goods store across the way grabbed bats and stuff to scare the guys off. It didn't go too well for them. The attackers killed two of the rescuers, killed the woman, cut up her face, then left. I’ve heard rumors about ritual killing or what have you, but this is just weird.”

“You said one of the attackers was unarmed. Did they do anything while the other two were fighting?” Dean asked.

“No. Apparently the guy just stood there and watched. Dammit—excuse me for a minute,” the cop said before hurrying over to a group of reporters setting up cameras on the periphery.

Once the cop was out of earshot, Dean mused asked, “Okay, working on the theory that we aren’t dealing with human variety nutjobs, what doesn’t fight in a fight?”

“Upper management,” Kay replied.

“Cute. I was thinking more like witches or demons—”

“These weren't demons,” Sam stated.

“How can you tell?”

“It doesn't feel like demons.” Sam tilted his head in a move reminiscent of an innocent shrug. “There’s like an aura about demons.”

“Yes, there isn't a gram of sulfur in this place,” Kay agreed with Sam’s assessment.

“One of these days you're gonna have to tell me everything you can do,” Dean said while pointing at Sam, then turned to point at Kay also.

They walked over to the bodies of the two would-be-rescuers. A crime scene tech was crouched between the corpses checking her camera’s settings. When she noticed them approaching, she gestured for them to take a longer path around to her in order to avoid several blood drops which had been marked for entry into evidence.

“I've never seen anything like this,” the tech told them when they were closer. “Look at these wounds.”

She put on a fresh rubber glove, then pulled back one of the victim's shirt. It was a three-sided stab wound. Unseen by the tech, Dean rolled his eyes, then mouthed ‘awesome’ to Sam and Kay. Sam
sent the tech off on the nearly impossible errand of trying to determine the probable chain of custody for all the evidence before it was even done being collected. With the immediate area cleared, they spoke more candidly.

“Why are angels killing humans?” Dean whispered.

“In my time, lots of reasons. In this time….” Kay’s lips thinned. “I mean, it’s not like these two are affiliated with you all?”

“No, they probably really are just two good samaritans and she's the one we care about,” Sam suggested. “After what they did to the coven, angels literally going overkill doesn't sound too far off.”

They strolled over to investigate the body of woman who had been fleeing. There were defensive wounds on her hands and her white dress was partially torn along one side. On her forehead was carved a symbol that wasn't either Lilith or Lucian’s sigil. Sam knelt down beside her to confirm the wound in her chest was made with an angel blade.

“It's Enochian,” Kay observed aloud, pointing at the carving. “I can't read it.”

“I guess you really should've studied Enochian,” Dean commented, earning an unamused look from Kay.

“Dyl or Cas should be able to read it no problem. We’ll just grab a photo. If there’s one lesson from today it’s that all your phones have cameras,” she added, then chewed on her lower lip as she gave the symbol another look. “It seems familiar though… I've seen it somewhere before, like in reports.”

“Do angels cut foreheads?” Sam asked.

“In my time everyone cut foreheads if you hated the other person enough, but yeah, angels have been known to cut foreheads.”

“So who is she and why was Heaven after her?”

Sam stood up and noticed a smear of black powder on the lower portion of his pants. He took a step back to get a better view of the floor. The carpet was a dizzying pattern of dark grey and indigo blue in the vague shape of leaves. Hidden among the streaks of dark colors was the faint image of wings made from black ash.

“Holy shit. It’s started,” Kay exhaled, seeing the wings too. “The Enochian, I think it's ‘fallen.’”

When they returned to the bunker, Dyaniel confirmed that the forehead carving designated the woman as a fallen angel. It only took a few seconds for Sam and Dyaniel to connect the discovery of a newly fallen angel with the news articles earlier in the day concerned surprise meteor showers. There was a slight flurry of activity as Bobby, Jody, Sam and Ruby had to split their research efforts from exclusively looking for Lilith’s demons to also looking for fallen angels. Kay contacted Crowley to bring him up to speed on the new development. Dyaniel offered to help with research, but it quickly became clear that his lack of experience using the internet left his contribution minimal.

“Do you guys have the angel hunt under control?” Dean asked as he entered the library where the research team was working. He was reading something on his smartphone and didn’t bother waiting for an answer before explaining. “We’ve got some more hunters wanting to meet up about
the search for Lilith. If a few of us can break away for an hour or so, we might be able to get more of the hunter base covered.”

“It’d probably be better if I pass,” Sam commented. “After last time, I don’t think I’d be much help. The rumors about me spread further than we’d thought. It might be easier to make nice for the moment, then clue them into me and the whole alliance with demons thing later.”

“With this angel shit, I’m gonna stay here and see if I can help coordinate between our research and reports from the Abyss.” Kay shot down the invitation, then glanced around to make sure that Ruby was temporarily out of the room. “Also Ruby’s probably a few poorly chosen words from putting a hunter through a wall.”

“As a potential wall-piercing victim, I’m in favor of her skipping this field trip,” Dean agreed.

“I can take you. At least then I’ll be of some use,” Dyaniel said, shaking his head at the laptop he’d been using. “Your internet has an obscene amount of pronography in it. If this is what you’re using instead of archives, I don’t know how anyone accomplished anything in this time.”

“We’re excellent multitaskers,” Dean replied.

“Not everyone uses the internet for porn,” Sam assured the nephilim.

“Hey, that’s what the internet was made for,” Dean said, then remembered Dyaniel wasn’t familiar enough with history to tell if he was serious or not. “That was a joke.”

“That’s somewhat comforting.” Dyaniel got up and Dean walked with him back to his bedroom to gather his equipment.

“You sure about going?” Dean asked after Dyaniel stretched in a surprisingly human showing of fatigue. “I could probably get Cas to—”

“Getting the list of seals fully translated is a top priority right now.”

“Should you be helping with that instead?”

“They aren’t translating text. It’s Anael’s knowledge. I don’t have the telepathic sophistication for that. Simply putting the knowledge into a format that I could utilize would slow them down.” Dyaniel put on his dual hip holsters. “Anyway, I don’t want to spend an extended amount of time alone with Cas, and maybe Anael.”

“Why not?”

“He looks at me the wrong way,” Dyaniel commented as he picked up his sheathed sword. Dean felt such a profound pity at the thought that he almost missed when Dyaniel asked, “Hunters in this time won’t mind my sword, will they?”

“If they do, then tough shit for them,” Dean replied while trying to feign a lighthearted smile.

He suspected that Dyaniel treated his weapons almost as a security blanket, so the sight of the nephilim fully armed felt strangely comforting. It may have been his imagination, but Dyaniel seemed to relax ever so slightly after donning his back scabbard.

Dyaniel teleported them to the alley next to the office building picked out for the meeting. Dean led him around to the back side of the building, where an old hunter acquaintance, Ray, was waiting to let them into the rear entrance. Ray approached them while nodding in greeting. The
cold evening air made Dean and Ray pull their coats tighter, but Dylaniel barely reacted. The hunter stared at Dylaniel for a few seconds trying to place the feeling of familiarity.

“You're the one from that video?” Ray rubbed his mouth in nearly anxious surprise.

Dylaniel attempted to quell that potential conversation before it began by turning past Ray and starting to walk toward the back door of the building while replying, “Yes.”

“Hey, wait,” Ray said as he reached toward Dyanningel, but Dean intercepted the contact.

The last thing they needed was for Dylaniel to reflexively break the hunter’s arm.

“He doesn't like to be touched,” Dean warned as Dylaniel looked back over his shoulder.

“Sorry, fuck,” Ray muttered while taking a step back.

“Are we waiting on anybody or are we good to go?” Dean asked.

“We're waiting on some more.” Ray took a cigarette out of his pocket and put it in his mouth. He moved a few steps away from them while he lit his cigarette, then dropped the lighter to the ground. A ring of flame spread out to surrounded Dean and Dylaniel. Dean didn’t even have to look at Dylaniel to know that it was fueled by holy oil.

Ray grinned at them and goaded, “You two have no idea—”

Dylaniel shot him in the forehead.

“How much time—” Dean began asking, but Dylaniel’s eyes flashed blue.

Dylaniel pulled off his jacket and tried to throw it over the flames of the circle, but the heat was too intense for him to get close. Dean took the leather jacket from him, then knelt down to try it himself, unhindered by any angelic properties that might’ve been affected by the burning holy oil. Before he could break the circle, over two dozen angels appeared in front of them. Dylanel fired three shots at the blockers standing in the back of the group, but a more powerful angel toward the front stopped the bullets telekinetically, dropping the small piece of metal to the ground.

“How many bullets do you have left?” one of the angels asked with a smile. “How many of us do you expect to kill?”

“I have twenty bullets and I expect to kill all twenty-six of you,” Dylaniel answered. He holstered his pistols, then drew his sword.

Following Dylaniel’s lead, Dean grabbed his angel blade. He knew exactly how impossible the odds of the fight were, yet somehow Dylaniel was maintaining enough composure to be the most menacing person around despite being trapped. Dean tried to find some sort of comfort and confidence in that.

“Those are big claims from such a low creature,” an angel replied.

“If I'm such a low creature, then how about you fight me one-on-one?” Dylaniel suggested. “Or would you prefer to prove your superiority thirteen-on-one?”

“You're a killer of angels,” the angel hissed.

“And how many of your honored siblings have killed angels?”
“You brought war!”

“No. I brought the abstention from war.”

“Bold words. How long do you think it will take before one of your hands summons Michael’s blade? Michael really could stop this war before it begins. I assume one of you knows where Lucifer’s vessel is hiding.” The angel smiled at Dylaniel and Dean’s silence. “You don’t want to talk now?”

A single angel appeared ten feet in front Dylaniel. Dean didn't recognize the vessel at first, but the way Dylaniel tensed made his sinking feeling worse. He’d seen the newcomer’s cold expression and commanding presence before… in India.

“Drop your weapons,” Raphael demanded.

“Make me,” Dylaniel snarled as he stepped between Dean and the archangel.

Dean watched the holy fire, knowing that it was the only thing delaying the fight. The ring could have been carefully measured to make it burn only for a limited time, just as they had done in the church. He wasn't sure what the minimum possible duration was, but he did know that their temporary protection wasn't really bringing them any closer to a rescue. The others probably wouldn't be expecting them back for an hour or more.

“I would prefer to take you both alive.” Raphael drew his blade, then slowly raised it as the flames began shrinking. “But I only actually need one of you.”

As soon as the flames broke, the archangel charged at Dylaniel, who parried the strike. Rather than proceeding forward with a counterattack, Dylaniel stepped backwards towards Dean. As he moved, Dylaniel swung a broad, horizontal slice to their right to help clear some space for a retreat to the backdoor of the nearby building. Inside the more confined space the greater numbers of the angels wouldn't have as much of an advantage.

One of the angels charged at Dylaniel, who dodged and swiftly cut the attacker in half diagonally through the chest. The sight made Dean feel like he might throw up, but his adrenaline kept him on his feet and moving. Two more angels ran at them. Dylaniel cut one's throat, then clipped the second one’s leg, causing her to stumble at Dean, who stabbed her in the chest.

Raphael waved off the others and instead indicated for them to merely cut off possible exits. He took a few quick steps to close the distance, striking at Dylaniel several times in rapid succession. Dylaniel deflected the hits. On the last strike, Dylaniel blocked the attack, then sidestepped while forcing his sword forward. He landed a deep cut to Raphael's shoulder, but suffered a lesser wound himself.

Drawing his weapon back, Dylaniel started slicing through the side of Raphael's chest, but he wasn't fast enough. He was thrown back into the brick wall. Fighting against the unseen force, he peeled himself from the wall and slowly started walking back to Raphael.

The archangel scowled at the surprising display of angelic will, then hurried to meet him. Raphael tried to stab at Dylaniel’s chest, but a last moment dodge placed the hit to the pocket of his shoulder. The nephilim kicked off of Raphael's torso, pulling himself from the blade. Dean tried to get to him, but he was busy, struggling to keep several angels at bay.

Another hit landed on Dylaniel, but it was too low for him to get much leverage against Raphael. Instead Dylaniel grabbed the minimal hilt of Raphael's blade and held it as he stumbled backward.
The blade was yanked from the archangel's hand in a slightly demoralizing gesture. When Raphael grabbed his temporarily lost blade, Dylaniel swung his sword up attempting to cut him in half. But Raphael recoiled, only suffering a significant cut from his groin to his mid-torso.

Blood and intestines spilled from Raphael's injury as his offhand attempted to hold his vessel together. His face was no longer painted with disgust. It was splattered with gore and rage. He raised his angel blade up to forming storm clouds. A bolt of lightning struck him, then was redirected forward.

Dean flinched at the gesture, expecting to be electrocuted. Instead he heard the flapping of wings. For a split second he hoped that it was the sound of the cavalry arriving, but it wasn't.

Dylaniel's massive golden wings were extended in front of him, blocking him from Raphael. He could smell burnt flesh and saw a dozen bloodied golden feathers drop to the ground. There was the sound of more metal on metal, then Dean saw an angel blade pierce all the way through Dylaniel's torso twice, one after the other. Dylaniel swayed and tried to lift his sword, but dropped it instead.

Raphael struck Dylaniel backward. Dean barely managed to duck out of the way. There was a loud snap when the nephilim's right wing hit the asphalt and brick wall. His left wing hung awkwardly over him, pulled down by its own weight. The sight of the mangled golden wings gave all of the angels pause for just a moment.

In the moment of collective shock, Dean picked up Dylaniel's sword off the ground, then scrambled to defend him from the archangel. He held the unfamiliar weapon with a combination of fear and wrath. Part of him wanted to check on Dylaniel, but he didn't risk taking his eyes off Raphael.

“The real Michaelsword,” Raphael said with clear satisfaction. “Your disappearance was worrying, but at least you delivered yourself in one piece. Michael will want to speak with you. If you drop the weapon I won't harm you.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Dean gripped the sword tighter, raising it.

“Fine. I don't have any qualms bringing you to Michael in need of some repair.”

The archangel moved forward to grab Dean, who swung the saber. Raphael dodged the attack and struck Dean with the back of his blade, knocking him to the asphalt. The strong impact caused Dean to hit his head as he rolled across the ground. For a second he couldn't tell which way was up, then he shifted onto his back and held up the sword defensively. The other angels moved in from the edges and he had no idea how he was supposed to protect himself let alone Dylaniel.

The way Dylaniel's wings had ended up positioned left him somewhat obscured from view. Watching Dean being obviously outmatched he knew how desperate the situation was. If Dean died or if Raphael got ahold of either of them, Michael would have a vessel or at least a head start. Dylaniel dipped his finger into one of the wounds on his chest. He took the blood and began drawing on the thigh of his grey pants.

Dean was swinging wildly, trying to keep the angels back when there was a flash of brilliant white light. As his eyes refocused, he realized all the angels were gone. Dean hastily crawled over to check on Dylaniel, but he was unconscious. For several panicked seconds Dean couldn't find a pulse and when he did, it was very weak. There was some sort of sigil written in blood on Dylaniel's pants. He'd done something to get rid of the angels.
Dean sat for a second in complete panic, watching the blood drip from Dylaniel's multiple injuries. He apply pressure as best he could and tried desperately to pray to Castiel. In an instant Castiel was standing beside him. Castiel looked down at the injured nephilim’s massive wings and his eyes widened.
Fallout

They teleported directly to the bunker's entry room. Dean hastily tried to apply pressure to Dylaniel's wounds without crushing his wings any more than they already were. Sam was the only person still researching in the library when they appeared, but he immediately got up and ran over to help. Castiel stood several feet back, staring at Dylaniel.

"Cas, heal him!" Dean yelled.

"I-I can't," Castiel said through his shock. "I am not a high enough choir."

"Find Kay! Get her here now!" Dean barely finished before Castiel disappeared.

“What’s the worst?” Sam asked, as he started looking for the most critical injuries.

“Don’t know. At least two through-and-through.”

Sam helped apply pressure to two of the stab wounds, but that wasn't nearly enough. He tried applying pressure using telekinesis, which only slowed the bleeding. For a second he thought about exerting more power, but he was scared of accidentally breaking Dylaniel's ribs.

Dylaniel's massive wings shuddered, knocking several books off the shelves and a laptop onto the floor. Dean nearly lost his footing, not entirely conscious of the fact that he was standing on a wing. Dylaniel started convulsed briefly before he began coughing up blood.

"Towards me," Dean said, then they carefully rolled Dylaniel onto his side while maintaining pressure. “Dyl, it's okay. Just cough it up if you need to—”

"Dyl!" Kay cried out after teleporting into the room, then hurried to kneel beside him. With a quick glance at the wounds she looked to Dean. "Who did it?"

"Raphael."

The news made her face flicker with something bordering on defeat. A disheartening moment passed while she tried to figure out what to do.

"Cas, move him to room 14," Kay instructed, then she teleported somewhere else.

As soon as Castiel and Dylaniel had disappeared, Dean and Sam both scrambled to their feet and started running. Sam almost slipped on the blood and loose feathers on the hardwood floor, but caught himself. They ran to the bedroom where Dylaniel had been placed on the twin bed in the center of the room. His wings covered the floor on both sides of him and leaned up against the walls, though the right one seemed to have one too many bends in it.

Kay appeared next to them with her arms full of first aid supplies. She hastily unloaded the supplies on Sam before she rushed over to her cousin. Her hands cupped his cheeks as she tried to make him look at her.

“Dyl, can you put your wings away?”

He barely shuddered in response and his eyes wouldn't focus on her.

“Fuck it! Just get over here and help me with this!” Kay yelled at Dean and Sam. “If we break his wings, we can heal it, but not if he dies.”
“Does anyone hear a lung?” Sam asked as he hit Dylaniel with some morphine.

“Dyl, come on. Deep breath,” Kay encouraged him while Sam grabbed a needle just in case.

Everyone listened closely as Dylaniel took a labored breath, but there wasn’t any ominous sucking noise, crackling, or gasping.

They cut off all his clothes except for his underwear in order to take a quick inventory of the wounds, then started working. Sam began with a stab wound near his right clavicle. Dean took a wound ominously close to his liver. Kay worked on one in his lower left abdomen. The wounds were so deep that both Dean and Kay had to cut wider openings to suture the interior. They were all furiously working when Dylaniel started trembling.

“Hey Dyl, keep it together. We're getting you.” Kay spoke reassuringly. “You're fine. It’s no worse than Memphis. We’ll get you patched up in no time.”


“Dyl, we need you to not talk,” she told him. “Just try not to move. You gotta take it easy.”

“I… I ca… I…”

“Dean,” Kay whispered. “Call him Dylan and tell him to hold still.”

Dean felt a sickening chill. She wanted him to pretend to be Dee. The thought of taking advantage of Dylaniel's confused state by impersonating his dead dad felt beyond fucked up—but if it stood a chance of working he'd do it.

“Dylan, I-I need you to hold still while we patch you up, okay?”

Even with Dean's voice breaking, the message seemed to get through. Dylaniel closed his eyes, but his head nodded almost imperceptibly.

After patching the shoulder wound, Sam moved on to a deep cut in Dylaniel's arm. Kay switched to another gash on his side. They worked as a group to turn him onto his side in order to suture the wounds on his back. By the time they got the last stitches in place all of their hands were covered in blood up to the wrists and the bed looked half-soaked through.

“What the hell is that?” Kay asked.

Thin pink lines in a pattern like shattering glass started forming across Dylaniel's otherwise too pale skin.

“It looks like electrical burns, Sam suggested. “Did he get shocked?”

“Yeah,” Dean answered, but he was distracted checking for a pulse.

He tugged slightly on the leather cord of a necklace in order to make sure that there wasn’t any tightness around Dylaniel’s neck, then tried to place two fingers on his jugular. When he couldn’t get a decent angle on the vein, Dean circled around the bed to get a better position.

His attempt to move quickly was somewhat hindered by them standing on Dylaniel’s tattered wings. Dean slipped on the combination of feathers and blood, forcing him to jerk suddenly to keep from falling down. The sudden motion of his foot and the weight of his body yanked a few feathers loose. He was briefly horrified at the realization of what he’d just done, but looking down
at the floor he saw that a significant number of the nephilim’s feathers had already been burnt, bloodied, or were pulled out in the chaos.

“Dyl?” When he didn’t react to Kay’s voice she tried slapping the side of his face gently, but that didn't wake him.

“He's alive,” Dean said, after moving to a better position and finding the weak, fast pulse.

“What's his blood type?” Sam asked.

“AB Negative, but I think straight human blood messes up nephilim,” Kay replied.

“How much does it mess them up? Like sick or lethal?”

“I don't know.”

“Has he ever had a transfusion before?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Kay shouted, then took a deep breath. “We don’t do combat together.”

“What about that—Memphis or whatever you said. He was hurt bad. What’d you do then?” Sam asked, trying to spur some sort of insight.

“Triage and passed him off to the professionals.” Kay shook her head. “Dyl's the nephilim expert. He's the one who knows how to deal with this kind of stuff.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Dean asked.

“Something creative.”

Dean turned to see that Castiel had been standing in the doorway helplessly watching the scene unfold. He had no idea what to say, but he needed to say something. When he started toward the angel, Castiel abruptly turned and began walking down the hall.

"Cas, wait!"

Dean hurried after Castiel, catching up to him after turning two corners. He put a hand on Castiel's arm, but the angel jerked away. After a moment's pause, he spun around, grabbed Dean by his shirt and pinned him to the wall. Castiel leaned in so that his face was only a couple inches from Dean's.

"You knew that he was my son and you didn't tell me!" Castiel growled through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know how to—"

Castiel loosened his hold just long enough to slam Dean into the wall again. "If I had known I could have done something." Castiel's grip tightened, causing Dean's eyes to water. He released Dean, who dropped to the concrete floor. "He shouldn’t have fought Raphael. He is not strong enough to defeat him."

Dean clutched his aching head and looked up at Castiel. "What?"

"I'm from too low of a choir. He's weak because of me." Castiel's voice lost some of its anger, but he was clearly still upset. He turned from Dean and paced slightly, trying to process the situation. After shaking his head Castiel looked back at Dean with a crushing mixture of confusion and
disapproval. "I don't understand. You are Michael's vessel and you harmed your line—I harmed your line…. You should have picked a stronger partner. He can't win against Raphael and I can't do anything to save him. This should never have happened. We were fools."

Castiel was criticizing Dee and Cas for having a kid. Dean knew that they weren’t in a relationship, but he was still surprised how much Castiel’s words hurt him. He didn’t want to marry Castiel and have a family with him, yet someday he might want to have a family, maybe with an angel—maybe under very different circumstances with Castiel. But in that moment, it felt like Castiel couldn’t even understand what family meant. He couldn't understand valuing a person or a relationship over a tactical decision. So a choice that had been made out of love was just a mistake to him.

In a way Dean pited him. Castiel was lost in a strange new world and he’d just found out that the other him had had a child in a relationship that he considered taboo—Dean felt like an idiot. He'd been in almost the exact same situation back in 2039. This hurt he was feeling was just a small measure of what Dylaniel, Kay, and the others must’ve felt when he’d freaked out.

"Cas, the other us, his parents, they didn't have him so that he could be a soldier.” Dean tried to explain. “He's not something to be optimized. He's just their kid."

"He's not just a child. He's a death sentence,” Castiel said in frustration. “I'm already damned, but Heaven would have spared you."

"No, they wouldn't." Dean staggered to his feet. He hesitated to touch Castiel, worried that he might be thrown back into the wall. "They were already after me and even if they weren't, it's not his fault for being born. Please don't be mad at him."

"We’re fools in this time too.” Castiel took a step back, away Dean. “For very different reasons.”

Dean cautiously moved a bit towards Castiel, who backed away from him. “Wait, don’t—"

“He's not what you led me to believe. I trusted you, more than anyone.” Castiel turned from him. “I need to think.”

“Ca—” Dean couldn't even get the word out before the angel was gone.

He looked down at the blood on his clothes and hands, then slid back down the wall to sit on the hallway floor. It was too much. A few tears escaped him as he struggled to think of what to do. Dylaniel was fighting for his life and Castiel had just walked out on them. They weren't his family, but they were something to him, something important.

Now that he wasn't focusing on stitching wounds, Sam noticed the half a dozen tattoos on Dylaniel’s upper body. Most of them appeared only decorative or symbolic, but one was definitely a magical tattoo. Dylaniel had the same teardrop shaped tattoo that Sam on his own chest. There was no doubt in his mind that the other Ruby had put it there.

“That’s a healing tattoo. It runs on magic,” Sam started to explain, though Kay was instantly on the same page as him.

“Get Ruby,” Kay instructed as she placed her hands on Dylaniel's tattoo, but Sam was already running out the door in search of the tattoo’s creator.

It took him less than a minute to find Ruby and enlist her. She had been writing notes in her improvised workshop, but stopped what she was doing as soon as she saw the blood on Sam’s
clothes. He brought her up to speed as they ran through the halls back to Dylaniel's room. When they got there, Kay was holding her hands over the healing tattoo, channeling a basic spell. Ruby blinked her eyes black and looked the nephilim over.

"I don’t know how to read half this stuff," Ruby said as she studied him. "The healing ward is working on these wounds here, the deep stabbing damage. But there's some weird haze I've never seen and the ward isn't touching whatever these burns are."

Ruby traced her hands over the fractal pink lines emanating from three points on Dylaniel’s torso. Her fingers followed one branch of the scarring up to where it overlapped the healing tattoo.

"Those are high voltage shocks," Kay explained.

"How’d he get shocked?" Ruby asked while examining the skin for blistering.

"Lightning." Kay’s answer drew a sidelong glance from Ruby. "Raphael can wield electricity."

"'Wield'—good to know." Ruby chewed her lip. "Great, so we have no clue how much he got hit with. One sec."

Ruby disappeared, then reappeared a few seconds later with a metal box. When she opened it, Sam and Kay could see a tattooing needle and several vials of ink. She immediately got to work on a clear stretch of skin along his left ribs.

"I’m placing another ward. The burns could keep getting worse and damage the original one. He’s got some innate power running it, but there's not much and I don't want him tapping out. Someone go grab a witch to help boost him until I can get this new one in place."

Sam grabbed the first witch he could find, then returned to watch Ruby work. It was surreal watching her place the same tattoo that she'd put on him roughly a year ago. She had a speed and comfort with the craft that brought home her centuries of experience. But it was the job that she hadn't done yet that struck Sam. The other Ruby had placed the ward on Dylaniel. She'd protected Dean's son.

"Sam." Ruby spoke without looking up from her work. "I've got a little more to do, but I told Bobby and Jody I'd take Kaylee off their hands a while ago. You want to make sure the home front is okay?"

"I've got it," Sam acknowledged, then turned to Kay. "I'll be back once I check on them."

"I'm not sure what else we can do. You can get some rest—" Kay started to let him off the hook.

He didn't want her to be alone. "I'll be back, okay?" he told her, earning a nod of understanding.

After explaining the situation to Bobby and Jody and making sure that Kaylee was alright, Sam went to go find a bathroom to clean himself up. He was walking through the corridors and turned the corner to see Tom heading his way. Tom’s eyes widened and he started hyperventilating, then fell weakly to his knees. It took Sam a moment to remember that he was covered in blood.

"No-no, Tommy. It's okay. I'm not hurt."

The sight had to be terrifying for the young boy, independent of the memories of Gabin’s death that it was likely triggering. He wanted to comfort Tom, but he didn't want to make the situation worse by getting blood on him. Tom had curled up, clutching his legs to his chest, crying. Sam knelt down to be closer to Tom, but he was scared to touch him.
“We aren’t in danger,” he said in an attempt to reassure the boy, then yelled for help. “Can we get a little help over here!”

His shout for help drew Ruby from around the corner. She was carrying the tattooing kit, though she dropped it when she saw Tom’s state and knelt down to check on him.

“It's the blood,” Sam explained. “Can you…” He gestured at Tom. “I need to get it off of me.”

“Hey, Tommy. I'm here.” Ruby sat down on the floor beside the boy and pulled him to her. He closed his eyes tightly as he clung to her. His breathing was fast and chaotic, struggling to calm down. “We’re fine. Sam’s fine. He's just gonna go wash up and you'll see that he's fine. You need to get control of your breathing, okay?”

Sam rushed to one of the bathrooms and started washing his hands and arms. Looking in the mirror for the first time, he could see why Tom had been so upset. His shirt had large stains across the chest and blood was smeared on his face where he'd wiped his brow when he was sewing up Dylaniel.

He went to his room and looked around for a clean shirt. In his haste, he tossed the bloody shirt onto the desk. For a split second he glanced back to see the blood soaked clothes next to his daughter’s crib. It nearly broke him. He gripped the back of the desk’s chair for a moment to stop his knees from buckling.

Over the years there had been a lot of fights with a few close calls. But in that moment all he could think was that it could've been him. He could've been with them and who was he to Raphael? He was disposal at best or despised at worst.

He tossed the shirt in the trash can before hurrying back to Tom and Ruby.

“See, I'm okay,” Sam said as he knelt down next to Tom and Ruby.

Tom released Ruby in order to embrace Sam. “Please don't die,” he begged.

“I'm not going to die.” Sam’s stomach churned at the statement. He couldn't tell if that was a lie or just some oversimplification to comfort a traumatized kid.

After taking a few minutes to calm down, Tom asked, “Why was there so much blood?” His voice was less frantic, though he was obviously still concerned.

“One of our friends got hurt and I was helping patch his wounds,” Sam answered.

“Is he gonna be okay?”

“I hope so.”

“How'd he get hurt?”

“He got in a fight with a bully.”

“Was the bully an angel?”

Sam hesitated a bit at Tom’s question. There was a real concern that another horrific moment related to angels would cause an even worse association in the boy’s mind, but he couldn’t bring himself to lie.

“Yes.”
“He's gonna die,” Tom whispered.

“Listen to me. Angels are tough, but that doesn't mean that they always win,” Sam said as he gently rubbed Tom’s back in reassurance.

“Hey, Tommy. It's getting pretty late and I could use some help putting Kaylee down for bed. Want to give me a hand?” Ruby attempted to start moving Tom away from uncomfortable encounter. She took the boy’s hand, gently drawing him into a standing position, then spoke quietly to Sam. “Go check on Dyl and Kay.”

“Thanks.”

“Just remember that eventually you’ll need some sleep too.”

Dean found Kay sitting next to Dylaniel, holding his hand. She was speaking to him softly, but her voice traveled just enough that Dean could overhear her from the doorway.

“You've gotta get yourself back together. We need you. I need you. You're the strong one. You could always walk the line, a foot on each side and never trip. I can't do that. I'm buried up to my eyes in Hell and I don't want to lose sight of Earth.... You're all I have left. There's this whole world full of people and it doesn't feel real, you know? But you're real....” Kay wiped her eyes while huffing a laugh. “My dorky little pain-in-the-ass cousin. If you don't wake up soon, I'm gonna hug you.”

The threat reminded Dean of his own relationship with Sam. He hoped that someday he'd be comfortable enough with Kay and Dylaniel that he could be so vulnerable and benignly teasing with them. He felt more at ease with Kay, though in the last day or so he'd started growing closer to Dylaniel. There was something about becoming more accepting of himself that made it easier to accept the nephilim... but just when real ground was being made, this had happened.

Kay looked over her shoulder and spotted him by the door. She wiped her eyes again, but to his surprise it wasn't a hasty embarrassed gesture.

“I'm sorry,” Dean said as he entered the room and took a seat on the opposite side of the injured nephilim. “I didn't mean to eavesdrop.”

“I wasn't exactly whispering.”

For the first time Dean noticed, hidden among the random tattoos, a small block of text on the upper left of Dylaniel's chest. It listed off various pieces of information, some of which he couldn't decipher. Top of the list was an alphanumeric code. Below that was a field labeled ‘Drop’ and what looked like coordinates for some location. Next was ‘Blood: n.AB-,’ then ‘Donor: Blacklist.’ Last was ‘Disp/Rites: Strip & Pyre.’

Around Dylaniel's neck was the black leather cord of a necklace. Dean slipped it over Dylaniel’s head, revealing the pendant, which had fallen below him early in the chaos. For some reason he'd expected it to be dog tags, but it wasn't. It was the same necklace that Dean was wearing, the one that Sam had given him as a child, one of Dean's most treasured possessions. But unlike his there was another addition, a wedding ring. On the outside it was a nondescript gold band. Inside the band was a small engraving that read ‘From here until the end.’ He'd seen Dee’s ring. It had been silver, which meant that he was holding Cas’s wedding ring.

Staring at the pendant and the ring shook Dean. Somehow they had found themselves so far from the world Dylaniel had grown up in. They'd tried to change their future and in just a few days
they'd turned everything on its head. Dylaniel had mentioned the theory that some moments in time carried more weight, pulling causality into their gravity, making them harder to escape. If time really was so stubborn maybe they'd pushed it too far too fast?

He hated to imagine something like karma biting them in the ass. No. It wasn't fate; it was the natural course of conflict. They had pushed Heaven and in its desperation Heaven had pushed back when they weren't prepared. They'd taken bold and unprecedented action at the suggestion of Kay and Dylaniel because that was a normal response for their time. But this time was still young and no one knew how to wage a war, let alone how to prevent one.

He wasn't ready to be the kind of person that that world had demanded. He wasn't ready to be like the other Dean. Maybe someday he could be a leader. Maybe someday he could be in love and have a kid or two. But in that moment, looking down at the last tangible remnants of such a dangerous risk as love…. He couldn't believe that he was strong enough yet to carry that responsibility. After all, his cowardice had just betrayed Castiel and left them without a powerful asset in a dire time.

"Why does he have his wings out?" Kay asked quietly, interrupting his troubled thoughts. She looked exhausted. "He knows better than to fight like that."

"He didn't have them out most of the fight. Only when Raphael used the lightning." Dean swallowed hard. "He was trying to protect me."

"Classic Dyl."

"I'm sorry."

She didn’t acknowledge his expression of sympathy, which somehow made the situation worse. Instead she got up, stretched, and looked around the room.

"We should cut down his feathers." She spoke at barely more than a whisper as she started picking up the feathers that had been pulled out in the chaos. "So that we don't accidentally pull anymore of them out at the base."

"Will he be able to fly?" Dean had no idea if nephilim wings were any bit functional or just an aesthetic embellishment.

"If we're careful, we should be able to heal it… but we might want to have a non-vessel do it just to be extra safe," Kay suggested. "The last thing we need is for the act of us using clippers to constitute an attack in the capacity of our arch-vesselness."

Bobby and Jody were fetched and brought up to speed on Dylaniel's status. Bobby took the right wing while Jody took the left. Before Jody started, she brushed a few loose strands of hair out of Dylaniel's face. Dean knew that she'd had a son die a few years earlier. Maybe that's the sort of thing Dee would've done if he was here? It was hard to imagine what Dee would do because surely it would’ve been the right thing.

"I can't watch this," Kay said at the spectacle of the wings being trimmed down, then stepped into the hall.

Dean followed her after nodding reassurance to Bobby to keep going.

"This is…." Kay struggled to find the words to articulate what the moment meant. "If we were home, the angels would riot. It's not just cutting wings. It's Dyl's wings."
“If you don’t think it makes sense we can stop.”

“It does. It’s just… He's gonna be so pissed.”

“If he's alive to be angry, that's still a win,” Dean told her in an attempt at a positive spin.

“We can't tell anyone we cut his wings.” Kay spoke almost to herself.

“Who would we tell?”

“I don't know which angels we’re gonna be dealing with after this whole thing, but they can't find out about this. The more secretive we can be with this the better.”

“He just put himself in the spotlight with the angels,” Dean pointed out.

“He’s been maimed.” Her voice broke with emotion. “We’re maiming him.”

“It’s temporary.”

“Gods I hope so.” She exhaled the sentiment.

Dean pulled her into a hug, which she accepted after a moment of stressed confusion. He could feel her soften a bit, to his relief. After a few second he let her go and they both leaned against either side of the doorjamb.

“What do you want to bet Raphael and those angels are telling all of Heaven he’s dead?” Dean commented.

“They probably are,” Kay agreed. “I guess Raph’s gonna be real fucking surprised when Dyl kills him.”

“I want to be there to see that.”

They stood in the doorway watching Bobby and Jody work. Dylaniel was somewhat stable, thanks to the new magical tattoo. There was a surreal calm to the moment. The fury of activity had passed and now they were entering the exhausting waiting phase. Somewhere between shock and recovery, they were starting to process thoughts, if not emotions. Dean hated that stage of a crisis. It was always so disorienting.

“What the hell happened out there?” Kay began searching for facts to piece together a fuller picture.

“It was a trap,” Dean replied. “Ray, one of the hunters, had some holy oil laid down and got us in it. Within seconds there were two dozen angels and then Raphael was there.”

“I can't believe Raphael was on Earth.” She shook her head in disbelief. “It's been like a week tops. He didn't touch down for years in our time.”

“This time around we’ve got time travel, nephilim, and angels falling in just a few days,” Dean reminded her.

“And two dozen dead angels.”

“I can't really blame them for bringing out the big guns,” Dean admitted. “Heaven's already tapping hunters.”
“How much do the hunters know? How much intel are we losing?”

“They know we're looking for the seals and Lilith.”

“Yeah, well Heaven knows where and what the seals are already,” Kay groaned, then cracked her neck. “Any apocalypse-hungry asshole with a halo is gonna be two steps ahead of us and laying traps. What do they know about Lilith?”

“Nothing special through us.” Dean relayed the one good piece of news. “Bobby and I were playing that one close to the chest until we figured out how much to talk about Sam’s situation with her.”

“If we can't safely hunt her through the seals, that just leaves finding her through chance or working through her inner circle.”

“The angels have to be thinking of looking for her crew too.”

“But they don't know who her lieutenants are,” Kay speculated. “We only know because we have the intel from Hell and the future timeline. Anyway, how's Heaven supposed to pick out Lilith's demons from our own? At least we can disregard half the demons on Earth.”

“I guess that’s something,” Dean conceded. “But I don’t know how we’re supposed to be enough…. Are you gonna keep sending demons to defend seals? If Heaven shows up your guys’ll be wiped out.”

“We don't have a choice.”

“And Hell’s gonna be cool with sending its people to die?”

“No. But I don't see a lot of options.”

Dean sighed. “Those angels better start falling faster.”

When Sam eventually got back to his bedroom, he took a moment to appreciate the calm. Kaylee was dozing in her crib. Tom was sleeping on what had unofficially become his side of the bed. Ruby was lying in the middle of the bed with a pensive expression on her face. When she noticed Sam in the doorway she gingerly climbed out of the bed in order to not wake Tom.

“How’s Dyl?” she whispered as they moved into the hall.

“I don’t know what to think. You saw him.”

“He seems like a tough kid.”

“He’s lost so much blood. Who knows if we even got half the internal….?” Sam chewed his lip. “It was awful. I’ve never seen it that bad.”

“You gonna be okay?”

“Maybe never again.” Sam leaned his head back against the wall and rubbed his face with both hands. “He looks so much like Dean. When we were younger there was a hunt. I was seventeen so Dean must’ve been about Dyl’s age. Dean got sliced up by a spirit….?”

“You had some flashbacks?”
“I’d just forgotten and seeing Dyl… it brought it all back. I just felt so helpless again.” Sam looked through the doorway at the sleeping six-year-old. “Is Tom okay?”

“It took him awhile to calm down, but I think he’ll be fine.”

Sam let out a long, pained breath. “God, I wish he hadn’t seen that.”

He hated the thought of being a party to reviving trauma in Tom. Less than a week ago, the boy had watched as his dad was killed. Now after starting to bond with Sam, he’d seen his semi-guadian in such an alarming state. It’d taken Sam months to recover from his own dad’s death, and his dad’s death had been both less violent and had taken place when he was much older than Tom. He couldn’t imagine what the reopened wound must’ve felt like when it was so fresh.

Sam was so caught up thinking about the incident in the hallway that he didn’t notice the tense look on Ruby’s face until she pulled the bedroom door to nearly closed.

“I’m gonna send the coven to their new camp as soon as I can arrange transportation and give Pascoe some direction.” Ruby spoke quietly, but with determination.

He felt completely blindsided by the statement. “What? You’re sending them away?”

“They can’t stay cooped up in here.”

“They’re safe here,” he argued.

“But we’re not safe and they’re with us. They don’t need this kind of exposure,” she countered.

“Putting them out there on their own is its own kind of exposure.” Sam gestured in some random direction to indicate the outside world. “We can’t just send them away.”

“Sam, just fucking trust me on this!”

Ruby had spoken a little louder than she’d probably intended. She took a breath, then peeked back into the bedroom to make sure that Tom was still sleeping. Sam stared at her while they waited to see if either of the children had been woken up. The silence stretched in a painfully awkward way. He didn’t even know how to respond and she seemed equally shaken by the conflict.

“Pascoe’s gonna take lead on the coven,” she finally continued. “If they don’t get settled, Morrison is gonna take them over and they’ll go… I don’t even know.”

“But they’re your….” He felt a little weird trying to describe the relationship between Ruby and her surviving coven. In a way they were almost like family to her, especially considering their history. The thought that someone else could interfere in that dynamic was unsettling. With all the informality and warmth between Ruby and her coven, he’d forgotten that there was an underlying contractual aspect to their setup.

“They need to have some stability,” she stated firmly.

“What… what about Tom?” Sam asked knowing perfectly well that he didn’t have any sort of clear parental or guardian relationship with the boy. Maybe someday it could be possible, but it was too soon and he knew it wasn’t his place to say where or how Tom would live in defiance of Ruby or the coven as a community.

“Sam….” He could tell from her voice and almost pitying expression that she was starting to sense his anticipatory loss.
His lip quivered slightly as he tried to articulate the collision of reason and feelings swirling in him, then softly said, “You know how he's been with us.”

“Yeah, but I don't want him to be around when one of us gets dragged back in bleeding.” She paused a moment to let him imagine the scenario. “You saw him. He's been through enough.”

Sam closed his eyes, nearly grimacing at the thought of putting Tom through any trauma. After a few seconds, he nodded, opened his eyes, then whispered, “You're right.”

“It's not like you’ll never see the coven again.”

“Don't jinx it.”

“You just misused a technical term,” she replied.

He tilted his head and gave her a weak half-smirk in acknowledgment of her attempt to lighten the mood. Ruby tried to take his hand, but noticed that he was holding a piece of bloody fabric. She tapped on the back of his hand and nodded at the cloth, bringing it back to his attention.

“Kay found this while they were cleaning up the feathers and mess. There was a sigil or something on Dyl’s pants. Any thoughts?” Sam handed it to her.

Ruby looked at the symbol and cringed. “Cas showed it to us a few days ago. It’s supposed to banish angels back to Heaven.”

“So, what’s it do to half-angels?”

“I don’t know, but I’m guessing he’s broke in ways stitches and the dark arts can’t fix,” Ruby speculated, then glanced back up at Sam. “Where’s Cas?”

Sam found Dean sitting alone in the parlor closest to Dylaniel’s room. The elder Winchester was leaning against a bookcase, face buried in his hands. It looked like he’d also needed a short reprieve from the bloody and depressing scene. If Sam felt concerned for Dylaniel, he couldn't even imagine what Dean must be feeling.

He entered the room, then cautiously asked, “Do you know where Castiel is?”

Dean didn’t move for a few seconds, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly before answering. “He's gone.”

“What? Where'd he go?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

Sam knew that Castiel hadn’t been able to heal Dylaniel, but that didn’t mean he was useless. They were in a desperate state and the guys had abruptly up and left. “How could he just leave now? We need all the help we can get.”

“He's pissed at me. He…” Dean hesitated and didn't meet Sam’s eyes. He briefly pursed his lips, then explained, “Cas is Dyl's other parent. He just figured it out.”

Sam stared at Dean. It’d almost certainly been days since Dean had found out. They'd been working together and living under the same roof and Dean had just been sitting on that information.

“You and Cas? Why didn't you say anything?”
“I didn't want to make a big scene.”

“He just walked out. How does the scene get any bigger?”

“Shut up.” Dean looked up at Sam, clearly frustrated and defeated. “I didn't say I made the right decision.”

“Wait.” Sam’s eyes widened. “If Cas was Dyl’s mom, you two were….”

They'd barely gotten comfortable talking about love in the abstract, but to face a practical scenario was that much harder. He was trying to figure out how to word the question when Dean cut him off.

“Don't! Don't start that,” Dean said, shaking his finger at Sam for a second before regaining some control over his fragile emotional state. “I'm not in love with Cas. The guy practically beat me up before taking off. He doesn't care about Dyl. He just doesn't….”

“But….” Sam was going to say something to defend Castiel, but he hadn't seen the interaction. The truth was that he barely knew the angel or any of the interpersonal dynamics between the three of them. The only thing he knew for certain was the pained expression on Dean's face. “I'm sorry things have been hard for you.”

“I've been trying, but it's all so fucking confusing with everything that's going on.”

“I'm sure you're still in shock from the fight and what happened to Dyl.”

“Even before that I was—I'm so fucking embarrassed.” Dean shook his head. “God, how fucked up am I? Dyl's going through this shit and I'm feeling sorry for myself over this guys thing.”

“Guys thing’?”

As soon as Sam asked the question, Dean froze and his face lost all color. There was a strange silence between them. Sam looked around to see if something had happened, like Castiel walking by the doorway or Kay arriving to deliver bad news, but there wasn’t. Dean was caught up on a thought or something that had been said.

Sam raised an eyebrow, then asked, “What's going on?”

“I've been…. The other me and Cas.” Dean swallowed hard, then took a deep breath. “Cas was a guy.”

“Yeah, Cas is a guy now, but he was—becomes—well, would've become….” Sam wasn’t sure why Dyl's mom having previously been a man would be such a big deal to Dean. They'd never spoken about dating transwomen, but if Cas had wholly changed bodies, then Sam couldn't see any reason why Dean would get worked up at all. “Cas is Dyl's mom though, right?”

“Cas was only a woman for like nine months or whatever. The other me married a guy.” Dean was blushing.

“I didn't know you were…..”” Sam wasn’t sure how to categorize Dean.

“I haven't been—I mean, I didn't know I'm something. I hadn't really thought about it… much, until I talked to the other me.” His posture recoiled inward defensively. “I don't know what I'm doing.”
“I’m sure this is confus—”

“I kissed a guy the other night,” Dean interjected hastily in the verbal equivalent of yanking off a bandaid.

“You know that’s fine, right?”

“I liked it.”

Sam actually smiled. “That’s still fine.”

“I’m kinda freaked out with everything that’s going on. Dyl’s hurt. Everything’s speeding up with the seals. Cas left—I’m not in love with him or anything, but—I don’t know. That’s such a fucking shitshow. Then there’s this other guy that I kinda want to see again. And Pascoe keeps hitting on me,” Dean rambled. “Jesus, I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“Hey, sit down. Take a deep breath. You’re fine.” Sam helped his dazed brother to a chair at one of the tables, while he replayed Dean's comments in his head. “Pascoe's hitting on you?”

“Yeah. The guy's all about big men.” Dean took a calming breath, then added, “Heads up, Sammy. He checks you out like half the time you’re in the same room.”

Sam furrowed his brow before asking, “He knows I’m with Ruby, right?”

“Yeah. You two having a kid was kinda a red flag.” Dean rested his elbows on the table and rested his face in the palms of his hands. “I don't even know where to begin. I mean, like, I still feel weird saying it.”

“Does it make it more or less weird if I told you I’ve kissed a guy?” Sam could feel himself blush slightly.

Dean didn’t lift his head, but he did peek through his fingers. “You're kidding?”

“I tried some stuff with a friend in college, but I wasn't really into it.” He had to consciously stop himself from physically reacting to the awkward memories. The last thing he wanted was to convey any discomfort or judgment. He looked at Dean with more seriousness. “This isn't some getting-back-at-dad thing, right?”

“You mean like you fucking a demon?” Dean gave an embarrassed little laugh.

“Low blow.”

“Sorry, it was a joke.” Dean held up his hands apologetically. “Bad joke. I know you two are solid.”

“Look, I'm not trying to be dismissive. I just want to make sure you've thought through what's happening with you.”

He hadn’t exactly had the most sincere intentions during his college fling, but the other Dean hadn’t had a fling. The guy had been married or at least in a relationship for long enough to have a twenty-one year old son. The question was whether this Dean was taking a self-aware path or frantically tumbling through a complete emotional breakdown.

“I think there's always been something, but I couldn't bring myself to look at it.” Dean huffed out a short sigh. “There were maybe times when I felt something was off—different. It was just easier
to pretend that part wasn't real.”

Sam was struck with a profound sympathy. The way Dean was talking about it reminded him of his own childhood. For as long as Sam could remember he'd felt like there was something wrong with him, that he was corrupted. In hindsight, he'd probably been feeling his Abyssal nature. But he'd suppressed that side of him in an attempt to be some ‘better’ person. Only recently had he started accepting that piece of him.

Dean had on some level faced his own identity crisis and tried to bury it. Sam didn't need to guess why Dean might grow up repressed. He knew perfectly well that growing up there were certain expectations placed on them. Dean had always tried to be what everyone wanted from him, for better or worse. Now he was struggling just to be himself.

“You don't ever have to put on an act or keep secrets from me,” Sam assured him.

“I know I fucked things up, but I didn't mean to. I didn't know how to....” While he was talking, Dean leaned over in his chair and grabbed a bottle of whiskey and a glass from a nearby cabinet. “I know you aren't like Dad, that you wouldn't…. I'm sorry, man. I shouldn't—”

Sam reached out and gently grabbed Dean’s arm. Dean didn't look up at him, but he stopped trying to uncork the bottle of alcohol. Sam took the bottle from him, then moved it out of his reach. Dean’s hands opened and closed, unsure how to preoccupy themselves in that awkward moment.

“Dean…. I know we’ve had some problems in the past, but you're my brother and no matter what I'm here for you. I don't care who you date as long as you're happy.”

“I don't know what I'm doing.”

“Welcome to the club,” Sam replied, earning a chuckle from Dean.

“I know it sounds dumb…. I think I was scared. I think I'm still....”

Sam pulled Dean into a hug. “Welcome to the club.” Dean let out another fatigued laugh, but Sam felt a few tears soak into the shoulder of his shirt. After a few seconds, Sam broke the silence. “I've got to ask, when did you find the time to go on a date?”

Dean pulled back from the hug and gave Sam a soft punch in the arm.

With a little help from Morrison, Ruby managed to prepare a site-to-site jump for all of the coven members. Dean, Sam, and Ruby were there to see the coven off. Dean and Pascoe initially shook hands, but Pascoe pulled him into a surprise hug. Sam spotted Pascoe whisper in Dean's ear and slip a paper into Dean's back jeans pocket. When Dean was released there was a distinct pinkness to his ears. After Dean retreated a bit, Pascoe shook Sam's hand, then gave Ruby a polite hug.

“The place should be completely stocked and ready for you all,” Ruby advised the new head of the coven. “Call if you need anything.”

“We'll try not to bother you, but obviously you're always welcome,” Pascoe assured her.

“Aren't you and the baby coming?” Tom asked as he stepped away from the rest of the coven, toward Sam and Ruby.

“I'm sorry, Tommy, but we can't go with you right now,” Ruby explained. “There's some stuff that we have to do before we can relax.”
“If there’s stuff to do, I don't want to relax either. I want to help,” Tom objected. He looked around at the adults, who weren’t making any moves to support his side. A bit more frantically, he went to stand with Sam and Ruby. “I don't want to go…. I want to stay with you.”

“Come here.” Sam handed off Kaylee to Ruby, then knelt down and hugged Tom. “I know you want to stay, but at the camp you’ll be able to go outside and play with the other kids. You’ll be away from all the scary stuff.”

“You two and the baby could come with me.” Tom gripped Sam’s shirt. “You should be away from the scary stuff too.”

“I want to, I really do, but Ruby and I need to do some stuff to make sure you're safe.”

“Let me help. I don't need to play.”

Sam could feel the boy shaking his head at the prospect of being sent away. He gently pulled Tom from the hug so that they could look at each other eye-to-eye.

“Tommy, someday when you get older you're going to do all sorts of incredible things and help so many people, but you should try to stay a kid for as long as you can. Ruby and me, we both grew up too fast and we don't want you to have to go through that.”

“But what if I don't see you again?” Tom asked meekly.

“I’ll come and visit you,” Sam assured him, though Tom looked up to Ruby expectantly.

“We’ll come and visit you,” she corrected.

“And when we're done fixing things, I'll bring the baby and stay with the coven,” Sam added. His heart felt strangely hopeful and pained by the thought.

Tom loosed his grip on Sam’s shirt ever so slightly. “And then I can help you?”

“Yeah. Kaylee and I will go live with the coven.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Tom reached into the pocket of his sweatshirt and pulled out a little doll that was made out of strips of braided cloth. It reminded Sam of the little stick-and-yarn person Tom had made him almost a year earlier, which had been abandoned at Bobby's house.

“I was making it for the baby.” Tom held it out to Sam. “It was gonna be bigger. She can play with it when I can't play with her.”

Sam took the doll. “Thank you.”

“I tried to make it soft.”

“It’s perfect.” Sam gave Tom another hug, too overwhelmed by the gift to express himself any other way. “We’ll come visit you soon.”

“Hey, Tommy. I’ve got some important coven business that I'm entrusting to you,” Ruby said when Sam finally let him go. She spoke to the boy with a tone of respect that made his eyes light up a little bit. “I need you to help Belda get the other kids settled. Then, once you're feeling up to
“it, I want you to start apprenticing under Pascoe—”

Sam noticed Pascoe's eyes widened in mild alarm at the unforeseen charge.

“I'm gonna be an apprentice?!” Tom asked excitedly. “But I'm not even ten!”

“I know you're young—and I'm not saying you get to skip your normal lessons, but I think you can start learning the basics of the craft,” she told him. “Can you do that for me?”

“Yes. I can.” Tom nodded solemnly.

“And when Sam and I visit you, we want a tour,” Ruby added to the boy’s short list of responsibilities. “I’ll want to know all the fun stuff to do and cool things to see.”

“I can do that,” Tom assured her. “I’ll find all the fun stuff for you.”

After the coven left, Ruby went to go double-check their magical communication link to the camp and Sam took Kaylee back to the bedroom. He passed by Dylaniel’s room, where Dean and Kay anxiously hovered, uncertain of what else they could do. He walked through the halls, which had suddenly become silent and still without the commotion of a dozen or so children from the coven echoing down the corridors. He sang a soft lullaby to Kaylee in the otherwise lifeless bedroom before placing her in the crib. Then he lay down in the bed that seemed too large for just one person, even a person as tall as himself. Sam turned the little cloth doll over in his hands a few times before resting it on his chest and trying to fall asleep.

After saying goodbye to the witches, Dean returned to Dylaniel's room to check on him and Kay. Dyaniel's status appeared to be unchanged. Ruby's new tattoo was maintaining some degree of life support, if not minor healing. It was hard to say if his color had improved at all, though his new bandages didn't have nearly as much fresh blood and assorted drainage.

Kay was seated in a small desk chair to Dylaniel's right. She was leaning forward slightly, hold his hand. Her eyes were closed and she was whispering—actually, she seemed to be praying. He gave her a minute to finish before fully entering the room.

“I didn't really picture you as the praying type,” Dean said.

“Prayer helps angels recover from injuries. I have no idea if it works for nephilim or not, but at this point I’m willing to try anything.” Kay held up what looked like a piece of Dyaniel’s pants. It had the bloody symbol on it. “Ruby says it’s an angelic weapon. He sent all the angels in the area back to Heaven. We don’t know what it did to him.”

“You don’t think…..” He couldn’t imagine what having half of yourself being banished did to someone.

“His wings didn’t fall off,” Kay said halfheartedly. “I don’t know, maybe he’ll be fine. I just…."

“He was awake after it happened,” Dean reminded her as he took a seat opposite Kay. “I mean, he listened to us. That's got to be a good sign.”

They sat in silence for what felt like a long time. After a while Kay touched Dyaniel's arm, then reached up and rested the back of her hand against his forehead.

“Does he feel warm to you?” Kay asked, promptly Dean to check.
“I don’t know…. Not really.”

Dean eyed her. He wasn’t sure when the last time she’d slept was and the stress of the moment had to be affecting her in ways that he couldn’t imagine. It was hard to say whether she was being excessively or justifiably cautious.

“When he was a baby and he got the fever. It… it was rough,” she said in an attempt to explain her concern.

“He got a fever?” he asked, confused by why a common symptom of illness would be noteworthy.

“The fever,” she corrected, then remembered her audience. “All nephilim get the fever. It’s like when their immune systems are trying to figure out how everything works together. The best I can figure is their angel side and human side don’t get along.”

“Nephilim get sick? I thought they were tougher than humans.” The only angelic illness he’d ever heard of was becoming emotional, so he’d just assumed angelic creatures operated on a completely different level.

“The ones who made it usually ended up tougher than humans.”

Dean’s stomach dropped. “Made it?”

“A lot more nephilim die when they’re kids than humans. The fever’s the big illness for them.”

“It’s lethal?”

Dean suddenly had a newfound appreciation for all of the parents of nephilim back in 2039. Not only had they voluntarily put themselves on Heaven’s bad side, but they went into parenthood with high infant mortality rates.

“We didn't know it when Dyl had it. He was the first,” Kay explained. “I mean it was scary, but we didn't realize…."

“Do nephilim ever get it as adults?”

“Not that I know of, but Dyl…. He was messing around with his grace. I just don’t know what to expect.” Kay shook her head. “Fuck, I hope he doesn’t get sick.”

“He’s a fighter,” he replied.

She nodded in acknowledgement of the point, then said, “Speaking of fighting…. Did he ever teach you how to bless weapons?”

“Not really.”

They both sat quietly contemplating the unspoken scenario. If Dyaniel didn’t survive or was unable to fight, that would theoretically leave their heaviest hitters as Kay, Sam, and Dean. But without the ability to bless weapons, Dean was practically a typical human. Sam and Kay were valuable in a fight, but as soon as the sixty-fifth seal was broken the two of them became such a large liability that they might not be worth putting in the field at all. And if they reached the point of hiding out indefinitely, how far off was that from what had happened in the other timeline?

“We need to do something,” Kay commented.

He couldn’t tell if Kay was talking about Dyaniel’s situation or with the greater conflict.
“How do I do this?” Dean asked her as he took Dyaniel’s hand. “I don't really pray. Do I ask God for help or are there some angels that don't want to kill us?”

“You just pray to Dyl. Trying to give him strength and asking him to get better.” Kay unconsciously patted Dyaniel's hand. “I tried praying to Gabriel, but he doesn't know to pick me out from the crowd. The humans don’t know he’s supposed to be dead. There must be tens of hundreds of thousands of prayers to him every day.”

Dean looked up, intrigued by a thought. “If we could find him, could Gabriel heal Dyl?”

“Maybe, possibly. Gabe and Raph are similar in their level of power.” Kay tilted her head from side to side as she considered it. “But he's completely off the grid in hiding.”

“Is his scary girlfriend in hiding?”
It felt like he had only just fallen asleep when Sam was woken up by Kaylee crying. To his slight distress he realized that Ruby wasn't in the bed. It was the first time in months that she hadn't stayed with him during the night. Granted, she didn't need to sleep anymore, but it was still jarring to suddenly find her gone, especially after the long night dealing with Dylaniel’s injuries and the coven leaving. In that moment more than anything he just wanted to restore the comforting warmth that nearly made that place his home, and Ruby was so much of that.

“It's okay. I'm here,” he assured the newborn as he climbed out of bed and picked her up. “You need a change or are you hungry?”

He changed her diaper, then rested her against his shoulder. Rocking gently back and forth stopped the crying, but her little chest huffed with some lingering distress. At such a young age there were only so many things that could be upsetting her and unfortunately hunger wasn't one he could easily remedy on his own.

“Come on, sweetie. Let's go find your mom.”

After a few minutes searching, he found Ruby in her little workshop reading something at her desk. She was still dressed in the same clothes she'd worn earlier, which meant that she probably hadn't called it a night at all.

“You didn't come to bed.”

“I thought I'd get some work done.” Ruby held up a few half-sized sheets of notes for him to see. “Dean actually came up with some halfway decent recipes. Most of them seem incomplete or sloppy, but I can see what a lot of them are getting at. And three of them he annotated as having been weaponized. Do you know if the bunker has any flare guns?”

“No,” Sam replied, thrown by suddenly having to recall the bunker’s inventory in his groggy state. Kaylee wriggled in his arms with growing impatience. “I think Kaylee’s hungry.”

“Let me wash my hands first. I'll try to pump some more milk later, to keep the fridge stocked,” Ruby said while placing a bookmark in some antique codex. “Next time someone goes on a supply run they should probably get some formula just in case though.”

“In case of what?”

As soon as he asked, he regretted the question. His half-awake brain let slip the not fully formed thought. He could imagine several reasons why Ruby might not be around, all of which made his heart sink a bit. Maybe she was just being pragmatic about the possibilities, but it was a little disheartening for her to seem so casual about being away.

It wasn’t that he needed her to be around all the time. It was just that he wanted some reassurance that she was committed to their family. On some level he'd just lost Tom, whether it was temporary or not remained to be seen. And his… whatever Dylaniel was to him, was in critical condition. It wasn't his place to tell her what to do, but it didn't stop him from hoping that she'd be there more for him and Kaylee… but maybe she just wasn't as focused on family.

“We're in the middle of a shitstorm. I might be out running missions or injured or whatever and I can't feed her.” Ruby raised an eyebrow at having to explain such an obvious concern. “You don't want to find a store, buy some stuff, and then learn how to make it all while juggling a screaming
baby.”

He could tell by her body language that she was mentally picking him apart, trying to figure out what he was getting at, like one of her puzzles. There had been a time when it was the harbinger of a very lengthy and occasionally heated discussion, but with all the stress and complexities that were burying them, he just didn’t have the willpower to risk a fight. He decided to not bring up the potentially controversial topic of her arguably unnecessary and dangerous outings.

“You could have done this in the bedroom,” he suggested in a particularly gentle tone.

“Not as easily. Anyway, you looked beat. I thought you could use whatever sleep you could get.”

“It’s hard to do that when I’m the only one there to take care of Kaylee,” Sam muttered.

“Okay, so maybe you have to get up once or twice,” Ruby conceded.

“I just don't get…. ” He was too tired to figure out what they were even arguing about at that point and instead jumped to some fundamental principle they could hopefully agree on. “We're a team.”

“And we trade off with her all the time.” Ruby pointed at her work. “And I'm trying to figure out how to get us out of this shit situation.”

“I'm trying too.”

“I'm not saying you aren't.” She sighed. “I know you're busting your ass researching and you're getting better with your powers, but you're not the only one—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Jody said while knocking on the door jamb. “But we're having a meeting in the library. Apparently Kay might know someone who could heal Dyl.”

“You want to summon Kali, goddess of destruction?” Bobby asked in a distinctly unenthusiastic voice.

“Change,” Dean corrected. “She's the goddess of change.”

“I'm sorry. What are we doing?” Sam asked, not having heard the earlier conversation.

He entered the parlor and took a seat on the couch. To his relief Ruby sat down on the same couch as him in order to feed Kaylee, though she wasn't close enough for him to assume they were on the best terms. He thought about scooting towards her and assessing her reaction, but decided to give it a few minutes before risking what might be considered crowding her.

“Let me start from the beginning,” Kay told the new arrivals. “Angels can only heal damage caused by other angels of the same weight class or lower. That's why Cas couldn't heal Dyl. Raph is an archangel, which means that only a few beings are powerful enough to heal his damage.”

“Kali is one of them?” Sam asked, regretting not having immediately gotten coffee after waking up.

“Kali is the right weight class, but she doesn't heal,” Kay answered. “I don't know of any healer deities with a significant enough power base to fix this, which means sticking to the Heavenly pantheon. God, Michael, and Luci could heal Raph’s damage no problem, but none of them are likely to help us. That leaves Gabriel.”

“So why are we contacting a Hindu goddess?” Ruby asked.
“Gabriel faked his death back during Luci’s rebellion. He's in hiding, so it's pretty much impossible to find him, but his girlfriend Kali is an active deity with live temples.”

“The idea is to try to summon her and see if she'll get us in touch with Gabriel,” Dean elaborated. As he spoke, he turned to address Ruby’s question, but saw that she was breastfeeding and hastily looked at the wall.

“You just want to summon her, right?” Ruby didn't look thrilled by a thought. “Because binding a god sounds a little above my pay grade.”

“I think summoning will be fine,” Kay assured her. “Kali isn’t bad. She's Dyl’s whatever it is... mani or aunt—would've been Dyl's aunt.” She frowned. “Admittedly, she might not be as fond of us since she doesn't know any of us.”

“And you want to summon her?” Sam double-checked. He exchanged a wary glance with Ruby.

“She’s a reasonable person. I mean, she might not be sweet, but she got along well with Dyl, some of my family.”

“What’d she think of you?” Jody asked.

“She didn't really understand me,” Kay confessed. “It's hard for most gods to reconcile their shared existence with Hell. Basically, we stayed in different hemispheres and she almost never initiated communications with downstairs.”

Dean cringed at some memory. “Let's count a little blessing that at least we don't have any carryover with the Sam-Lucifer-Kali dynamic.”

Sam may have been tired, but his ears perked up at the mention of his name. “With the what?”

“Just as we were leaving my time, you all were killing each other.” Kay gave him an apologetic shrug along with the news.

“Great,” Sam groaned. Somehow it felt like the plan had just gotten worse.

“It’ll be fine. We don't have that drama in this timeline. There's no reason to fight.”

“Except if you piss her off while summoning her,” Bobby commented.

“Gods answer summons all the time,” Kay replied.

“Is that really a thing in our time or is that more of a your time thing?” Dean asked. “Because in your time gods were a lot more public.”

“There's plenty of lore on summoning lesser gods, but when you move from the obscure religions to more accepted ones the lore turns murky.” Sam complained about one of his biggest research pet peeves. “The sources start turning into theology, philosophy, or popular fiction. It might be fine summoning her, but it's going to be hard trying to do a lot of recent research on her.”

“Well, I'm at least trying.” Kay crossed her arms in front of her chest with determination. “I have experience dealing with a version of her, so maybe that'll help.”

“You shouldn't go alone,” Sam warned.

“I'll go too,” Dean volunteered. “I met the other her, so I guess that's a leg up.”
“How do you even summon her?” Bobby asked.

“I figured we’d go to her temple and pray,” Kay suggested with less confidence than anyone would’ve liked.

“Do you know if she’s a manifest or an independent spirit form?” Ruby’s question to Kay drew confused looks from the others. “It affects which summons types will work. Not knowing the planear mechanics could make the summons a complete dud, especially if you’re doing home-brew craft.”

“Ruby’s going too,” Kay dictated, making Sam’s stomach knot.

“I’ll need a few minutes to research Kali and construct a summoning ritual.” She agreed, then looking down at the nursing Kaylee. “After my dinner date, of course.”

“So what should we expect?” Dean asked. “I only actually talked to her for about ten minutes and I’m hard at work killing those brain cells.”

“She was distant family. Mostly she stuck to herself—well, I guess before Gabriel died the two of them spent a ton of their time together. I was nineteen when Gabe died and I took over in Hell, so after that I didn't see her much. I mean she was my uncle through marriage’s brother’s girlfriend,” Kay explained the tenuous relationship. “She was a lot closer to Dyl because he was Gabe’s favorite nephew. My mom was good friends with her. She also got along with Dean.”

“Your uncle, not me,” Dean clarified for the others.

“Yeah, my uncle,” Kay confirmed. “But she didn't seem to hate you either.”

“Really? Cause she didn't seem to think much more of me than decent bait,” Dean complained. “Does she make everyone feel really uncomfortable?”

“Mostly.”

After handing out the assorted preparation assignments for the trip to India, Sam hurried to catch Ruby to speak privately. Part of him wanted to ask if there was a way for her to just instruct Dean and Kay on the ritual, but he knew that wasn't the right answer. Ruby was by far the most qualified to perform the summoning ritual and Dylaniel needed their help. No matter his anxiety, he had to admit this wasn't a frivolous mission or risk.

“Take care of Dean and Kay.” He offered the vote of confidence, earning a small smile of understanding from her. For a moment he hesitated to say anything more, but he added. “She sounds dangerous.”

He could hear the concern in his own voice and suspected that Ruby had also picked up on the sentiment. She could’ve been offended—the way things had been going she might’ve been offended on some level, but she didn't push back on it. Instead she gave a little smirk and tilted her head in a gesture akin to a shrug.

“She probably is dangerous, but hopefully she’s our kind of dangerous.”

“Be careful.” Sam intentionally voiced it as a meek request to make it clear he wasn't looking for a fight. He held out his hands to take Kaylee back.

“I always am.” She looked down at their daughter, but didn't hand her off. “I have a few things to look up for the summons. I can watch her while you grab an hour or two of uninterrupted sleep.”
“You ready to roll?” Dean asked as he peeked his head into Ruby’s work room. She was seated cross-legged on her desk chair with a blanket on her lap creating an improvised bed for Kaylee. Her main hand jotted down some notes, while her offhand had been captured by the sleeping newborn.

“Almost.” She dragged her fingers down a page in an old tome, skimming the text. “Do you know what time of day you were born?”

“I think the morning,” he replied uncertainly.

“Let’s go with your time of death. At least we know for sure that was night for you.” She crossed out part of her notes, then corrected for the later date and converted some figures from spiritual arrival to spiritual departure.

Dean moved a little closer to get a better look at his niece. “Are you calculating in all of our birth or death times?”

“The three of us going, yeah. Kali’s got this whole temporal and entropy thing. Apparently she’s got a bug up her ass when it comes to temporal precision.”

“I saw her insult a bunch of angels to their faces over time travel techniques—and these were angels on her side.”

“Everyone's a critic,” Ruby commented, but she had to admit she liked the idea of seeing a bunch of angels getting chewed out over technicalities.

“What time of day are you using for yourself?” Dean asked, probably to fill the silence, as he played with a walnut sized agate that had been sitting on the desk.

“The first time I came back to Earth after turning.”

“What did you do first when you got back?”

“I killed a lot of people.” She thought about mitigated her guilt by saying that they deserved to die, but she didn't really mind omitting that for Dean. She didn't care about trying to improve his opinion of her at that point… though, she supposed she hadn't truthfully answered the question. “Actually, I got some food first. I was so hungry while they worked me downstairs.”

“I would've crawled across that razor stone stuff for a bacon double cheeseburger,” Dean agreed. She looked over at him surprised. For a moment she'd forgotten that he had also been to Hell. “You mean the stone floors on the bottom two levels of Lower, Marlax’s neighborhood?”

“I only went to Lower once. I meant the Inner Oubliette. That place was something else. All the real demons turned to smoke just to skip touching the blades.” She could swear he got goosebumps at the memory.

“I can't picture a Torquean drifting around as a cloud.” Ruby huffed a partial laugh at the mental image of the fierce demons turning into wisps to avoid a little pain. “The secrets from behind closed doors. Next you're gonna tell me Alastair’s private den is full of kittens.”

“That’d….” Dean looked a bit distracted by the mention of Alastair’s private sanctum and area of influence. “That’d be something.”
There was another uncomfortable silence. She could see that he was thinking unpleasant thoughts, undoubtedly related to Alastair. Without question he was still struggling with what happened to him in Hell. It probably wasn't helping to know that the archdemon who had tormented him was still around and on Earth.

Her torture and transformation into a demon had been centuries earlier. While she was currently accepting of the situation, for decades she'd been traumatized by the experience. She'd never interacted with the Torquean who had turned her and honestly she wasn't sure what she'd do if she saw them today. But the thought of potentially confronting them as soon after the torture as Dean was risking… that was unsettling even without being worked over by the best.

“Thanks for getting the spell mats and recipes,” she said, hoping to knock him and herself out of that depressing headspace.

“I did the easy part. You're the one who better not screw it up.” He smiled a bit to reassure her that he was joking, which she appreciated.

“Hey, Dean. Go fuck yourself.”

“Oh god,” Dean muttered as he collapsed to his hands and knees in the damp grass.

Ruby considered offering him some help up, but the piggybacked demon jump might've been rough enough to make him throw up. She took a step back to a safe distance.

“Still have all your parts?”

“What?” He looked up at her question, not quite understanding that it was a joke. “Next time we call Anael.”

“We don't have her number,” Ruby pointed out. “Come on, we need to go find our angel so I don't have to drag you back.”

She gently side-checked Dean, unintentionally knocking him over onto his right side. He curled up into the fetal position and cradled his abdomen for a moment. When she finally offered him a hand, he flipped her off.

“Don't touch me. I'll catch up in a sec,” he groaned. “My stomach’s still crawling out of my ass.”

She shrugged, then proceeded to the temple entrance about forty feet away. Kay had arrived about a half hour earlier in order to start making arrangements while Ruby was making the piggybacking talismans for Dean to use.

The temple was located in a fairly rural area of Maharashtra, so there was less risk of being interrupted. It was little more than a worn one-room stone building with heavy wooden doors that were suffering from some sort of fungal rot. Kay poked her head out the doorway at the sound of their voices.

“Did you find the stuff?” Ruby asked.

“Of course.” Kay stepped fully out of the doorway when she spotted Dean. “You doing okay Dean?”

“Surviving,” he replied as he staggered to his feet.
They entered the temple to find a mature water buffalo standing in the middle of the main hall. Dean looked around for other congregants to see if the animal was out of place. There weren’t any signs of another human around. A few lanterns had been lit, but he suspected that it had been done in the natural course of Kay preparing for them.

“What's the livestock doing here?” he asked warily.

“Coin for the court,” Kay replied, then handed Ruby a golden long knife.

“Jesus.” Dean grimaced. “Are we gonna have to fight a bull?”

“I'll make it quick. Just stand back,” Ruby said as she cautiously walked up to the water buffalo.

Thankfully, Kay had gotten a domesticated one, otherwise the entire process would’ve been a lot more trouble. Ruby pet its head a few times in reassurance, then moved in close. She whispers a traditional mantra of Kali’s into the animal’s ear. Her left hand stroked the top of its head, but as soon as the mantra was finished she gripped the buffalo’s horn and her right hand dragged the knife across its throat.

The buffalo jerked, kicked, and tried to buck. Ruby locked her arm so that the horns stayed safely away from her body, though she was pushed backwards a few feet across the dusty stone floor. Kay telekinetically held it in place as best she could. After several seconds the beast’s knees buckled and it fell to the ground. Ruby watching as the blood drained from it.

This definitely wasn't the first time that she'd sacrificed a life for a spell, but every time it was important to see it through completely. Some witches cut corners or avoided watching the death itself. To her it wasn't some act of cruelty or morbid fascination; it was about respect. Blood magic was profound and it should be treated with professionalism and dignity. It was a point of pride in her work, and maybe that pride took hold in her craftwork because she often got results.

Kali stood before them in the middle of the pool of blood. Her hair was done up in an ornate braid and she wore a turquoise and gold salwar kameez. Despite her delicate appearance, she radiated a fierce power that gave everyone else awe-filled pause. Her eyes took in the bizarre patrons of her temple, then she said something in Hindi to them.

“I’m sorry, but we don't speak—” Kay started explaining, but she was cut off by Kali.

“This had better be good.”

“We need your help finding someone.” Kay wasn't sure how to even begin making pleasantries, so she just cut to the chase. Luckily, Kali seemed to appreciate not having her time wasted with unimportant things like introductions.

“That's unusual. That two time-walkers would enter my domain and not wish to speak to me.” Kali looked at Dean with a casual interest. “Aren't you a strange one? I can see my mark all over you.”

“You helped me before, in 2039,” he explained.

“And you're asking for help again? I hope you gave me something worthwhile.”

“I don't really know what you got out of helping me then,” he admitted. “I guess it fixed a problem with time.”

“It redirected a problem with time,” Kali suggested. “There have been two temporal tears in the
"last week, now I see those were because of you two. Pressure has been building and waning in unnatural patterns."

"We're changing the future," Kay synthesized.

"Nothing changes the future," Kali corrected. "You've only altered which causal chains bind you. We're being pulled towards something, probably a moment in your previous timeline."

"What is it?"

"We aren't there yet," Kali replied with a stoic indifference.

"Can we change it? Can we do it differently?" Kay asked with growing desperation.

"We aren't there yet."

Ruby could see the despair on Kay and Dean’s faces. They’d seen the fucked up world that could be their future, one that she couldn't begin to imagine. It was definitely unsettling news, that on a big enough scale they might officially be losing the battle to prevent the Apocalypse. But that wasn't why they came there and she was the only one with enough composure to keep the momentum going.

"We summoned you because we need to speak to your partner, Gabriel," Ruby stated, earning a blatantly confused expression from Kali.

"I am the forbidden. You've summoned the source and destroyer of worlds, to seek a meeting with my boyfriend?"

"We need his help to heal someone," she explained.

"Death is intrinsic in life." Kali shrugged slightly. "Most people who summon me seek this lesson, whether they know it or not."

"I know death; believe me, I do." Kay jumped back into the conversation, refocused by the mention of Dylaniel. "I don't need a mantra or enlightenment. I need my cousin."

"A single mortal life is rarely needed. Change moves through all people. If one falls then another takes up the mantle," Kali countered. "It's not my place to interfere in—"

"Don't give me that hands off shit!" Kay snapped. "I've seen you fight not one, but two archangels, probably mostly because they pissed you off. You get your hands dirty plenty often. And I'm not even asking you to fight for me. I just want you to deliver a message."

Kali raised an eyebrow. "What's the message?"

Kay pulled a clear plastic baggie from her satchel and handed it to Kali. Inside the bag was one of Dylaniel's feathers, but it was partially caked in blood.

"I don't know how long he has," Kay said.

"Where is he?" Gabriel asked from behind the group, drawing everyone's attention to the back of the room.

Dean turned back to face Kay in surprise. "Wait, this son of a bitch is Gabriel?"
Sam was in the library researching with Bobby and Jody, waiting for the others to return when he saw the bane of his existence for almost a year. It was the trickster, walking into the library. He was in their sanctuary. They were supposed to be safe there, except this guy was anything but safe.

With the coven gone, there had been no one else to help watch Kaylee, so Sam had improvised a little bassinet out of a wash bin and a cushion that he'd let some of the filling out of. She was dozing on the table next to his laptop, so that he could keep an eye on her and occasionally offer a finger for her to grab. However, now he moved to stand between Kaylee and the new threat.

“You!”

Sam tried to telekinetically throw the trickster across the room, but he teleported a few feet to the left. Sam grabbed at him again with his powers and this time the trickster struggled slightly, visibly surprised by the resistance.

“Sam, let him go!” Dean shouted, rushing into the room along with the others.

“He killed you!”

Kaylee was woken up by the yelled and began crying. Sam wanted to turn around to check on her and do whatever he could to comfort her, but he didn't want to turn his back on the surprise standoff.

An Indian woman entered the room and calmly walked to stand in front of him, drawing his attention down to her smaller form. Her eyes were intense, though she didn't seem particularly volatile. She must've been Kali.

“We've all killed a lot of people.” She took another step towards Sam, leaving them only a foot apart. “Release him.”

Sam let go of the trickster, then wiped the trickle of blood from his nose as the realization hit him. The powerful creature that had tormented him for so long was actually an archangel. In a messed up way it felt right; some heavenly force had been dabbling in his life and screwing with him for so long. It felt like just another way he was helplessly aligned against… well, what he used to think was good. He backed away from Gabriel and Kali, then picked up his crying daughter.

“Wow, big guy. You’re packing more of a punch than you used to,” Gabriel commented while brushing off his clothes.

“Don't you fucking talk to me,” Sam said coldly. He could deal with not fighting him, but they were far from being on such friendly speaking terms.

“Hey!” Kay snapped, trying to stop another fight from possibly breaking out. “We deal with Dyl, then can someone fucking explain why you guys want to kill each other.”

“I don’t want to kill them,” Gabriel said innocently.

“You killed Dean 138 times,” Sam replied while turning his body to shield the bundle in his arms. “Suddenly it’s lost its novelty?”

“Seriously?” Ruby exclaimed, then looked to Dean. “How does one guy piss off somebody that much, even you?”

“It wasn’t about Dean,” Sam explained while watching Gabriel warily.
Ruby’s eyes widened, then she nodded in understanding. “Come on, let’s let him try to save a life, okay?” Ruby suggested as she manually turned Sam’s face away from the archangel, towards her. She caressed his cheek with her thumbs, soothing him slightly. With him starting to relax, Kaylee’s crying began subsiding.

“Hey, cutie,” Gabriel said while making a small waving gesture at Kaylee.

“I swear if you—” Sam started to warn him, but Kay cut him off.

“He isn’t gonna hurt your baby,” she stated before pointing her finger at everyone in the library then adding. “No one’s hurting anyone. Everybody got that?”

Thankfully no one attempted to be cute by arguing with her. They started heading towards Dylaniel’s room in order to get down to the most immediate concern. As the others were leaving the room Ruby waited so that she could intercept Kali who was trailing behind the pack.

“I know you're a god and I'm just a demon, but if you touch Sam, I'll kill you,” She warned.

Kali looked her up and down thoughtfully. For a moment Ruby was worried that her threat would immediately initiate some kind of fight. She didn't have any of her reagents or preparation time, which left her vulnerable in general. Against a god she was undoubtedly fucked, but she tried not to betray that fear on her face.

“You're a demon,” Kali corrected. “You’re not just a demon.”

Kali nodded with something like respect before following the others. Ruby stood, slightly dumbfounded by what at least appeared to be a positive statement, if not a compliment. She wasn't expecting that kind of treatment by a god, but she wasn't about to complain.

“Oh, wow. Castiel had a kid,” Gabriel commented when he saw Dylaniel. “I knew he had the potential to be the sentimental type, but having a family….”

The archangel examined what was left of Dylaniel’s clipped wings. Several spots where feathers had been pulled out at the base were bruised. The break on the right wing was splinted with planks of wood and adhesiveless bandages, but there was still visible swelling. He let out a long soft sigh at the pathetic sight.

“Aside from Luci’s, Michael’s wings were always the most, I don't know, impressive.” Gabriel touched the cut edges of the feathers. “These….”

“Can you heal him?” Kay asked, stepping forward from the small audience.

Gabriel approached Dylaniel, then placed one hand each on the nephilim’s head and chest. “There's some damage from Raphael, but he also used a divine banishment spell that caused a lot of damage.”

“How bad is it?”

“He nearly ripped the grace straight out of his soul,” Gabriel answered. “There's a lot of fraying in there.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I can heal the physical damage, unless something weird was going on powerwise in the fight, but
Gabriel touched each sutured wound causing them to heal. He then moved onto the lightning strikes. The fractal burns receded back to the point of impact. After addressing the injuries on Dylaniel’s torso and arms, he turned his attention to the wings. His hands traveled along the feathers with a bit more reverence than before, regenerating them as he went, then he carefully healed the broken wing. Once all the physical damage was undone, he began examining Dylaniel more closely.

“Anyone with a weak stomach might want to look away,” Gabriel warned before plunging his hand into Dylaniel’s chest just below the breastbone. A smile flickered on the archangel’s lips.

“What’s funny now?” Kali asked.

“I said ‘not my funeral.’ I forgot, if I sneeze right now we’ll all explode.”

Everyone except for Kali moved away from Gabriel a bit, uncertain whether he was serious or not. For his part, Sam positioned himself so that Kaylee was in the hallway, obscured by the wall next to the doorway.

White-blue light shone from the insignificant space between Gabriel’s wrist and Dylaniel’s torso. Dylaniel's back arched in a sudden convulsion. Gabriel used his freehand to push him back down, but Dylaniel's wings spasmed, hitting the walls of the small concrete room.

“A little help,” Gabriel said in a voice that was surprisingly strained.

Kali and Ruby held the nephilim’s torso, while Kay and Sam both tried to telekinetically hold the wings safely away from everyone.

Gabriel grunted, “Almost got it.”

He pressed deeper and his eyes widened. The light shining from Dylaniel turned golden as a wave of heat hit them. Dylaniel's hands clenched the sheets and Dean couldn't help but wonder if the bedding had accidentally been blessed. After a small eternity, Gabriel withdrew his hand, returning Dylaniel to his limp unconscious state, though there wasn't any sign of damage from the intrusion.

“I’ve touched grace before, but Michael’s….” Gabriel rubbed his face with his palms. “I think I'm gonna need about an Atlantic Ocean worth of tequila.”

“How is he?” Kay asked.

“I started patching together what I could without getting too close to the really explosive stuff. In theory it should help speed up the mending,” Gabriel replied. “Let the kid get some rest and he might be up on his feet sometime this decade.”

“What about his powers?” Dean asked.

The sight of Michael's grace was an unnerving reminder that he would have extra pressure on him to figure out how to bless weapons if Dylaniel was incapable of doing it going forward. He wanted to learn that, to be more helpful, but the thought of being the last potentially powered Sword of
Heaven was a whole pile of responsibility that he wasn't sure he could hold up. As much as Dylaniel was a friend, maybe even family, he was also Dean’s sole support in that burden. It was selfish thinking, but with Dylaniel out of the woods, his attention had to turn to the Apocalypse.

“Does he use angelic powers?” Gabriel asked, unfamiliar with the nuances of nephilim.

Kay started ticking them off on her fingers. “Flight, healing, sensing incoming angels—”

“He also blesses weapons as part of being Michael’s vessel,” Dean added, eager to get to the heart of his fear.

“The vessel grace was pretty well imbedded in his soul, but there's this whole other piece that's real grace, his grace.” Gabriel interlocked half of his fingers as a demonstration. “I don't know how integrated things were before, but there were definitely tears and weird bleed over between all the pieces. My suggestion: don't ask him to teleport you anywhere for awhile and maybe give him a practice run or two at killing angels with a spork.”

“Gabe, we need your help,” Kay implored. “Especially with Dyl out of commission.”

“I’m an outlaw as far as Heaven’s concerned. Well, I would be if they knew I was alive.” Gabriel crossed his arms and leaned against a small part of the wall that wasn't occupied by Dylaniel's wings. “I've been in hiding for thousands of years. I mean I disappeared when Luci was still on the loose. That really doesn't look good. If Michael finds out about me, he’ll be pissed. You have no idea how much of a pain he can make our lives.”

“Trust me, I'm aware,” Kay corrected.

“Then why are you looking for that kind of trouble?”

“That trouble is gonna find us, one way or another. We need to get the drop on it.”

“I'm a lover, not a fighter,” Gabriel said, then he teleported to be next to Kali, drew her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “She's the fighter.”

“One in the same with this crowd,” Kay replied, earning several uncomfortable sidelong glances from the others. “You're an archangel, a fallen archangel. That means so much.”

“You have to own up to who you are and get out there,” Dean tried another approach.

“Look who's talking Michaelsword,” Gabriel jabbed. “Are you ready to own up? Because the rumor is Michael’s really looking forward to riding you like a prize ass.”

“I'm not just some archangel’s meat puppet,” Dean answered in a barely contained snarl.

“Then what are you?” Gabriel asked, silencing Dean.

“He’s someone trying to do what's right,” Sam interjected, defending his brother. “Like the rest of us. What are you trying to do with your life?”

“I'm trying to survive.”

“Sometimes survival isn't good enough,” Ruby countered.

“Especially when the world decides to end without asking for your permission first. If you're gonna do anything worthwhile ever again, you better start soon.” Kay paused a beat to let her point
sink in. “And we could really use your help.”

“I've got my own responsibilities and problems—” Gabriel started arguing.

“The end of the world isn't your problem?” Dean asked.

“This may come as a surprise to you, but I'm not some all powerful being. I'm just an angel with a nice right hook, who's good with illusions. I can't tell you where to go or how to win. I'm not a psychic—hell, you've got a psychic—“ Gabriel gestured at Sam. “—and that still doesn't solve your problems. If I put my neck on the line at the wrong time I'll be just as screwed as any of you.”

“So you're gonna leave all the heavy lifting to us.”

“If you need my help with specifics, then maybe I could give you a hand, but I'm not going to waltz around in Heaven’s sights without a real good reason. Fair enough?” Gabriel looked around at their unenthusied faces. “That’s the best I can do considering your current pitch.”

“How's this for a pitch: 340 nephilim on Earth at one time,” Kay replied. Gabriel’s eyebrows raised subtly, but he didn't interrupt. “Because that happened in my time.”

“Heaven wouldn't let that many nephilim exist,” he said in disbelief.

“Yeah, well sometimes Heaven doesn't get a say,” she told him. “What do you think of the name Devi?”

Gabriel looked confused by the sudden turn in the conversation, but Kali unconsciously took a step forward with interest. She began speaking to Gabriel in Hindi. His face softened at her words, then he nodded in understanding.

“Believe it or not, but I do care and I like you guys,” Gabriel told them. “I’m not doing milk runs, but I'll keep my ears open.” He gave a little nod of acknowledgement. “Try not to get yourself killed before the real fun begins. See you around.”

Gabriel and Kali disappeared before anyone could think of a way to convince them to stay. It hadn't gone as well as it could have, yet he'd at least seemed open to some future communication and assistance. More than that, Kali looked as though she thought the existence of nephilim was something worth striving towards.

“What's Devi?” Ruby asked.

“Devi was their daughter in my time,” Kay explained. “I'd heard Gabe was always a little scared to have a kid because of the whole ban on angels breeding. And an archangel’s kid…. She was maybe even as big a target as Dyl. I think Kali was the only partner who could've kept her safe for all those years.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at the tactic. “You're appealing to him wanting to be a parent?”

“It’s a more powerful motivator than you’d think,” Sam replied, then glanced down at Kaylee, who was sleeping in his arms.

Gabriel and Kali’s departure brought either a lull in progress or, depending on your perspective, a welcome reprieve from action. Everyone except for Ruby cycled through a few hours of sleep to break up the assorted research and preparatory efforts. After getting a little rest, Sam started heading back to the library when he heard quiet, fatigued singing coming from one of the parlors.
He cautiously poked his head inside. Kay was lounging on one of the couches smoking a joint while listening to some music on an iPod with mini speakers.

“You okay?” he asked to let her know he was there.

“Far from it.”

She sat up slightly on the couch and held out the joint to him. Sam entered, accepted the weed, then took a puff. After a moment of social uncertainty he sat down next to her on the couch.

“Things are pretty rough, especially with everything being so up in the air,” he agreed.

“I'm not sure how much more of this waiting I can manage,” she admitted. “Ever since he was born Dyl was bittersweet—a handful, but he was our handful. Now he's my handful, I guess.”

“We're all here for him too,” Sam assured her.

“I know, but... you guys aren't....” She hesitated. “You barely know him.”

She was drawing the line between her family from her own timeline and everyone else. He was aware of the distinction—they all were—but the more time they spent together the more Kay and Dylaniel did feel like family. Maybe Kay didn't feel like a daughter and maybe Dylaniel didn’t feel like a nephew, but maybe something akin to half-siblings.

“I care about him and you,” Sam replied. “And I'd like to know both of you better.”

“Talking about myself, I don't even know where to start, but Dyl....” Kay took the joint back from Sam while trying to figure out how to explain. “I love the kid. He's really sharp, like observes or deduces way more than most people. A lot of people don't give him credit because he's so internal. There's always something going on below the surface with him—well, most of the time. I guess not always, not now.”

“You mean right now?” Sam glanced in the general direction of Dylaniel's room. “With him mostly healed, he's basically just sleeping. It's not like he's not there.”

“He doesn't dream,” she said before taking another hit.

“What?”

“When he sleeps there's nothing. Some of the nephilim are like that I guess. But I'm just like, he's been lying there in bed for over a day and it's weird to think that maybe there's just nothing going on.” Her lips pursed. “Maybe he didn't even hear my prayers? I don't even know how that works normally.”

“He's going to be fine.”

“I hate the waiting. Not knowing what's going on with him. Not knowing what’s gonna happen to us. I just wish I could make things better.”

He felt a profound sympathy for her. In a weird way he felt like he was going through something similar with Ruby and his little potential family. Rationally he should be hopeful or at least grateful that things appeared stable enough for the moment. Yet there was this fear that came from a place of love and the desperation to hold onto the few people they had left. There wasn't anything he could say to reassure her. There wasn't anything he could say to reassure himself. It was just part of caring about someone, being vulnerable to them and their loss.
“Are you okay?” she asked, probably seeing his uneasy feelings all over his face.

“It’s just that things are complicated… with Ruby.” He felt awkward venting about his relationship with Ruby to their alternate-timeline daughter. “Things are just stressful with everything that’s going on.”

“Yeah, this probably isn’t the easiest setting to…. ” She pursed her lips, uncertain with how to end the sentence, took another hit, then passed him the joint.

“I know that it’s supposed to be complicated with a new kid, figuring out how to do everything and juggling responsibilities. But I just feel like if I say the wrong thing…. Did your parents fight?”

Sam asked then took two quick puffs.

“Maybe like once or twice, but nothing big.”

He couldn't tell whether her answer made him feel better or worse about the situation. On the one hand it was nice to think that maybe there was a way for him and Ruby to end up as a fully united front again, that maybe the strange underlying tension was just a rough patch. But at the same time it was a bit disconcerting to think that somehow they weren't where they could've been in their relationship.

“Why do relationships have to be so complicated?” Sam mused aloud.

“You want to complain about complicated relationships?” Dean asked from the doorway. “You guys are having a pot-and-pity party and you didn't tell me?”

“Here.” Sam held out the joint, inviting Dean to grab a seat. After his brother was settled on the other couch and partaking in the refreshments, Sam decided to broach his situation. “Any word from Cas?”

“Nothing.” Dean shook his head. “I don’t even know what I’d do if he suddenly showed up.”

“What comes to mind?”

“Apologizing again, punching him in the face—those two are the first ones that pop into my head.” Dean smiled, probably in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“So… who's this guy you went out with?” Sam probed, causing Dean to drop his head back against the the top of the couch back and Kay to sit up in excitement.

“You went out with someone?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. It wasn't a date or anything,” Dean moaned. “I was at a bar and we talked while drinking.”

“Did you kiss him?” Kay asked, making Dean blush and fluster a bit.

“He kissed him,” Sam answered for Dean.

Kay grinned broadly. “Tongue?”

“I hate you both,” Dean replied, then huffed something that didn't quite qualify as a laugh. “You're both jealous.”

“Yeah, no thanks. I'm done playing the bar scene,” Sam countered. Though he wished he could've said that everything was great in his love life.
“I've already got plenty of man-children to worry about.” Kay held up her hand to collect a high five from either of them. After a long pause, Sam accommodated her.

“Things will get easier in our personal lives after we stop Lilith,” Sam speculated. “Then we can actually spend some time and energy making it right.”

“Well, we better gank Lilith soon.” Dean took another puff, then passed the tiny remnant of a joint back down the line for a final go.

Sam debated asking whether Dean was saying that as a general sentiment or as a point of frustration related to his personal life. He couldn'ttell if Dean was even interested in Castiel in any capacity other than as a colleague. Obviously the situation with Dylenial and Castiel leaving did strain whatever relationship, be it friendship or something more, that had been forming. And putting all that to the side, if Dean was interested in someone else that was perfectly fine too. As far as Sam was concerned, anyone who made Dean happy and fulfilled was better than nothing.

“Ah fuck, yeah,” Kay commented, shaking Sam from his somewhat weed induced introspection.

She took a final hit, then leaned forward and turned the volume up on the iPod. The music was some sort of synth-pop with a female singer that he didn't recognize. It was a wholly unexpected selection for someone that he'd only ever seen wearing metal and hard rock t-shirts. The lyrics were about love, but he couldn't describe it as happy. It was more about the complexity and insanity of love. He could appreciate her enthusiasm over the aptness.

Kay put out the negligible butt of the joint in an ashtray, got up from the couch, then started dancing in a nearly staggering fashion. Her intoxicated singing and dancing reminded Sam of Ruby. The resemblance was endearing. She even started playfully harassing Dean.

“Dance with me.” She wasn't asking.

“I'm not dancing,” Dean stated firmly.

Sam preempted any attempt to get him to dance by lying down on his couch.

“It's called catharsis.” Kay kicked Dean’s leg, then flipped her head indicating that he should join her.

“I don't dance and I don't sing—and if I did, I wouldn't be singing that.”

“Come on. Nobody likes three lumps of iron,” Kay said as some kind of idiom. When she spotted their confused faces, she added, “You don't have that one in this time?”

“No.”

“Two testicles and your brain—it's being stubborn and proud,” Kay clarified. She noticed Sam's newly horizontal state, then turned her attention back to Dean. “Jesus, are all guys in this time cowards or is it just you two?”

“Fighting the armies of Hel—Heaven is one thing.” Dean caught his slip and managed to keep going without too much of an awkward pause. “Dancing to this stuff is something else entirely.”

“Everything is fucking awful. Embarrassing yourself in front of us isn't going to make it any worse,” she countered then hooked Dean’s arm, pulling him off the couch.

When he tried to retreat, she sidestepped to block his path, then kept dancing. He rolled his eyes.
“You're kinda terrible,” he complained.

“Yeah, but this song isn't.” She grabbed Dean's wrists and gently started moving his arms back and forth to the music. “You guys need to learn to not take yourselves so seriously.”

Sam tapped his foot on the arm of the couch in rhythm to the music. He watched Dean slowly relent to the mixture of drugs and Kay’s lightheartedness. Maybe they didn't have their personal lives figured out, and maybe their personal lives were the least of their concerns, but at least they were sneaking in a moment of healing commiserations.

Kay chose to drag an armchair into Dyaniel's room and sleep there rather than in her bedroom. It wasn't the most comfortable accommodations, but she wanted to be available for him as much as possible while she was on Earth. Eventually she would have to check in downstairs for more than just the brief trip she made after her little tension-easing dance party had wound down. In the meantime though, she was trying to do her part in keeping watch over her cousin.

She was lightly dozing when she heard the sheets rustle a bit. Her eyes opened to see Dyaniel's fingers dragging experimentally over the bedding. After running through the halls to alert the others that Dyaniel was moving, she hurried back to watch him for more signs of progress. The others stopped in every ten minutes or so to check on his status, but it took another hour before he opened his eyes and started trying to focus on people.

“Hey, Dyl. Can you hear me?” Kay asked when he seemed somewhat aware of his surroundings.

He tried nodding, but lifting his head back up obviously took more effort. Dean and Sam were both hovering around the room and moved closer to observe the minor movements.

“Can you speak?” Kay continued. Rather than replying, he closed his eyes and turned his head from her. She chewed her lip, then said, “Dyl, I need some help understanding you. Are you going nonverbal or is it something else?”

“Too... much,” Dyaniel whispered.

“What's too much?” She asked.

“The light? Or sounds?” Sam quietly suggested based on his experience with migraines.

Dyaniel partially nodded again. They quickly turned off the light in the bedroom, leaving only some dim illumination from the hallway to watch his face.

“Is this better?” Kay whispered.

“Some,” Dyaniel answered softly. “S’all double.”

“What's double?”

“Everything,” Dyaniel exhaled causing Kay, Dean, and Sam to exchange an uncertain glance.

“You're seeing double images?” Sam asked.

Dyaniel slowly turned his head from one side to the other in an attempt at shaking his head. He cringed subtly, then tried to lift his hand to clutch his head, but he didn't have the strength.

“Hey, be careful. Do you want pain meds?” Kay asked. When he nodded after the briefest hesitation, she checked, “Pills or morphine?”
“Morphine.”

“Let me know if this makes your double vision worse,” she said while giving him an injection.

“There's two... different versions of everything,” Dylaniel whispered as the pain medication started taking effect. “One’s too much; one’s too little. I'm dizzy.”

“You're okay. You're lying down,” Kay assured him. “You can't fall or anything.”

“There's too much—every fiber and it's just a blanket.” Dylaniel groaned, then pulled his hands weakly off the bed. He held them to his chest, palms up.

“You're not making sense—”

“How sensitive are angels?” Dean asked.

“You think he’s having like normal vision and angel vision side-by-side?”

“Neither’s... normal,” Dylaniel corrected.

“He doesn't have human vision,” Sam speculated. “His default is probably something in between.”

“No, everything,” Dylaniel emphasized some point that they weren't getting. A fatigued tear rolled down his cheek. “Sound, smell, feeling… these… vibrations in my head.”

“The morphine won't help with that,” Sam told Kay with visible concern.

“Dyl, I think we should try to figure out a way to knock you out for a little while,” Kay suggested. “You might be better integrated after some more rest.”

“I... I should help,” Dylaniel whispered pitifully.


“Sam, could you see if Ruby knows a way to knock Dyl out for a bit?” Kay directed.

“Sure thing,” Sam acknowledged before leaving to go find her.

Dylaniel tried to look up at Kay and Dean, but his eyes didn’t want to focus on them for too long. “Where's Cas?”

“He's not here,” Dean answered. “He left.”

Dylaniel's head lowered back down in a gesture of disappointment. “He knows.”

“He's just confused,” Kay replied.

“It's not you. It's me,” Dean told Dylaniel.

“He's young,” Dylaniel said as some sort of explanation for Castiel’s behavior.

“I'm sorry, Dyl,” Dean apologized. “I screwed everything up.”

“Not everything.” Dylaniel managed to speak through his audible exhaustion. “Not... alone.”

“Hey, Dyl. We’re gonna knock you out as soon as Ruby gets here and things’ll be better when you wake up,” she told him. “You're gonna get some more rest and your head won't hurt. Then we can
Dylaniel woke up from his chemically-induced sleep feeling slightly better. The world was still split in two in every way imaginable, but the disparity seemed ever so slightly less. He couldn't tell which set of inputs was most unpleasant. The angelic input was nearly too detailed for his brain to even know where to begin. Yet the human input was almost depressing in its dull simplicity. He'd taken his unique worldview for granted until then, but now the moderate headache, dizziness, and nausea were making him painfully aware of it.

To his surprise, instead of Kay waiting beside his bed, he saw Castiel sitting in the armchair. For a moment, his confused mind wondered if he was actually home… but the angel looked too rigid to be his xe. His xe wasn't nearly that stern. The thought made him have to look away from Castiel, who just sat there patiently waiting for something.

“Is something wrong?” Dylaniel asked quietly after realizing that Castiel didn't know how to begin such a strange social interaction.

“You're injured, among other hardships.”

“I meant... is there a reason you're here?” He wasn't sure if there was a nice way of asking. Though he wasn't sure whether he particularly cared about Castiel feelings, let alone whether Castiel was emotionally mature enough to perceive a slight.

“I wanted….” Castiel hesitated. “I wanted to observe your recovery.”

“Are you going to stay with us here?”

“I don't know.”

Dylaniel blatantly stared at Castiel because he didn't care about the social concept that it was considered intrusive. Castiel stared back at Dylaniel, completely unaware of the custom. Neither of them spoke for some time, though Dylaniel was forced to look away after a few minutes. The sight of Castiel’s grace, flowing out and around him like soft blue wisps of light was more intense now thanks to the divided angelic senses. There was something almost oppressive to the interaction.

Dylaniel eventually broke the silence. “Are you trying to read my mind?”

Castiel seemed a little taken aback by the suggestion. “No.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

Dylaniel felt drained by the interaction. If it had occurred at a time when he’d been physically well he wouldn't have minded the awkward conversational dance nearly as much. He'd dealt with dozens or hundreds of emotionally and socially stunted angels in his life. But now, in his frail state and dealing with an angel wearing his dead xe’s face, it was pushing him to the limits of his patience.

“I don't understand why you exist.” Castiel shifted in his chair as his grace recoiled slightly.

“I exist because my parents... wanted to share another aspect of their lives,” Dylaniel replied promptly, having had decades of experience justifying and explaining his own existence to others.

“It’s not rational, the choice as I see it.”
“In many ways it wasn't rational,” Dylaniel acknowledged. “That doesn't make it the wrong choice.”

He watched Castiel, trying to determine if the angel was successfully processing the subtleties of the statements. It was often hard for newly fallen angels to understand the value of following one's heart above pragmatism. That lesson was best learned firsthand and it could only occur organically, but planting the seed in his mind had great value and potentially powerful implications.

“Why didn't you tell me that you were my son?” Castiel asked after another extended silence.

“I know your people... have a different relationship with time, but I don't want you to try to be a parent to me.” Dylaniel’s eyes avoided Castiel. “I don't want you to try to be him... because you're not. He's dead.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't say that.”

“It's true.” Castiel frowned, unsure of how to contain his pity, but Dylaniel could feel it radiating off of him. “What can I do for you?”

He didn't honestly know what he wanted from Castiel. Part of him wanted to be left alone, to avoid the pain and complications. The angel was so new to independence that it was hard to imagine him acting with any level of sensitivity to the situation. Yet Dylaniel knew that once the awkwardness was worked through, there might exist some sort of relationship, either comradeship or friendship. He'd found something of value in his interactions with Dean. And beyond that, the group needed Castiel’s help.

“Treat me as you would anyone else.”

“I don’t know how,” Castiel admitted. “I don't know how to treat a nephilim.”

“Just... pretend you don't know what I am. I'm just a person,” Dylaniel replied. “Our interactions... don't have to adhere to strict protocols or be perfect. Much of interacting with humans is imperfect.”

“You aren't human.”

“I am human and I am not human. Don't overthink it,” Dylaniel warned. Part of him wanted to leave it at that in order to quell the conversation, but the other half of him thought it would be cruel to intentionally underexplain. “Don't feel discouraged by not understanding…. My xe had trouble knowing how to interact with me at times.”

Castiel tilted his head in a painfully familiar gesture of curiosity. “Xe?”

“My angelic parent. My family adopted the term... as a way of respecting the relationship regardless of my xe’s vessel.”

“I would not have expected a human to appreciate that I'm not this body,” Castiel said, possibly starting to understand that there might've been substance to his parents’ relationship.

Dylaniel decided to take the opportunity to improve things between Castiel and Dean. "You should forgive him."

"I do not think I can."
In many ways he couldn't blame Castiel for feeling that way. He'd inherited stubbornness from his dad, but also from his xe. And betrayal was one of the hardest things to move past. But in the name of progress, there were some things that needed to be let go.

"I've heard that forgiveness is divine." Dylaniel spoke softly, considering his words carefully in the midst of his cluttered mind. "But that's wrong. Forgiveness is humane. It's one of the greatest strengths of humans."

"Forgetting acts of harm is arguably a weakness," Castiel countered.

"You'd prefer to live... for all eternity holding onto every slight and mistake?" Dylaniel asked. "Grudges take so much energy.... I think I'm finding that it's exhausting."

Castiel quietly considered the point for several minutes. For a while Dylaniel wondered if they had reached the end of their conversation. He was running out of energy just talking and perceiving the world. But when he was about ready to explain that he needed additional rest, Castiel said something he hadn't expected.

"My sister Anael has located thirty-four fallen angels. They are weakened from the fall, but she is working to organize our people." Castiel nearly had a hopeful tone to his voice. "They admire you and would welcome your company if you ever wanted to join them."

It was flattering to think that some of the angels had taken to him so quickly, despite him being a nephilim. Though he knew that any decision made by the newly fallen angels had to be coming from a place of significant emotional turmoil.

In his timeline, his parents had been the ones to lead the original fallen angels, attaining a sort of reverence among the fallen. While he'd always had his own following, Dylaniel had occasionally wondered what it had been like to unify the population of fallen that he had taken for granted his entire life. In this time, they didn't have Dean and Castiel as a united couple to lead them. Anael appeared relatively experienced with humanity, but Castiel was nearly as inexperienced as any other angel. It was tempting to go meet with the fallen, to help them if at all possible, but he still had a significant amount of recovering to do and he couldn't abandon Kay and the others.

"I'd like to work with the fallen angels eventually, but right now I'm...." Dylaniel wasn't sure how to categorize his role going forward. "I need to stay here with my cousin and the others.... They need my help."

"You're injured. What help can you provide them?"

"Maybe just the reassurance that I'm alive... and that I will support them in whatever limited way I can," Dylaniel conceded. "For the moment that'll do."

"Do you pray?"

"Only to my parents."

The statement caused another flare of pity in Castiel.

"You can also pray to me." Castiel stood up from the armchair. The wispy tendrils of blue light extending from Castiel's core flexed upward and Dylaniel suddenly understood how angels truly might see them as wings. He was getting ready to fly away.

"No matter what mistakes are made." Dylaniel spoke hastily to catch Castiel before he was gone. "You're welcome here."
Castiel nodded, then disappeared.

There was a small, dated conference room with a large formica-topped table containing eight silver goblets of blood. Six demons stood guard at the locked door and the two windows which had been covered with blackout curtains. A woman with long blonde hair wearing a white dress walked around the table, carefully stepping over the bodies of three people.

“We're losing ground in the Upper Pits and Lower is starting to be pressed. You knights need to get back down here,” one of the goblet featuring an inhuman voice warned.

“We don't answer to you,” said a woman's voice emanating from another goblet.

“Our progress on Earth is too important for us to start backing off now. They can press us in Hell all they want. Our victory is here,” Lilith countered.

“We'll lose more of our troops,” said another goblet. “We’ve already had 15% defect.”

“They lacked faith,” Lilith argued. “Let the Council and some false queen purge our weakest.”

“With respect, we can't win the war for Earth without an army.”

“Our father will slaughter our enemies and restore faith to our people. He is the one we must focus on.” Lilith’s statement was followed by the silence of deference. “How many troops do we have that aren't holding the line in Hell?”

“Roughly 880,000,” another goblet answered.

“I want half of them training for topside combat,” Lilith instructed. “We're facing resistance at the seals. There are even angels standing against us.”

“Angels?” The female voice purred with curiosity.

“Yes. Aside from reinforcing the effort on the seals, we need to address the problem of the angels,” Lilith explained. “Until our father’s return every angel is an enemy. If we find one, kill it. Send a hundred troops at it, just make sure it's dead. We will not show weakness or cowardice when we're so close.”

“Mistress, my lord would like to know what you wish of him now that he's completed another task,” the fourth goblet asked meekly.

“Cressida, do you need help with your works?” Lilith asked the fifth goblet.

“With all respect to Samhain, I believe his presence would hinder my people.” The voice hesitated. “The Weacan aren't as bad, but he is, well, frightening.”

“Brexil, tell your lord to stay in Klamath until I can find the best purpose for his skills,” Lilith instructed the fourth goblet. “But send the idle Waecan to go reinforce other groups. We cannot allow ourselves to lose momentum now.”

“Of course, Mistress.”

“Alastair, I need updates on your ten seals.”

“We should have three of them complete within a day,” the sixth goblet hissed. “I believe that I could have five more ready by the end of the week.”
“Excellent work.” Lilith smiled at the thought. “I will be traveling for the next two hours. Alastair, you're in charge while I'm unreachable.”

“Thank you, Mistress.”

Lilith tapped the surface of the blood in each goblet, ending the calls while her bodyguards opened the door to the hallway. There were two men and one woman standing on the other side waiting for them.

“And you are?” Lilith asked from behind her guards.

“Someone who very much wants to meet with you.”

Kay sat up in her bed, panting and covered in cold sweat. She looked around her dark bedroom, then buried her face in her hands imagining nearly half a million demons getting ready to touchdown on Earth.
Kay jumped out of bed and quickly threw on some clothes, then started prowling the halls looking for the others. The vision of Lilith was too important and there was no telling how long the intel would be good for. She knocked on Dean and Bobby’s bedroom doors, shouting for them to get up, without even bothering to check if anyone was inside.

She turned the corner to head for Sam's room, but before she could reach his door, he came out. He also looked haggard in his pajama pants and a wrinkled t-shirt. Kaylee fussed in his arms, probably annoyed by being picked up without permission in his haste. Kay didn't waste time walking over to him, he was already catching up to her.

“Did you have that vision too?” Sam asked as he followed her towards Dylaniel's room.

“Yeah.”

“What was that all about? I could only understand the last part.”

“Most of it was in Abyssal,” Kay explained. “Lilith was talking with her lieutenants, the core group.”

“What were they talking about?”

They turned into Dylaniel's temporary bedroom. He was sleeping, but stirred slightly at the sound of their arrival. Kay dimmed the lights as a precaution, then moved to the side of the bed.

“Dyl,” she said just louder than a whisper.

He opened his eyes and looked to her. His movements were a little bit faster than before, but he still seemed mildly resentful of his own consciousness. Ruby arrived a moment later, opting to stand next to Sam in a free corner of the room.


“Is anyone dead?” His question made her want to hug him, but she knew that would only upset him.

Dean, Bobby and Jody arrived, taking up the remainder of the small room.

“No. We’re okay for now,” she assured him, then turned her body to address everyone. “There was a vision. Lilith is planning on pulling a huge number of troops up here in order to make a hard push for the seals.”

“How many?” Bobby asked.

“440,000.”

“You can't be serious.” Dean buried his face in his hands. “That's like ten times as many as we're already dealing with and we can't even handle that.”

“That's more than one for every thousand people in the country,” Jody muttered.
“They'll probably be spread all over the world,” Kay corrected, but it was hardly any comfort.

“If they're really focusing on seals, there are only 666 possible things they'd be going for,” Bobby pointed out. “How many bodies can they throw at them?”

Sam did some quick mental math, then said, “Maybe 720, more depending on how many seals are already broken.”

“They're coming down the homestretch,” Kay explained bleakly. “Alastair said he could probably knock out eight seals by the end of the week.”

“Eight?!” Dean exclaimed, then bit his lips when Dylaniel cringed at the noise. “Sorry.”

“We need to find out how many seals are gone.”

“I'll reach out to Anael and Cas,” Dylaniel suggested. “They’ll listen to my prayers.”

“You're in touch with Cas?” Dean asked anxiously.

“He visited me last night and told me that I could pray to him. I think he's still processing the situation,” Dylaniel told Dean, who nodded in understanding.

“Well, let’s hope that they're almost done translating.” Kay redirected the conversation back to the tactical issues. “The last thing we need is to find out we're too late.”

“I still can't believe one guy can do eight seals in a week.” Sam sighed.

“Alastair probably already has dozens or hundreds of demons working under him,” Kay replied. “We’ve been finding fewer and fewer of his caste working dungeons that we conquer. The whole feeling of the war is that they're shifting up here instead of trying to hold their territory down there.”

“You beat them too hard,” Ruby theorized.

“More like we didn't have a way to block their retreat up here,” Kay said in her defense.

“Her people can't all be making that kind of progress,” Jody mused. “The seals sounded like they're designed to be difficult to break.”

“Yeah, well, the way Lilith was talking, Samhain just finished one too. She was actually concerned about him disrupting other demons’ efforts, so she told him to hold steady….” Kay’s eye lit up as she looked around to the humans in the room. “What's Klamath?”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“It's a place or something.”

Sam shrugged. “No idea.”

“Like the mountains?” Jody asked, drawing everyone's attention. “There's a mountain range in Southern Oregon and Northern California, a city or two out that way with the same name, and maybe a river. I think there's a native tribe by that name out there….” When she saw everyone’s confused expressions she added, “University of Oregon class of 91.”

“Let me see if there are any hits recorded for that area,” Sam commented, then pulled his smartphone out of his pocket. After a brief search of their records, he read his findings aloud.
“We’ve got demonic omens in Redding, Klamath on the coast, Fort Jones, Klamath Falls—"

“Falls. It's got to be Klamath Falls,” Jody said. “There was a hit last night in something Falls. Five people are in custody at their jail, arrested yesterday for killing their entire families all on the same day. Local police are calling it a cult homicide.”

“I think we found our seal.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at Kay. “You think this Samhain guy is there?”

“Lilith told Samhain to stay at Klamath until further notice,” her explained.

“But what's this get us? He’s an archdemon, right?” Bobby asked gesturing at Dylaniel, who’d been laid out by an archangel. “He's still got to be untouchable.”

“Archdemon are pretty strong, but they’re a lot weaker than archangels,” Kay corrected. “And his underlings are supposed to be helping elsewhere. He's undefended.”

“One archdemon—we could take one archdemon?” Dean asked hopefully.

"He's archdemon of the Waecan caste. He doesn't need protection,” Dylaniel warned. “Their entire caste specializes in corruption, which makes them one of the more difficult types of demons to fight. Samhain is the most powerful among them.”

"Samhain is the self-perpetuation of evil," Kay recited, conceding the hiccup.

"Awesome,” Dean said unenthusiastically. “I can see why Lilith wanted him on her side."

"He can summon vengeful spirits and mess with supernatural creatures’ moods," Dylaniel elaborated, then reconsidered his statement. "Actually he does that to basically anyone with a weak will."

“Weak will is an overstatement,” Kay corrected. “Anyone who's ever felt a little pleasure while beating on an enemy gets head-warped by him. That's why demons don't like him. He'll take the worst of you and let it loose, but moreso.”

“What does that actually look like?” Bobby asked. “How bad of a fight are we talking about?”

"He induces violence and moodiness. He'll take your rage and turn it against you."

"Great. Well, Dyl's obviously out of that fight on both counts," Dean commented. “No offense.”

"None taken," Dylaniel replied with a weak shake of the head. “Even without my injuries, I know that I have… sensitive points he would exploit.”

“Cas and Anael shouldn't go either. Hell, I bet Gabriel would also have a hard time with this,” Kay guessed. “Angels have a losing streak with him.”

“I would've thought that angel versus demon is a winning match up?” Jody speculated.

“Angels are extremely susceptible to being overwhelmed by emotions, especially when they're first being confronted with them.”

“Yeah, let's not get an evil trickster-archangel on our hands,” Sam agreed. “That sounds like the last thing we need right now.”
“Especially since he knows where the bunker is located,” Ruby pointed out.

Nearly everyone in the room took a moment to cringe at the thought, but Dyaniel, Kay, and Dean all took a little longer to recover.

“I’m out too,” Dean added. “I probably wasn't even a candidate before I went to Hell.”

“You weren't even a candidate after the fourth grade,” Sam corrected, then muttered under his breath, “Goddamn clowns.”

“How do we even fight something like that? How did you all kill Samhain?” Bobby asked.

“We didn't,” Dyaniel answered.

Dean looked between his fellow time travelers in disbelief. “What do you mean you didn't? If he's an archdemon, where was he when Lucifer was at the temple?”

“I don't honestly know. Maybe Luci just figured that it would be enough of a brawl without him? His skills were better served on another front?” Kay threw out the idea, but she hadn't really considered the issue before.

“If he was capable of summoning minions, why not contribute them to whatever cause Lucifer was pushing? Why not help the boss?”

“Do you think there was defensive magic holding him back? Or at least his minions? There weren't any ghosts, and with that many possessing creatures in one fight it felt like he would've tried that given the opportunity,” Kay suggested.

“Our witches locked down flight in the area surrounding the temple, could that have hindered his effectiveness?” Dyaniel mused. “Can he summon ghosts if they can't fly?”

“It’s completely possible that might've handicapped him.” Ruby chewed her lip, intrigued by the idea. “We might be able to block him from summoning ghosts… though we still have to figure out how to beat him straight up, which is kinda hard when nobody can get close to the guy.”

"Sam," Dean said, drawing everyone’s attention. "Sam could fight him."

"What? I can’t." Sam thought about the other version of him, who had ruled Hell, called himself a demon, said yes to Lucifer, and was a party to the destruction of the world. "If I go bad, that's got to be really bad…. If you needed to, could you even take me down?"

"It's not going to come to that."

“That's easy for you to say. You aren't the one that’d have to fight a mind-bending archdemon while not going insane.” Sam glanced around the room looking for anyone who would agree with him that it was too dangerous for him to face Samhain. “Tell me you could stop me if you had to.”

“You're not going dark side,” Dean stated. “Hell, I saw the other you complete with Lucifer in him and he was still a good guy.”

“He’s one of the few people that might know how to locate Lilith,” Dyaniel reminded Sam of the stakes.

“You’re asking too much from me.” Sam’s voice lost a little bit of the fight in it, though he didn’t seem remotely convinced.
He met Kay’s eyes, looking to her for any insight into her dad and his own nature and strength. She knew her dad’s personal conviction, yet she wasn’t sure whether that was innate quality or something that he’d gained through the crucible.

“Yeah, we are asking too much from you,” she agreed. “But you can do it.”

After it was tentatively decided that Sam might be capable of defeating Samhain, if the opportunity had truly presented itself, it was time for additional research. No one liked the idea of Sam going into a fight by himself, so it was agreed that the normal research effort to find Lilith would continue... but if the planning and preparations for the fight were completed first, they’d have to jump on that opportunity while it lasted. Since the archdemon hadn't been on Earth in several centuries, Kay and Ruby both volunteered to go to Hell to find what they could while the others started investigating current events in Klamath Falls.

Kay went directly to the Citadel to delegate out significant portions of the research on not only Samhain, but also on Abaddon, Alastair, and her vision from the previous night.

Ruby opted to go directly to the High Athenaeum in order to begin her work. The athenaeum was the academic nerve center of Hell’s Central District. It was a massive series of buildings which included access to the realm’s archives. The four scholarly castes considered it sacred ground.

A group of half a dozen Maji and Arbris entered a little ways in front of her, which gave her pause. The place was more active than it'd been when she had visited after meeting with Morrison. Normally she didn't give a damn about propriety, but she was still trying to get her archdemon off her back and that meant outwardly appearing to be a team player.

She stopped in the supply room off the entryway to get the customary adornments. In the social structure of Hell, Maji were one of the scholarly castes, which traditionally wore robes in areas of importance for the different castes. The rules hadn't been strictly enforced since the Crossroads had unofficially adopted modern human business suits as their caste garb, leaving the robes as dusty relics. Ruby wouldn't have bothered wearing robes to another caste’s sacred site, but for her own people's she decided to spend a few extra minutes getting herself decent. She threw on a small humanoid set of the black and maroon robes of the Maji, then continued into the building.

It was incredibly rare for a demon to bring a meatsuit down with them, but she didn't want to risk having hers decay beyond use while she was in Hell. Some small part of her wanted to trade out her meatsuit for something closer to her original human form, but she had to admit that it made sense for her to stick with what she had. Not only was her current meatsuit capable of producing milk, but Kaylee may have already started bonding with it. Not to mention the fact that it had already successfully produced a child. She wasn't prepared to investigate how that happened and she wasn't planning on trying to have another kid, but she had to admit that it was important to keep her current body in good condition to preserve future options and data.

The more she moved about collecting her sources, the more it felt like everyone was watching her, either covertly or even unabashedly. Thanks to her meatsuit she wasn't some malformed creature, but she was far from the only human looking demon around. The scholarly castes were among the best at imposing their wills onto their appearances and the High Athenaeum was where the cream of the crop liked to spend their time. She was wary of the attention, especially when one of the other Maji approached her.

“I haven't seen you since the Wilderness. What are you up to?” the Maji asked in a polite tone while stealing a glance at the tomes piled on the table in front of Ruby. She didn't recognize her castemate, but she honestly wasn't in the mood to ask zir name.
“Research,” Ruby replied succinctly.

“On what?”

“Samhain.”

“Oh.” Zir voice lost some enthusiasm and zir shell softened.

“What?” Ruby asked. “Do you know something about him?”

“Not really. I just…” The Maji hesitated. “I thought you might be here for something else.”

“Morrison is making me put in more time for the caste and realm, but right now that means Samhain,” she explained.

She noticed that several of the demons who’d been watching her were moving closer, drawn by the conversation.

“And you should be doing that?” Zie questioned.

“Why not?” Ruby asked indignantly.

“It's just that you're…” The Maji opened zir mouth, but didn't have the confidence to finish whatever the thought was.

Brynx, an old acquaintance from within the caste, interjected himself into the conversation. “I just want to know how'd you do it?”

“What?” Ruby turned to look at him.

Three other demons hovered behind him, watching her with clinical interest.

“Have a child.”

“It's called sex.” Her tone was as uninviting as possible.

He stood taller than normal, consciously or unconsciously trying to intimidate her. “But what did you do? How did you make it take?”

“I didn't do anything.”

“There has to be more to it.” He moved closer to her, nearly inserting himself between her and her research. “The war will pass, and our species will still be stuck taking the scraps of the humans. But if we could breed— You realize this is the most important thing to ever happen to us and you aren't even helping us.”

“If you think the war is over just because we're doing better down here, you've got a hell of a lot of learning to do,” Ruby told him. “It's still being fought. I have my own work and priorities. I'm doing my fucking part.” She noticed one of the other demons creep closer to her from another direction. “Stay away from me.”

“Ruby, let the brutes fight while we solve the real problems,” Brynx suggested.

“You don't know a damn thing about this war and what's at stake. So don't tell me I'm not working on real problems,” she shot back. From the corner of her eye she saw another demon look her body up and down while flexing its claws. Without waiting for any further advances, she slammed
the tome in front of her closed, scooped up her materials, and pushed her way through the small crowd. “I said stay the fuck away from me!”

“You don’t belong in the war!” one of them shouted after her, but she didn’t look back to see who it was. “You aren’t strong enough! You’ll get yourself killed and we’ll lose so much!”

Ruby slammed the door behind her and made her way to the closest gate as fast as she could. She stopped in an alley a couple blocks from the gate in order to take a moment to collect herself.

For a few seconds she considered staying down in Hell to do her research. There was much more time downstairs, but there were also many more distractions. Ignoring the fact that the environment was a natural irritant, there were also who-knew-how-many demons lurking about who might harass her about Kaylee. Worse than the questions and curious glances was the fact that many of them were apparently judging her. And if things went wrong that judgment could be potentially dangerous. The last thing she needed was for Morrison or someone to try confining her for her own safety. Being under the clock on Earth wasn’t ideal, but she needed to get away from the risk of being locked down entirely. She bundled her books in her cloak and hurried to the gate.

Sam watched his daughter sleep peacefully in her crib, unaware of everything that was going on around her. With some luck she would grow up only hearing stories about these troubles, both the Apocalypse and everything surrounding it. He thought about the hunters he had killed over the last year in order to protect his daughter and he wondered how many people Kay’s dad had killed for her. There was no doubt in his mind that he’d always fight to save his family without hesitation, but he couldn’t help wonder how easy it’d be to lose the line between defensive and preemptive action as the ambient threats in the world increased. Had the other him pressed the limits of morality or did he occasionally break them in the interest of practicality? He looked at his hands, then back at Kaylee’s crib, wondering how many more people he’d have to kill in his life.

“What’s—you wanna talk about it?” Ruby asked. “You look pensive as hell.”

She stood in the hallway, having stopped in her tracks at the sight of him. Her hair was a bit tousled and her face wasn’t its usual relaxed expression. A bundle of books wrapped in black and maroon fabric was clutched in her arms, but she didn’t seem to notice the awkward load. When he nodded weakly at her she entered the bedroom and temporarily dumped her books down on the bed.

“I’m worried about fighting him.”

“No surprise there,” Ruby agreed. “Facing down a fight is always a little anxiety producing and he’s an archdemon.”

“It’s not even that that worries me. It’s thinking about the other me…. I ruled Hell. I was Lucifer. I did horrible things. I killed people.” Sam remembered the faces of the hunters they’d left dead in their wake. He wondered how insignificant that weight would be on his conscience in the coming weeks and months, compared to what might come. “I’ve killed people.”

“You were in an impossible situation with them,” Ruby assured him.

“And if I end up in another?” He almost didn’t want to meet her eyes. “It scares the hell out of me, thinking what I could do. I know he’s trying, but for years Dean didn’t trust me. I used to think it was because I was his baby brother, but maybe he could sense it too.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Ruby stated firmly. “Dean just doesn’t trust anyone.”
“Maybe he was right not to trust me? I'm dangerous.”

"Aren't we all?"

“It's not the same.”

“Dean said it himself, the other you was still good after Lucifer and everything. Maybe it's hard and it goes against his protective instincts, but think about it, Dean's backing you on this and that's gotta be huge.” Ruby moved to stand right in front of Sam and grabbed his chin, turning it so that he was facing her. “There's no question that you could be this larger than life person: an incredible fighter, a leader, a force of nature, whatever. The only question is what do you want to be?”

"I just want to be a good father."

“Guess what? You are.”

“I won't be if I die out there,” he muttered before rubbing his face, trying to regain some sort of composure.

In a surprisingly affectionate gesture Ruby hugged him. He held her close trying to cherish every detail of the moment.

"You shouldn't have to fight him alone.” Ruby looked up at Sam with a desperate expression. “I could—”

"Nobody else can face him.” Sam shook his head. They'd tried to think of anyone else who might be able to resist that kind of corruption and he was the only person that seemed to stand a chance. “I don't like it either, but we're running out of time and opportunities. How do we know we'll get another shot at something like this before it's too late?"

"If something happens….” She pulled back from him in order to stand before him in a showing other concern and determination. “You said it; we're a team.”

"This time... it's alone or nothing." He glanced back at the crib, then back to her. "You're not going to get killed."

"Sam, I—"

“Before we were facing different enemies. The stakes have changed. The situation has changed.” He spoke with growing conviction. “You know I'm right on this.”

She wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that something was wrong, but she couldn't find the flaw in the reasoning beyond her not being there with him.

With a sinking feeling she realized that maybe part of the wrongness was in the way his words had echoed something that Morrison had told her. That the situation had changed and the truth was that he didn't trust her. That he couldn't rely on her. She'd thought that Sam had trusted her. Back when he was struggling to get himself back together after Dean's death, he'd been so vulnerable with her that there hadn't been any doubt about the trust between them. But recently something had felt off. He was tiptoeing around subjects and trying to talk her out of going on missions. It was almost as if he didn't trust her, that he wanted to keep her home with Kaylee the way Morrison had been pushing. Sam wasn't relying on her the way he used to. Instead of being his equal and partner in all things, she was being coddled.

Despite her frustration at the epiphany, she didn't want to confront him with it and risk a fight with
him, not before sending him off to battle an archdemon that fed on and manipulated those sorts of
dangerous feelings. For now she’d have to bury her hurt and doubt so as not to burden him
anymore than he already was. If there wasn't a technical flaw in the plan to send Sam on his own,
then the most she could do was to reassure and support him.

“I know. You're right.”

Sam was taking some time alone to collect himself while Ruby prepared the teleportation spells for
him to use. He wasn't particularly concerned with honing his fighting skills at that point; demons
were his preferred opponent. The biggest priority was just getting himself into the right headspace
to face someone who was potentially capable of manipulating emotions. Talking with Ruby had
helped him a little bit, but he still felt like something was off. He was torn between focusing on
positive thoughts or digging down to find every little insecurity when there was a soft knock on the
door.

“Come in.”

Kay entered at his invitation, then leaned against the wall next to the desk he was sitting at.

“What's up?” he asked.

"I want to give you a little good luck charm, before you head out there."

She reached around to the back of her neck, undid the clasp on one of her two necklaces and
handed it to him. The pendant was a bright silvery metal. It was a two-inch-long, flat inverted
tear drop containing fine Arabic text bordered on the top by a pair of horns and tiny flowers.

"Is it actually a magical charm?" He looked it over, turning it in his hands, fairly certain that it
wasn't out of the question with this crowd.

"No. It's not like that," she admitted. "It's more of a reminder."

"A reminder of what?"

"My brother."

"Tom?" Sam asked cautiously. He wondered if the necklace had belonged to Tom or maybe it had
been a gift.

"Alex," Kay corrected, earning a surprised look from him. "He was five years younger than me.
Rebellious smartass, took after our mom."

"Ruby and I had another kid?" Sam barely managed to get the question out.

"Two other kids," Kay replied. "Sa’dah—Sadie—was the youngest."

He'd figured that Kaylee had been a fluke, some sort of improbable occurrence that some people
might call destined. But she hadn't been alone. He had a chance at having other biological children
in the future, and with Ruby. Maybe he'd silently hoped for a scenario like that, but he hadn't dared
to express it or even admit it to himself. In that moment of turmoil and uncertainty, knowing that
that was even a possibility was bittersweet.

"Alex was your perfect misunderstood teen," Kay continued when he didn't respond. "He was all
about demon pride—wore his eyes black and horns out. He even wore Hell clothes topside. But he
was the nicest kid you'd ever meet and barely anyone outside the family bothered to know him well enough to figure it out…. Anyway, Alex fell for a human. When word got out that he was dating a lot of people got scared.”

“Why?” Sam couldn't understand why anyone would care who his son dated.

“People in the know don't like the idea of having more of Lucifer's vessels alive than the bare minimum, possibly none. The fact the Alex’s girlfriend started sleeping at his flat put the issue back on the table. But he didn't back down on the whole freedom to date whoever issue.” Kay nodded at the necklace. “That pendant’s made out of the angel blade that killed him.”

Sam nearly dropped the necklace, but instead managed to gently place it down on the desk. He felt a bit sick to his stomach at the thought that he'd been holding part of the weapon used to kill Kay's brother, his would-be son. It didn't seem like a good luck charm. He couldn't see why she'd been wearing it around her neck. There had to be something he was missing.

“What… what happened?”

“He was killed by some angels because he wouldn't stop seeing his girlfriend.” Kay dragging her fingertips over the pendant. “He was brilliant. I'm sure he knew the risks on some level, but somethings are too important…. They're worth risks.”

"What's it say?" Sam nodded to the Arabic text on the pendant.

"'A guidance and a mercy for those who do good,'" Kay translated. "It was one of his favorite phrases. Alex was a hellion if there ever was one. He was as Abyssal as anything that set foot on Earth, but he was also the sweetest. He hated fighting, cruelty—he wasn't even into revenge, which is kind of amazing when you think about the world we grew up in. Occasionally, you could piss him off. He was a teenager after all, but he didn't hate people."

"I don’t understand. Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because he always fought for something that was right, even when it was easier to fight against someone who was wrong," Kay explained.

“That’s pretty noble. You sure you can't come with me?” He asked even though he knew the answer was unchanged.

“Sorry, but I don't think so. They're his words, not mine.” Kay chewed her lower lip for a second while staring at nothing in particular in a moment of reflection. “I’ve tried to hold onto that lesson, but it’s a hard one to internalize. Maybe I’ve seen too much of the wrong things? Maybe it’s something you’re born with or not? Maybe I just don’t understand what it means to be good?”

“I think you’re a good person.”

“I’ve done horrible things.”

“You’ve been through a lot.” He gave her that excuse.

“Spoken like an actual good person,” Kay joked. “I know this is a ton of pressure. You’re young, and you’re going through a lot in general… but maybe you’re the kind of person who can really practice that lesson.”

“I hope so.” He picked up the pendant again and looked at it with new reverence. “Thank you for letting me borrow this…. Guidance and mercy, just what I need.”
Sam rocked Kaylee in his arms. Her dark brown eyes looked up at him, with what he hoped was focus. Maybe it was wishful thinking to imagine that her inhuman senses gave her the ability to recognize him. He just wanted her to know him as he was, if something were to happen.

He knew better than anyone that memories as an infant didn't linger in the mind into adulthood. His mom had been alive and in his life for six months, but he'd only ever known her from photographs and the exceptionally rare story that Dean would tell. Meanwhile Kaylee was barely a week old.

"I'm going to go out to stop a bad guy, and hopefully find another one called Lilith." He oversimplified for the newborn. "If we can find her and stop her, then I promise we'll go have a real life. We'll go have a home where you can play like any other kid. I can learn to cook—and not just burgers like your uncle Dean. And when you're older, you can go to school and make friends. You're going to have a real life, away from all of this fighting and fear."

He slipped the necklace that Kay had given him over his head, then put on his fake wedding ring. Kaylee reached out for him, taking hold of his right thumb and pinkie. He rested his fingers lightly on her little chest and felt her gentle heartbeat. Her eyes blinked slowly with fatigue before closing as she fell back asleep, perfectly content holding his hand. He wasn't sure if such a young baby was capable of understanding what it meant to be safe, but the sight of his daughter completely at peace… that was one of the things he'd need to hold in his heart, one of the things to fight for.

Ruby walked into the bedroom and over to him. She softly dragged her fingertips along Kaylee’s arm, then along his arm in the same movement. He knew that she was expecting to take Kaylee in preparation for him leaving for his mission, but she let him have a few more minutes of holding her.

"Let me show you the goodies I've cooked up for you," she suggested as a way of buying him a bit more time. When she opened her bag to dig through it, he spotted an angel blade inside.

"I don't want that blade." On some level he knew it was Lucifer’s blade. The thought of using it while trying to stay disassociated from the archangel was unsettling.

"Like any blade or just that specific one?"

"It's his."

She nodded in understanding, disappeared for a moment, then reappeared with a different angel blade. He took it in his hand, but its subtle wrongness just reminded him of the connection to Lucifer in a different way. After a moment of trying to become comfortable with it, he put it down on the table.

"I can fight demons without a blade," he told her.

"Just take it with you. You can leave it in the bag if it bugs you." Ruby picked it back up and returned it to the bag. "If angels show up for whatever reason you're gonna be glad to have it."

"Fine," he conceded. "Anything good against demons?"

"Offensively, not so much. But this is gonna be your ace in the hole.” Ruby handed him a flare gun of all things. “Supposedly this was the universal pain in the ass for all flying supernatural creatures back in 2039. You get to be the one to drop that bombshell on its first unsuspecting victims.”
“Wait, the anti-flight spell is in a gun?” He examined it while being careful to not point it anywhere near Kaylee.

“The spell’s one of the group that was essentially weaponized. Its area of effect is as far as the light travels, so shoot it into the sky. You can probably get up to maybe a 20 mile radius if there's good visibility and the elevation is in your favor.”

“What happens if I fire it indoors?”

“You waste a few hours of my hard work and probably get killed by an army of angry ghosts and demons.”

He appreciated her attempt to lighten the mood. “Outdoor use only,” he acknowledged, then packed the flare gun in the bag.

“Here are the teleportation spells.” She showed him two pieces of wood with coordinates charred into them. “This one is keyed for the edge of Klamath Falls. You're going to snap it to get there. This other one is keyed to a safehouse in Newark that Bobby had Rufus ward up. From there we can get you back via less cloak and dagger methods. The spell won't work while you're in the no fly zone, so you'll have to clear the area first.”

“Got it.”

“Snap the first one, find a car, and look for Samhain. We’ll call you if the locator spell shows that the demons are moving or doing anything weird. When you get close deploy the flare outside. After that you should be able to fight him without anybody fleeing or flying in. Beat whatever you can out of him, then get out of there.” She spoke with a seriousness that candidly showed her concern. “Don’t stay there for very long, maybe two hours tops. We have to assume that Lilith’s gonna realize the area is under attack and send support eventually. Take one of the small roads out of town—”

He kissed her and didn't pull back for several seconds. His thumb caressed her cheek, then he looked her in the eyes for a moment just to appreciate her. He reluctantly traded her Kaylee for the bag of equipment.

“It’ll be like old times,” he assured her. “Sneaking by Lilith's lines.”

“But this time I won’t be with you.”

“Then this time you two will be what I'm coming back for.”

Ruby was rocking Kaylee and anxiously pacing in Sam’s bedroom. The waiting was ridiculous. It’d only been about twenty minutes since Sam had left, but it felt like a week minimum. She wanted to do something, to make a difference—and the bedroom even smelled like him a bit. She decided to take Kaylee into her workshop where she could at least try to distract herself with designing offensive spells or refining the rest of the spell recipe fragments that Dean had given her. When she got to the workshop, she sat at her desk and started assessing the pile of paper and random clutter.

“See, this is the kind of mess inventors live in,” she explained to Kaylee as a way of preoccupying herself. “Your dad is smart and all, but he’s too organized. You have to throw a little chaos into the mix in order to get inspiration to hit you square in the face.”

Ruby started flipping through the calculations that she’d done for summoning Kali. She didn’t
need them anymore, so she started pushing them to the side, but while juggling the baby in her offhand, she accidentally knocked a pile of notes onto the floor. When she knelt down to collect the mess she realized that the Kali notes had gotten mixed up with some of her research on Samhain and also the recipes provided by Dean.

“Your dad would be perfectly fine looking up Samhain if he could’ve gotten his hands on it. But there’s this whole other type of smarts that is figuring out these recipe puzzles,” Ruby continued. “You see, you have to understand the mechanics that make the magic work in order to know how you can enhance it or restrict it. You can’t just pray to Kali if she’s actually a spirit—”

Ruby froze for a moment as her brain started racing. She pushed around the papers, desperately searching for the notes on Samhain’s abilities and the anti-flight spell involving the balsam powder. When she found the six pages she was looking for, she spread them out on the floor and looked all of them over together.

The recipe that she was using for the anti-flight spell included angel blood, an ingredient that she had never used before. The recipe notes that Dean had added said that it was supposed to work the same as a normal anti-flight spell, except for also binding angels, but he wasn’t a witch and he’d been basing the annotations off secondhand information. The fact of the matter was that angels were a very different creature than demons, the normal targets of the spell, and therefore something else was happening in the fundamental mechanics.

She started scrambling, trying to redo half her calculations. The math was off. By her guess the anti-flight spell was only partially effective. It’d block the demons and angels just fine, but it was by no means a universal prohibition on supernatural travel. She grabbed her silver fake wedding ring, stuffed it in her pocket, then held Kaylee to her and ran to find one of the others. A few seconds later, she located Dean and Bobby in the library talking about the eight seals Alastair was breaking.

“Watch the baby,” Ruby told Dean while handing him Kaylee, who’d started crying. “I need to go.”

“What? Wait.” Startled realization spread across Dean’s face. “You can’t go near Samhain. That’s—”

“Listen, Sam might be able to take Samhain, but there are the ghosts—”

“He’s got that spell. It’s a no fly zone. Samhain can’t get the ghosts into the area,” Dean countered, though as he said things that should’ve been obvious to the spells’ designer he lost the confidence in his voice.

“The spell only stops him from drawing the dead from afar. It doesn’t stop him from raising. There are spirits everywhere. Samhain doesn’t need to fly them in. Sam’s gonna get swarmed.”

Dean’s widening eyes told her that he was understanding her. “But the anti-flight… You can’t reach him.”

“Watch me.”

Ruby disappeared.

Once Sam had stolen a car and gotten into town, it had taken him only twenty or thirty minutes to find Samhain. As soon as he touched down in Klamath Falls he could sense the presence of a powerful demon. He hotwired a car, then followed the almost-sour sensation until it led him to the
nearly empty parking lot of some shopping plaza. There were half a dozen lesser demons loading a
van in preparation for some journey. He watched them for ten minutes, waiting to see if the
minions would leave without their master, but he decided it wasn’t worth the risk that the
archdemon would leave with them, making him a moving target. His approach drew their
attention, but none of them seemed to take a significant interest until he climbed out of the car and
they saw his face.

Sam didn’t waste any time once they’d identified him. As soon as he was outside the car he pulled
the flare gun from his pocket. For a moment three of the demons laughed, mistaking it for a
weapon he intended to use to harm them. He pointed it into the air, firing the balsam and angel
blood flare, locking down flight for the area.

Samhain quietly gave a subordinate some instruction. But when the underling tried to teleport
away he couldn't. The demons barely had enough time to realize that something was going
horribly wrong before Sam grabbed them with his powers.

In a way it was almost refreshing for Sam. He was perfectly competent at using his powers against
demons. There wasn’t nearly the struggle or spottiness that he’d faced while fighting humans or
angels. In a testament to his growing proficiency with his powers, he killed the lesser demons
without breaking a sweat. But Samhain shrugged him off with only a minor amount of effort.

“You’re going to fight me?” Samhain asked in a raspy growl.

“Tell me where Lilith is,” Sam demanded, but Samhain’s lip curled up in a smile.

“I’d like to see you make me.”

Sam stared at Samhain for a second in confusion. He hadn’t expected to face an opponent that to
happily welcome a fight. Based on the how many dozens or hundreds of demons he’d killed over
the last year and a half, he’d assumed that his reputation had somewhat preceded him as being a
capable foe. But Samhain seemed excited by the conflict…. He was excited by the prospect of
Sam crossing a line in the heat of the fight.

Samhain shoved his hand towards Sam, trying to throw him, but he managed to largely block it.
Before Sam could recover enough to counterattack, Samhain charged at him. The archdemon
swung at his head with superhuman strength, an attribute that Sam lacked. He stumbled
backwards, but another punch came at him. Instead of dodging, he grabbed at Samhain’s arm, then
started trying to burn him with the First Light. Samhain howled with rage, before kicking him in
the torso. Sam could feel one of his ribs snap as the air was knocked out of him. He staggered
backward and tried to collect himself, but Samhain shoved him back with telekinesis.

For a dizzying moment Sam had trouble getting his bearings. He didn’t understand what was
happening at first. The hit to the chest had stunned him for a split second, but it shouldn’t have
affected him that badly. His confusion at the sensation seemed to rattle around in his mind creating
a frustrating feedback loop— It was Samhain using his powers to try to agitate him. The
archdemon had seized upon as minor a vulnerability as confusion and was trying to amplify it into
something that might debilitate him. It was a startling realization that something other than cruelty
or anger might be a small seed of corruption.

Strangely, the discovery that he was being manipulated canceled out his confusion and the effects
began to fade immediately. Sam shook his head, trying not to become focused on fearing the
power that Samhain could wield, lest that become its own poison. He pushed himself up off the
ground and watched as Samhain backed away from him. They had both discovered that despite
Samhain’s demonic physical strength, Sam was arguably more dangerous in melee combat. He
wasn’t the only one concerned about the matchup.

Sam dragged himself to his feet, then gripped the necklace Kay had given him. The fight was going to be mostly powers-based unless he could find a way to close the distance. That meant that Samhain would keep trying to manipulate him and more than ever he needed to hold onto his confidence and his cause.

"I'm stronger than you," Sam warned.

"Are you going to prove it?" the archdemon coaxed.

“Tell me where Lilith is and I’ll let you live.” He offered mercy, a gesture that wasn’t well-received by Samhain.

“I won’t betray my mistress.” The archdemon’s every word seemed to drip with loathing. “And you will beg before this is done.”

Sam could sense a swell of power emanate from Samhain. It spread out through the air and down into the ground as far as he could see. Before he could begin to wonder what was happening, he felt a chill come over him. The sight of his own breath was crushing. Half a dozen ghost rose from the asphalt of the parking lot and shambled toward them.

For a moment Sam thought about trying to run for the car, but he suspected that he couldn’t make it there before the ghosts reached him. And even if he was able to get into the car, he’d probably just end up with a ghost possessing the car and causing a crash. Instead he took a deep breath and tried to convince himself that with enough concentration maybe he could use his powers on ghosts. He’d never tried it out, but his brain was struggling to think of any other options.

Samhain wordlessly pointed at him. The ghosts hurled themselves towards him. He tried to hold them back with telekinesis, but they flickered and slipped through his force. He managed to slow them down slightly, but they quickly had surrounded him, clawing at him, cutting shallow gashes into his flesh. He collapsed to the ground and curled up, trying to protect his chest and face as best he could. His powers might’ve been slowing the ghosts down, but he could tell that he’d soon give out.

He felt devastated. The fight had taken a turn that he hadn't sufficiently planned for and in the heat of the moment he couldn't find a way out. He was alone, completely outmatched against ghosts. He had no idea if angel blades worked on ghosts and the closest iron was probably the tire iron in the trunk of his car. But he could barely move let alone get the forty feet or so necessary to reach the bag or break into the locked compartment. He tried to reach out with his telekinesis, though it was so hard to focus while trying to hold off the ghosts as much as he was. But through the screeching of the ghosts and the exhausting effort, he heard the low humming of a car engine approaching.

A bright red Mustang sped across the parking lot at blinding speed, hitting Samhain, and crushing him into the side of the van. The driver's side door opened, then Ruby started running from the wreck. Blood trickled down the side of her face and she was limping as she hurried back towards Sam. Her main hand held the bloody branch of an oak tree and she was already reciting an invocation.

She was channeling some sort of barrier spell as she approached Sam. The translucent wall pushed the ghosts off of him and became a dome of magical protection that enveloped roughly fifty feet in diameter. She stopped about halfway between Samhain and Sam, encapsulating the three of them. The barrier flickered as the vengeful spirits slammed against it, trying to reach either their master
“Sam, get up!” she shouted. “You’ve gotta get up and finish this!”

Samhain threw the flaming mustang away from himself and at Ruby, but Sam deflected it. The archdemon peeled himself from the indentation in the van, then started lurching toward them. He moved to hit Ruby with telekinesis, but Sam blocked the attack. In his frustration Samhain snarled at her, throwing telekinetic attacks wildly. Sam tried to intercept them, but in his effort to protect Ruby he missed one good hit that knocked him back several feet to the ground.

The archdemon telekinetically grabbed Ruby, yanking her off her feet and dragging her roughly along the asphalt toward him. She kicked and struggled as the pavement tore her clothes and skin. As soon as the oak branch touched the ground, the barrier flickered and faded.

Unhindered by the barrier, ghosts started swarming Sam once again. He could feel their cold claws clutching his body and he fought to keep up some sort of telekinetic defense to at least slow them down. But the ghosts weren’t his biggest concern. Despite them, he started crawling on his stomach toward Ruby.

Samhain knelt down and grabbed her as soon as she was within arm’s reach. He clutched her throat with one hand propping her backwards over his bent knee. She kicked and jerked trying to break his hold, but he was much stronger than her. Samhain placed his offhand over her heart. Sam could sense tendrils of the archdemon’s power burrow into her chest, piercing her cloud. Her body convulsed and she screamed in agony. He looked up at Sam menacingly, taunting him, trying to make him angry.

Sam could feel a growing, burning need to make Samhain pay before killing him. The ghosts and his own pain became an afterthought to what he was witnessing. Ruby was being tortured. White-hot rage began clouding his vision and reason. He wasn't concerned with finding out where Lilith was, more than anything he just wanted to tear Samhain to shreds for hurting her— But Ruby acted first.

She pulled her knife from the back of her pants, then swung upward, cutting off Samhain’s hand at the wrist. Without his hand that had been holding her neck, the archdemon dropped her to the ground. He cried out in pain and anger, clutching his bleeding wrist. His screams caused the ghosts to immediately flee in fear.

Sam’s heart swelled with love and pride for her, drowning out the fear and hate. He wanted to fight Samhain to protect her, not to avenger her. She had avenged herself. He stood up and started staggering towards the injured archdemon. A quick telekinetic throw moved Samhain clear of Ruby, who was still recovering on the ground. He gripped Samhain below the guise of his meatsuit and squeezed.

“Where's Lilith?”

When he didn't answer Sam hurt him again, but it only produced a ragged laugh. “I won't tell you anything,” Samhain growled.

“I'll kill you if you make me.”

“You'll kill me if you want to.”

“No, I'm not here because I want to do this. It's because I need to,” Sam said with confidence. "I'm here because I'm fighting for something that's right, not against someone who's wrong.”
“You aren't going to win this.” The archdemon smiled through his bloodied mouth in a display of spite. “I promise you that.”

Sam looked over at Ruby, then back to Samhain. He hated the idea of going to all this trouble and not being able to extract any intelligence from him, but both Ruby and he were hurt and they needed to get out of there before any of Lilith's reinforcements arrived. With a calm and deliberate flex of his hand, he pulled Samhain from his body and destroyed him.

Sam hobbled toward Ruby, who was trembling on the ground. As he approached her, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Now you want to know if I'm alright,” Ruby said in a snide voice as she got to her feet. Her eyes narrowed at him.

Sam's stomach sank at the realization that she had been affected by Samhain. “Ruby, you aren't yourself. You need to calm down.” He tried to use as non-confrontational a tone as possible and raised his hands.

“You don't even know! How do you get off saying that you know who I am?!” Ruby yelled. She'd used her knife to point at him in a particularly unnerving move, then gestured around with it indicating something bigger than him. “Everyone's going around treating me like I'm made of glass.”

He wasn’t sure what to do. Part of him wanted to step toward her, despite the knife. He might’ve been unarmed, but he figured that he could disarm her without too much trouble. But at the same time, he didn’t want to undermine his credibility by doing something like fighting her for the weapon or retreating.

“I know you aren't. You're tough as nails.”

“Don't kiss my ass,” she snapped back at him. “You think I haven’t noticed the way you’ve been treating me. You think I’m weak, just like the rest of them.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Prove it.”

He didn't know what she was getting at. He didn't even know what was wrong exactly. They'd been having a bit of tension over the last few days, but somehow it'd always been put aside for some more important issue. Now she was fixated on it and he honestly wasn't even sure what her perspective was on everything. He didn't even know who she was accusing of thinking she was weak… other than him.

“I don't know what to say. I know things have been tough, but I don't know what's wrong,” Sam admitted. “What do you want from me?”

“You didn't even hear me because you didn't want to disagree. You were stressed and upset, and I stowed my crap to help you—but you know what? I can be stressed! I can be upset! I'm not some assistant, secondary character, support on the fucking sidelines! I'm your partner and you're too busy to try to help me or fix us!”

He was devastated by the idea that she might actually feel those things deep down under the exaggerated effects. Before he could think of what to say, she said something even more alarming.
"You hurt me. Now I kinda want to hurt you back."

"Whoa— I'm so sorry that I hurt you. I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am." He raised his hands and took a step away from her. "Please, I don't want to fight."

"And that's just the end of it?!" she shouted. "It's the two of us god dammit! I get a say and I want to fight!"

She dragged her knife across one of her palms, held it up, and said a keyword. A fissure ripped through the ground toward Sam. He tumbled out of the way.

"Stop it."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

He tried not to roll his eyes or otherwise telegraph his exasperation. Despite his concern over Ruby's obvious distress, the whole situation seemed screwed up. She was angry because apparently he hadn't been communicating enough and now that he was trying to talk things out she didn't want to de-escalate things.

"You're upset at me; I respect that. I should've listened to you sooner. I screwed up. I admit that," he said as a concession. "But you need to calm down and let this stuff get out of your system."

"I don't need to do anything."

She gestured at him, tearing up a large chunk of asphalt that he was standing on. He barely managed to land on his feet and dodge being hit by it.

"Fine, you're right." Sam mentally kicked himself for trying to tell her what to do when she was feeling so disrespected. "Tell me what you want—more than hurting me, more than fighting. What do you need from me?"

"What I need is for you to stop pretending like everything's fine because it's not." Ruby threw up her hands. "You're upset. I know you are. I want you to fucking talk to me. Yell at me. Just tell me what's going on with you!"

He hesitated for a moment too long. Ruby walked over to the burning Mustang, tore the passenger side door from it, and hurled it at him. He deflected the projectile, but didn't notice the incoming side view mirror, which she had thrown immediately after the door. The mirror hit him in the left cheekbone, though he suspected it had been another warning shot because the hit wasn't hard enough to break the bone. Lost in the confusing emotions, he couldn't stop himself from snapping back at her.

"You're looking for fights without even thinking of the consequences!" Sam telekinetically threw the smoldering car several yards away from Ruby as he started walking towards her. "You're going to get yourself killed and you don't care what that'll do to Kaylee and me!"

"Of course I fucking care! But you can't keep me locked up!"

Ruby swept her hand at the asphalt between them creating another fissure. While Sam was busy shielding his eyes from the burst of debris, she ran and jumped over the obstacle, tackling him to the ground. She pinned him for a second, but before she could throw a punch he'd grabbed her fists.

"I'm not fucking trying to keep you locked up!" He grappled with her on the ground. "You came
out here and risked both of our lives! If we both were killed—just think about our daughter!”

“If I hadn't come you would've absolutely died!” she snapped while looking up at him. He was on
top of her, so close that it was almost intimate. Her voice lost some of its edge. “You've got to
fucking trust me again.”

“And you need to take care of yourself.”

He knew he'd said something wrong from her eyes alone. She placed a palm on his chest, then
whispered something. It felt like he'd been hit by a charging bull. He flew off of her, scraping his
shoulder where he collided with the ground as he rolled several yards. In the few seconds that he’d
struggled to get to his knees, Ruby had gotten herself up and she was standing with her arms
crossed.

“I'm gonna fight whatever battles I damn well decide are necessary because I'm a fucking adult,”
she stated firmly. “You used to trust me to know what I’m doing and now you don't—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, I'm not telling you to be careful because I don't trust you. It's because I love
you!” Sam yelled, then bit his lip realizing what he'd just said. His stomach knotted and all of his
frustration was drowned out by nerves. He swallowed hard, then in a meeker voice said, “I'm
scared. I don't want to risk losing you... because I'm in love with you.”

She just stared at him for several seconds. He knelt there, bruised and bloodied, awkwardly
professing his love, only feet away from several dead bodies and a smoldering car.

“What the fuck does that even mean?!” She shouted, but her shoulders relaxed a bit and her arms
dropped to her sides in what he'd hoped was confusion and exhaustion.

“It means that when I'm with you, somehow I'm happy even when everything's shit.” Sam looked
down at his minor injuries, then back at her, and shrugged. “Somehow even now, with a pierced
lung and concussion, I’m the luckiest person in the world because I’m with you…. You're perfect
and the thought of losing you makes me do stupid things.”

Ruby shook her head, rejecting the idea. “I'm pretty fucking far from perfect.”

“To me you're it,” he told her while cautiously getting to his feet.

“You're an idiot,” she said softly.

“I'm fine with that,” Sam replied with a bashful smile, earning a small chuckle from Ruby.

As he slowly walked towards her, she dropped her knife, then put her hands over her face. “What's
wrong with us?”

“Nothing at all,” he assured her.

“I fucking hate these mindfucks,” she sighed.

“We're going to be fine.” Sam wrapped his arms gingerly around her. “Just please don't throw
another car door at my head.”

“No promises.”

They didn't even stop to fully tend to their wounds. As soon as they got back to the bunker, Sam
and Ruby checked in with Dean to reassure him that they'd survived and also ask him to watch
Kaylee for a bit more. Dean had barely opened his mouth to ask what was going on when Ruby grabbed Sam by the waistband of his jeans and led him towards his room.

Slamming the bedroom door behind them, Ruby pulled him into a desperate kiss. His broken rib ached when he picked her up and pinned her to the wall, but he didn’t care. He pushed the pain from his mind, then started grinding against her. Her hand frantically fumbled with his pants trying to push them down without interrupting their kiss. In his excitement he bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Sorry.”

“Don't care,” she whispered before playfully biting him in return.

Ruby tugged at her own jeans, accidentally tearing the seam extending down from the zipper. For a split second she hesitated, then gave up on any attempt to salvage the pants. She tore the jeans straight down the crotch, ripping it in two. The display of strength and eagerness made him harder. Her hand started fighting with his belt and he briefly humored seeing how many pieces of clothes she'd destroy out of lust… but he decided to help her instead.

“I’ve got it,” he breathed into her hair as he hooked his left arm around to support her while his other hand started undoing his pants. She tucked her knees up to her chest so he could pull off her panties. With her legs up, pressed between him and the wall, his hard dick was against her clit. He rubbed against her a few times, but just when he was getting ready to press into her, he pulled his head back from her a bit at an alarming thought. “We don't have a condom.”

“Just fuck me, Boy Scout,” Ruby panted.

Part of him was a bit thrown by the recklessness, but at the same time he was honestly a little turned on by the idea of not using a condom. It wasn’t that he wanted to have another kid any time soon. Instead it was the idea that she was open to things getting a bit complicated if it allowed them to have sex. She might have to smoke out or they might have some things to figure out later on, but for the moment it was just them desperately wanting each other in every way and he gave into it.

He pushed deep into her, thrusting with all his strength while pinning her to the wall. She locked her ankles around the small of his back, somehow pulling him even tighter to her. Her hands gripped his shoulders, then one slid up along his neck to grab his hair. He leaned in to kiss the sensitive flesh just below her jaw.

“I love you,” he moaned into her ear.

Her back arched forward, breasts bouncing against him with each hard thrust. His hand slid up her shirt, caressing up her ribcage and under her bra. He could feel her clenched around him, caught up in the moment. She cried out as she came; such a beautiful sound that it pushed him over the edge.

Despite their assorted minor injuries, they still managed to fuck two more times before succumbing to fatigue. During the last go, Ruby gripped the headboard of the bed and rode Sam a little rougher than she should have. Afterwards, neither of them had the energy or determination to pull the broken bed frame out from under the mattress, so they ended up lying on the half of the mattress that had settled on the floor.

With so little mattress space available, Ruby's naked body was mostly draped onto his own. His arm was wrapped around her, holding her to him. Her head rested on his chest and their legs were
intertwined. Despite everything that was going wrong in the world, it felt perfect—almost perfect.

He broke the peaceful silence. “I need to tell you something.”

Ruby pushed herself up on her elbow in order to look at him, visibly concerned by what else he might confess. “Sam, what?”

“I'm coming clean with everything I know, everything I've been scared to tell you.” He could feel her body tense, so he decided to just jump right into it. “The other us were together, like as a couple, for those thirty years.”

“I guess… that makes some sense.” Her brow furrowed, processing the information. “I mean… we had a kid.”

“We adopted Tom,” he added anxiously. “I didn't know until after we started taking care of him. It's not like I was planning on it.”

“I don't think you were trying to steal Gabin’s son.” Her words tickled some deep guilt in him that he hadn't even realized existed, but before he could think about it Ruby continued, “Wait, is that why you were so upset about the coven leaving?”

“I heard about this family we had and….” Sam chewed his lip while trying to summon some courage. “We were fighting or whatever that was, and Tommy was leaving and I just thought maybe I was losing it.”

“Losing it?”

“My chance at a real home, with you and our kids. I didn’t know how badly I wanted it and then I thought that it was all coming apart. I thought that if I told you or if I didn’t tell you—I didn’t know what to do. I was scared that I’d mess it up. And no matter what I was doing we were just getting further and further from what they had…. ” Sam purses his lips and looked away from Ruby. “Right before I fought Samhain, Kay told me… that her parents had two other kids together.”

“Other kids….” Her voice was soft and uncertain, still struggling to process everything he was telling her.

“A son and another daughter. The other you… you were a good mom. You said you loved me… and I don't know what that means for us. I don't know what that means to you.” Sam sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner and I’m sorry to tell you all of this now, but I just can't keep hiding things from you. I can't keep hiding from you.”

“Why didn't you tell me any of this before?”

“I didn't want you to leave. Maybe I love you, maybe I want to spend my life with you, but I'm not gonna ask you to feel the same way, not now. I'm not taking that for granted. I just hope you’ll still be here tomorrow, and if you're happy then maybe we can have another day after that. I didn't want you to think that I was asking you to stay forever…. I just didn't know how to tell you.”

“But you trust me, right?”

“More than anything or anyone. But I don't trust myself with something as important as you. I didn't want to mess things up….” Sam ran his fingers through his hair. “And maybe I did.”

Ruby put her index finger on his lips, silencing him. She looked him in the eyes, considering his
concealed hopes and fears. Her hand slid down to rest over his heart for a few beats before moving to interlace their fingers.

“This thing between us…. Hearing about them—I don't know what it means for us. I'm not saying that I'm ignoring it or following it blindly.” Ruby briefly pursed her lips betraying some nervousness. “But when everything is shit, you make me happy in spite of it… and I don't know why I'd want to give that up.”

He could feel the smile helplessly forming on his face. “Really?”

“Yeah, but you need to remember that you and me, we're a team.” She raised an eyebrow at him and her voice turned slightly authoritative. “No secrets. I don't care if you meant well. You have to trust that I'm not gonna be scared off by you or whatever. I've stayed this long; you gotta trust that I'm still here for a reason.”

“Lilith and Heaven have been on your ass—”

“No, they've mostly been on your ass. And when did I take off because things were weird or hard?”

“Do you really think you could be happy with us?” Sam brought Kaylee back into the conversation. It was one thing to be committed to a romantic partner. It was another to be committed to a family. “Having a stable life and taking care of a baby isn't quite running around the country fighting bad guys.”

“I seem to recall you signing on for 100% of domestic duty,” Ruby pointed out. “I'm pretty sure that you aren't gonna turn me down even if I squeeze in the occasional extracurricular activities.”

“I'm wracking my brain to think of a time when I'd ever turn you down.”

“The way things are going, I don't know.” She smiled reassuringly at him. “You're being all flirty now, but it's gonna be tough going at times.”

“When things get tough, there's no one I'd rather have with me.” Sam lifted his head and kissed her. “Thank you for being there for me.”

She shrugged playfully. “Hey, you're kinda my thing.”

“No. You've got a whole lot of things and I'm just lucky to be one of them.”

“You're such a dork.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Promise me something.”

He didn't hesitate. “Sure.”

“Don't treat yourself that badly ever again.”

Chapter End Notes

This might seem contrary to this chapter, but I don't condone romanticizing fighting in a relationship. I think that the best relationships are ones with good communication and that often mitigates or prevents fights. The extent that their conflict in this chapter is glorified is because it's them finally being upfront with each other. It's not one of
those “you need extreme lows to get extreme highs” unhealthy relationships tropes. In fact 2039!Sam & 2039!Ruby’s relationship was incredibly stable, which is the kind of equilibrium that 2009!Sam & 2009!Ruby are trying to achieve.
Kay stood at the edge of the crater of rubble. It had once been a twelve-story building containing stores and apartments, but about eighteen hours earlier it had come crashing down. At least seventy people were confirmed dead and fifteen were still missing, but at that point there wasn't much hope for survivors. It was the first days of winter and a cold snap had made the area drop below freezing during the previous night. For the last few hours every body was being dragged from the rubble partially frozen.

She pulled the collar of her black overcoat a little tighter, then sipped some of the black coffee from her styrofoam cup. She could hear footsteps approaching, but she didn't bother looking away from the morbid scene. Joseba and Tora were both escorting her on this investigation and while they kept a respectable distance, there was no doubt that they'd be watching every potential threat.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Agent Crow said as he cautiously moved to stand next to her. "I was wondering… if I could ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"It's just." He lowered his voice so that none of the nearby police officers or FBI agents could hear him. "With all the gossip about… well, angels—we aren't actually in danger, are we?"

Colin Medicine Crow was a twelve year veteran with the FBI and one of the tens of thousands of humans on Hell’s proverbial payroll. Per his contract, he’d shared the preliminary intel on the building collapse with his assigned demon contact. When that intel had been red flagged by Hell’s asset management and intelligence team, he’d gotten the privilege and terrifying burden of escorting the Queen of Hell herself into the crime scene.

She didn't blame him for being worried on any number of fronts, least of which being what the arrival of angels meant. Just that morning there had been a terrorist attack in Stockholm that had claimed 358 lives and half a dozen smaller acts of violence across the United States totally 100 casualties and counting. To anyone else it may have seemed like your routine senseless tragedies unfortunately falling in close proximity, but somehow the whole thing felt like classic Templar attacks. They just hadn't claimed the name and red crosses yet.

"Angels are real, but they're divided and preoccupied.” She mixed truth with an overly optimistic attempt at comfort. “We protect our assets. You shouldn't be afraid.”

"What are we looking at here?” he asked, gesturing at the crater with his own cup of coffee.

"On paper: a gas leak or bomb—whatever your forensics can make up.” She fed him a few ideas, though she suspected he didn't need any. “In actuality… well, some of our enemies are dead.”

"Did it…. Was it really necessary to take down the whole building?” His voice betrayed his fear that she might question his loyalty.

"I couldn't say. We didn't do this,” she replied. He stared at her in confusion and surprise, but didn’t dare say anything that might further involve himself with the unpleasantness, so she asked, "Tell me Crow, do you have a family?”
He shifted uncomfortably at the personal question, that objectively bordered on a threat. “Um… I’m divorced, no kids.”

“Any siblings? Parents?”

“A step-sister and step-father.”

“Do you see or talk to them often?”

“We talk on the phone every week or two,” he answered, then hastily added, “they don’t know about my arrangement, if that’s—”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” she assured him.

“Okay.”

“It’s hard for me to get a sense of what normal people think of all of this.” She gestured at the wreckage, but meant to indicate the chaotic conflict forming across the planes. “Are people scared? Does anyone notice or care?”

“Most of the guys at the station are blaming the terrorists or nut jobs, all the run-of-the-mill human bad guys.” Crow sipped his coffee, put slightly at ease by having an actual answer for her. “I keep hearing that the angel video’s a hoax, but my neighbor, this 92-year-old lady, she’s going to church every day now.”

“You have to appreciate the devotion it takes to get to church every day at that age,” Kay admitted.

“I really have to. I’ve been the one driving her,” Crow complained, then added, “I don’t go in though.”

“You won’t breach your contract by entering holy ground. Just don’t start seriously praying,” Kay assured him. “You can pretend to pray if you’re getting pressure to join her.”

“What….” He didn't finish his statement or question.

“Tell me.”

“Sometimes I feel like I need something… to turn to,” he confessed.

He’d had a history of opioid abuse after being shot in the line of duty. It had cost him his marriage and in his darkest hour he’d turned to a Crossroads demon. Instead of having his soul come due in ten years, he became a servant of the realm, but would forever be incapable of becoming intoxicated in any form. Assets with crippling weaknesses were hardly assets at all. He had gotten his sobriety, though now he had no escape and no ability to take sincere comfort in his childhood faith.

“How many years have you been with us?” Kay asked.

“Almost eight.”

“Do you regret making the deal with us?”

“Once,” he admitted. “I… I didn’t think I could keep doing it.”

She pitied him, but didn’t want to look at him lest he see her empathy. It was possible that she’d asked enough personal questions for him to suspect that she was sympathetic to the burden of
serving Hell as a human. In her time there had been less stigma about working with Hell. There had even been support groups dedicated to working through the religious and moral struggles. This time was different though, there was an expectation that any contact with Hell was intrinsically harmful. Taking away the illusion of necessity for his pain might be more disorienting than liberating, so she wanted to maintain a degree of emotional distance from him.

“You're a valuable asset to us.” She hoped that meant something to him. “I'm gonna put you in touch with a sheriff out of Sioux Falls, her name’s Jody Mills. She’s coordinating intelligence gathering from law enforcement personnel. If anything changes on this situation, contact her right away. She’ll be the fastest way of getting the information to me.”

“What do you expect to change?”

“At this point I'm pretty much expecting anything except for it getting better.”

“One of you needs to put on some clothes and take your daughter,” Dean shouted through the bedroom door after knocking. “She’s about one minute from screaming at me.”

“One sec,” Ruby replied as she rolled off of Sam, then picked a sheet up from the floor and threw it on top of his naked body. Sam started pulling the sheet up around himself, but stopped when Ruby tried to slip on her pants only to remember that she'd ripped them in half a few hours earlier. She looked around the room a bit, before gesturing for Sam to trade spots with her. “A few more seconds. We're just—”

“Don't give me details,” Dean requested. “I don't want any mental images.”

Ruby wrapped herself up in the bedding, then watched Sam grab his boxers and jeans. He double-checked to make sure she was covered before opening the door. He collected the fussing Kaylee, from a slightly haggard Dean.

“Do you need me to get you a doctor?” Dean pointed at the scrapes and bruising on Sam's bare torso, then he glanced back at the broken bed frame. “Maybe a carpenter?”

“Actually, can you see if Kay has any spare pants?” Ruby asked. “Mine we're torn apart.”

Dean stared at Sam a long while. Sam could feel himself turn a bit pink, then offered a smile of false innocence. Dean sighed before turning to head back down the hall.

“Kay’s out checking on a lead,” Dean called over his shoulder. “I’ll ask her about some pants when she gets back.”

Sam leaned out into the hallway to ask after him. “What’s the lead?”

“Hell found some dead demons at that explosion in Wisconsin—”

“What explosion?”

Sam's question made Dean pause for a moment. “News broke while you were getting ready for Samhain. A building exploded or collapsed. It's not clear.”

“And there were demons there?” Sam held Kaylee a little closer, then asked, “Do we think it's another seal?”

“We aren't sure. Kay said she recognized one of the bodies on the news from a vision.”
Sam took a half step, debating whether to follow him. “Which vision?”

“I don’t know. I can’t keep track of your guys’s visions.”

“But was it—”

“I just don’t know. She’ll probably be back soon.” Dean waved his hand dismissing the sense of urgency. “For now, get dressed. Get some breakfast. Get some medical help.”

Sam relented. He went back into his bedroom, closed the door and carried the fussing Kaylee over to Ruby.

“Wild guess.”

“Give her here.” Ruby took the newborn and started nursing her. “Kid, you've got a serious drinking problem.”

“I’m not about to say it doesn't run in the family,” Sam joked as he started putting on some socks.

“So something weird's going on out there, something from one of your visions,” Ruby mused from her reclined position on the mattress. “How often are you having visions these days?”

“It varies depending on how crazy it is out there.” He started to evade, but caught himself. “Maybe two dozen a day… one or two while I sleep. I try not to make a big deal out of it if there doesn’t seem to be something really dramatic.”

“Do you get any rest while you sleep?”

“Some nights.” Sam smiled at her. “I slept really well last night.”

“I think we need to run further tests to see if we can establish a trend,” Ruby said with a mischievous grin.

“I’m completely on board with this.” He slid his hand up her leg and massaged the inside of her thigh with his thumb for a second.

“You’re getting better with your powers.”

“A little.”

“Hey, you avoided that car door.”

“That was a bit much,” Sam replied, then stood up and kept getting dressed. He didn’t really finding the thought as amusing as she did.

“I have a lot of faith in you?” Ruby replied as a feeble excuse, then added more seriously, “please don’t hold all that stuff I did while mind-fucked against me.”

“You hit me with a piece of a car,” Sam said as he slipped on a t-shirt, then crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“That makes it sound like a big piece. It was just a side mirror.” Ruby looked at him apologetically. “You’re gonna shake me down for a few favors before you forget that, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I’m going to milk this for all it's worth,” Sam assured her. “Years from now I’ll be—”
If you're still milking it years from now, it's not a piece of a car I'll hit you with.”

“Hey, you're the one saying I'm getting better with the telekinesis.” Sam knelt down to kiss her. He caressed Kaylee's head as she nursed, then looked back up at Ruby. “A few years from now, bring it on. I’ll be ready to dance however you want it.”

Sam went to locate Dean while Ruby finished feeding Kaylee and tried to improvise a toga from the bedding. He found the elder Winchester in the kitchen cooking a large pan full of scrambled eggs. After realizing that Dean was preparing more food than a single person could eat, Sam dug through the fridge looking for some sort of contribution to the meal. The best he could do was finding some random assortment of vegetables.

“Really mild salsa or fried tomatoes etcetera?” Sam asked while holding up several bags of produce.

“How mild?” Dean asked warily.

“We’ve got onion.”

“Fry them all.”

“God will know his own,” Sam muttered reflexively.

He started halving the tomatoes and roughly chopping some potatoes, onions, carrots, and celery. He glanced up at Dean, who was humming Creedence Clearwater Revival while cooking. Dean hadn't shaved in a day or two and he wasn't wearing shoes. Granted as far as Sam knew, he hadn't left the bunker since Dylaniel’s injury. His brother didn't appear abnormally depressed though, more settled into a safe calm, no matter how fleeting it might be. Maybe that was what Dean would look like in a domestic setting, when he didn't have to be ready for the hunt or the road at seven o’clock sharp. Sam couldn’t even remember the last time the two of them had made a meal together. Despite the stakes of everything going on around them, it was a little comfort to have that shared moment of simplicity.

“So what the hell happened out there?” Dean asked once Sam was standing next to him at the stove.

“I told Ruby... that I love her.” He grinned helpless to his own excitement. “We’re basically together now.”

“That's great.” Dean let out a small chuckle. “But I meant with fighting Samhain and you both looking trashed. Ruby said the spell wasn't gonna work right before she took off.”

“Ah, yeah. He summoned some ghosts and they were going in on me when Ruby showed up.” Sam smiled at the memory of her entrance. “She hit him with a car.”

Dean nodded in approval. “Not bad.”

“We took him down, but he wouldn't give up any information.” His enthusiasm dimmed slightly at the fact that they hadn't gained any ground on the Lilith-front. “Go figure that a demon who embodied anger and frustration would love spiting people so much that he'd do it with his dying breath.”

“Note to self: pay attention to shticks,” Dean observed aloud. “How bad are you hurt?”
“Mostly some scratches and surface level stuff. He broke at least one rib… and I didn't exactly help it last night.” Sam touched a few sore spots experimentally. “I heal fast. It'll be fine in two or three days.”

Dean sighed. “I can't believe you two broke the fucking bed.”

“He's stronger than she looks,” Sam replied. “Anyway, angels pack way more of a punch than demons. I'm guessing other-you and—”

He stopped himself, suddenly wondering if talking about the other Dean’s relationship with Cas was off limits, because Dean was either still self-conscious about his attraction to men or because of the delicate situation with Castiel. Sam pursed his lips and tried to think of something else to say.

Dean had paused for a few seconds, processing the joke. To Sam’s relief he didn’t get super defensive, though he was a little introspective when he replied, “Point taken: no rocks in glass houses.” He shook his head as he finished with the eggs, then started searching through the cupboards for plates.

“When was the last time we cooked food together?” Sam asked, looking for a new, less delicate subject.

“Probably when my arm was broken in the eighth grade and we had that motel room with that tiny kitchen. I taught you how to heat up canned food.”

“This is nice.” Sam hesitated. “If things calm down, do you think….”

“If things calm down, aren't you moving up to Canada?” Dean replied.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I'll visit,” Dean assured you. “We'll make it work.”

“Would you keep hunting?”

“Maybe. I don't really know what else I'd do. I don't know what the world’s gonna be like when this is all done…. If there's anything left.” Dean looked down pensively at the short stack of plates he was holding. “Things could end up really different, if they end up anything at all.”

“We're doing our best,” Sam told him, though he knew it was only so comforting.

“Kay and Dyl’s family used to cook together.” Dean’s voice was a bit quiet and distant. “When they were together. I had a breakfast with most of them. It was…. While it lasted, it felt like family.”

Sam wanted to express sympathy for his brother’s proximate loss, but he wasn't sure how to convey it. “It sounds nice. I'm glad you got to see that, even if….”

Dean put the plates down on the table, then leaned on it with his hands. His back was turned to Sam and his shoulders were hunched. For a second or two Sam thought about going to check on him, to make sure he was alright.

“It scared the hell out of me, Ruby saying that you were gonna be trapped and I couldn't go after you.” Dean stood up and rubbed his face. “Kay started to go after you two. Dyl tried to get out of bed. Jody had to basically hold him down. And I was just stuck here taking care of Kaylee,
wondering if…"

“I’m sorry. Believe me, if I’d known it—”

“I know you didn’t want it to go down like that,” Dean acknowledged. “I just wanted to tell you. Those kinda scares—I know that we’re all tough and cool on the outside, but jesus that whole 2039 apocalypse has the shit scared out of me about you, and I’m sure Kay and Dyl don't have much thicker skin.”

“You were worried I’d start the apocalypse?”

“No, I was worried you'd get killed. I guess you could two-birds-one-stone that….” Dean pursed his lips. “Kay and Dyl lost a lot of family just before they got here. They weren't even my family and it was… rough.”

“I'll try to be more aware of that,” Sam assured him.

“Thanks.”

Sam turned off the stove, then walked over to Dean and gave him a hug.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked as he let go of Dean, who nodded before trying to pull himself together.

“You both made it back. I'll be okay.”

Ruby walked in carrying Kaylee. Rather than wearing bedding, she had used one of Sam's two button-up shirts, tightened into a small dress at the waist with a belt.

Sam just stared at her in awe for several seconds. He couldn't remember seeing her in a dress, let alone a green plaid one. It was a completely uncharacteristic appearance, yet somehow she pulled it off. Maybe it was her ingenuity that made it work or maybe it was the thought that she was wearing his clothes, he wasn't sure, but it made his affection for her flare.

“I know, I look ridiculous, but I didn't want to stay trapped in there until Kay gets back.” She tried to smooth down the lower portion of the shirt with her free hand.

“No, you’re good,” Sam replied. “It's cute.”

“I'm happy for you guys and all.” Dean started with the positive. “But if you start doing the ‘No, you are.’ ‘No, you are.’ thing, I'm gonna go eat by myself.”

“No, you are,” Ruby told Sam in a comically sweet voice.

“Ha ha,” Dean said unenthusiastically while placing the eggs on the table and pulling up a chair.

“Eggs, fried tomatoes, and some sort of hash.” Ruby assessed the spread. “We need to get some more supplies. Preferably coffee and bacon.”

“I second that,” Dean agreed. “If I get a chance—”

He was interrupted by Kay walking into the kitchen. She looked tired, but a small smile crossed her face when she saw Sam and Ruby. She took off a heavy, black wool overcoat and tossed it onto the back of a chair. Her charcoal grey pantsuit had a distinctly Fed look to it, but she wore a lapel pin of tiny red blossoms where one might otherwise expect to see a flag.
“Lilith had been at the crime scene,” Kay confirmed as she put her hands on her cold cheeks.

“You sure?” asked Sam.

“Her aura was right smack in the middle of that crater.”

“So why’d she level the building? That’s not too subtle for someone in hiding.”

“I fucking hope she’s still hiding,” Kay groaned. “If she’s coming out guns blazing, then she’s either a mile ahead of us or she’s just gotten really dumb.”

“We need to get that list of seals, whether it's finished or not,” Ruby commented.

“Time to talk to our fallen angel liaison, assuming he's functional,” Kay acknowledged. “I’m gonna see if Dyl wants food brought to him or if he’s up for being dragged around.”

“I’ll go with,” Dean volunteered and followed her back toward the quarters wing.

When they arrived it initially appeared that Dyaniel was sleeping and both hesitated at the doorway, uncertain if it was worth waking him just yet or who would get the honor of rousing him. But while they Dean and Kay were preparing to play rock-paper-scissors, Dyaniel coughed pointedly to draw their attention.

“I was meditating,” Dyaniel explained. “And your shoes squeak.”

“You want some food?” Kay asked.

Dean shift his weight to see if he could hear his shoes, then added, “We’ve got scrambled eggs and some fried other stuff. You want to eat in the bed or can we try dragging you to the kitchen table?”

“I don’t think dragging is going to be necessary.” Dyaniel started trying to prop himself up in the bed, but didn’t make much progress. “Maybe some halfhearted carrying, but not dragging.”

Kay and Dean moved to opposite sides of the bed. Dean carefully slid the sleeve of Dyaniel’s sweatshirt down past the wrist in order to not risk touching his skin.

They managed to get Dyaniel on his feet, though Dean noticed that the nephilim had to watch his feet as they tried walking down the hall. Dyaniel swayed slightly, but at least he didn't exert superhuman strength like Castiel.

“I'm glad to see you're among the living.” Dyaniel greeted Sam and Ruby when they reached the kitchen.

“Loose definitions of living,” Ruby corrected.

“This isn’t all pleasantries,” Kay advised Dyaniel while lowering him into a free chair. “We might have a lead on Lilith, but it doesn’t look good. We’re gonna have to get the list of seals whether it’s done or not. At least we’ll have some idea about the lay of the land as opposed to entirely guessing at anomalies.”

“We’ve traded phone numbers. I can give her a call,” Dyaniel agreed.

“Aren't you guys telepathic?” Ruby asked.

“I can hear certain types of angelic frequencies, but it's not like an open two way line of communication. It's like prayer, a broadcast into the ether,” Dyaniel explained, then added, “and
personally I think of prayer as a communication of last resort.”

“I'm guessing most people do,” Dean commented.

“How're you feeling?” Sam asked. “Do you feel capable of going to a meeting with Anael?”

“I don’t think that I should be teleporting like this,” Dylaniel admitted. “It feels as though I’m lagging slightly behind my own actions. It's taking more energy than I'd like to keep my attention where it's needed. I keep seeing—sensing echoes of things that I shouldn’t and it’s hard to tell if they’re all real.”

“It sounds like you’re having a bad trip,” Dean suggested.

“One accompanied by a significant headache.”

“Well, you’re staying home,” Kay said as she scoped up a plate of food and put it in front of her cousin. “Eat or I’ll feed it to you through an IV.”

Dylaniel carefully picked up his fork and started probing the various elements of his meal. He stabbed a piece of potato, sniffed it, then had a take a moment to gather his fortitude before he could take a bite. Everyone was watching him.

“Your attention is making this worse,” he commented. “Surely there’s business to discuss before I contact Anael.”

“Should we tell them that Gabriel is alive?” Sam asked.

Kay covered her face at the implications that discovery would have. “Jesus fucking christ.”

“The fallen angels would love to hear that,” Dean speculated.

“Unless they get pissed at him for hiding out,” Ruby countered.

“Gabe won’t be happy about being outing, even if we do try to keep it just within the fallen angels,” Kay pointed out.

“Like they’ll be able to keep that a secret,” Dylaniel warned. “Newly fallen might be loyal and invested in the cause, but they’re pretty vulnerable. No one should heavily rely on them until they have a chance to recover and acclimate.”

“How vulnerable are they?” Sam asked.

“Sometimes they suffer physical injuries or illness from the fall. Aside from that, there’s often emotional and/or mental trauma depending on their background and the exact circumstances of the fall.” Dylaniel tilted his head from side to side. “I’ve seen fallen anywhere from fairly acclimated in five minutes to essentially brain-dead.”

“Brain-dead?”

“Just one, Shidael. Supposedly, zie crafted the concept of nothingness. It's not clear if zie took the experiment too far or couldn't tolerate such a physical plane.” Dylaniel’s lips thinned. “Like I said it varies depending on their backgrounds. But generally they should be closer to Cas in health and sanity…. Well, Cas’s illness has been in him longer.”

“Is that good or bad?” Dean asked.
“He's more used to Earth and humans.”

“So we're looking at Cas, but more awkward?” Ruby mused aloud.

“It's hard to say,” Dylaniel admitted. “They should improve though.”

“Great.” Dean shook his head. “So, you’ll hook us up with Anael and what can the rest of us do? All this down time is making me nervous and scruffy.”

“There's always more searching for omens and researching seals through the normal, slower means. Ruby and I could go down—” Kay started, but Ruby cut her off.

“I'm not going back downstairs.”

“What's wrong?” Sam asked.

During their confrontation after killing Samhain, she’d indicated that there were things that had been bothering her, but they hadn’t really had a chance to talk about them. He’d known that she had had a disagreement with her archdemon that had resulted in her having to put in some time earning favor with her caste. The political inner workings of Hell weren’t something he’d been planning on taking a personal interest in, but to the extent they affected Ruby it was suddenly very much his concern.

“My whole caste wants to run experiments on me,” she replied.

“What? What kind of experiments?” Sam gently gripped her thigh below the table in a gesture of comfort.

“They want to know how I had Kaylee,” Ruby explained, then looked pointedly at Sam. “As a heads up, you also should avoid Hell for the foreseeable.”

“They want….” Sam’s eyes widened at the unpleasant concerns forming in his head. He already was intrinsically tied to the problem, he just hadn’t been within striking distance of anyone who’d consider pursuing it, not that he even knew what that entailed.

“They aren't gonna dissect you,” Kay clarified. “This is just normal politics—”

“Maybe for you, but I've never been sized up like a grade A piece of meat before,” Ruby said between bites of breakfast.

“How is this normal?” Sam asked Kay warily.

“I'll deal with it.” Kay dismissed the complication.

“What's that mean?”

“They want to find out how demons can be born. I can fit the bill of product and producer. I'll get them to back off of you all.”

Sam's eyebrows rose at the implications of her statement.

“Have you had a kid?” Ruby asked her.

“No.”

“Listen, I don't want to be a dick about this, but you're a politician. Anecdotal evidence doesn't cut
it outside of speeches. Your sample set of one isn't going to count for much,” Ruby suggested, then nodded her head at Kaylee and Sam. “Our asses are still on the line.”

“Kay, this time isn't like ours,” Dylaniel interjected weakly. “It's not just the two of us carrying the bloodlines, grace or otherwise. They don't get to outrun this just because you want it to be so.”

Sam and Dean exchanged an uncomfortable glance. Ruby's hand reached over and took Sam’s.

“How does this become an issue?” Dean asked. “I know that you two had people butting into your sex lives, but when do we have to worry about that? Do we have to worry about that?”

Sam thought of Alex, the fact that he'd been killed over dating someone that wasn't condoned. The thought worried him on multiple levels, for himself and his daughter… for any of his future children. This was a whole new dynamic he wasn’t prepared for.

Kay replied, “I couldn't tell you what Heaven wants—”

“Raphael told me that they aren't even considering Dyl for Michael's vessel,” Dean commented.

“Well that's pretty dumb of them,” Kay muttered. “Way to throw out one of the best vessels they could ever get.”

“So they'll go after you or try to get you to have human children,” Dylaniel suggested to Dean.

“Your dad must've really pissed off Heaven, ending up with an angel and a guy,” Dean observed aloud.

“Yeah, one of the major instances where the married and monogamous pissed off the holier-than-thous,” Kay confirmed.

“What about Hell? What does Hell want?”

“Hell doesn't really care that much about vessels, though all things being equal a few of the more conservative archdemons will probably always have it in for the Swords of Heaven. It's just a historical grudge,” Kay explained.

“What about for Lucifer's vessels?” Ruby asked.

“Hell will always want more,” Kay said unenthusiastically. “Lucifer created Hell, his grace can breathe something nearly life into it. The realm wants all the life and power it can get.”

“So they'll be after me to have more kids? Get involved with Hell?” Sam asked.

“They're focusing on me and I’m trying to make sure it stays that way. If you two don’t feel safe in Hell, then you don’t have to go to Hell. There are ways of avoiding this,” Kay told him. “It's not the end of the world—so to speak. I have years of experience evading this kind of stuff, same with Dyl. Granted I had more finesse.”

“It was semi-public knowledge that I don't pursue physical relationships,” Dylaniel stated coolly.

“Semi-public?” asked Sam.

“I suspect that it was widely known, but everyone was too cautious to discuss it publicly,” Dylaniel added. “My family and I tried to dissuade others from considering the subject.”

“Dissuade?”
“Dyl did 98% of the work by putting a few people in the infirmary very early in the process,” Kay explained. “It's not necessarily a workable solution for the rest of us.”

Ruby chimed in. “I'd be willing to try it.”

“Right now everything is tense with the whole seals thing, but once it quiets down there won't be as much of a sense of urgency,” Kay reminded them. “Be cautious, but we shouldn’t all assume that everyone is after our bits.”

“Speaking of bits, do you have a spare pair of pants?” Ruby asked Kay. “Mine met their untimely end.”

“Fight?”

Ruby hesitated a moment, then answered, “Let's go with that.”

“I've got some jeans I can part with. There are some positives to having a dress code at work.” Kay stood up to leave, then pointed at Dylianiel. “Are you okay calling Anael? If coordinating is gonna be too draining—”

“I’m fine.” Dylianiel sat up a little more in his chair. “I've coordinated entire—”

“I know, you're great at chess. I'm just saying, don't push yourself too hard.” Kay smiled sadly at him. “We need you in one piece, not two awkward halves.”

Kay led Ruby back to her bedroom. It lacked decorations or personal effects, except for a dozen pieces of clothing tossed about. She grabbed the jeans off the top of the dresser and handed them over. Ruby gave Kaylee to her to hold while she slipped on the pants, but the legs were several inches too long for her.

“You can cut them down if you want,” Kay suggested. She glanced round the room for a knife or scissors, while gently bouncing the newborn.

“Is it weird?” Ruby nodded towards Kay. “Holding yourself?”

“Please, every Saturday night of my adult life I've had at least two glasses of wine and held myself,” Kay joked, then looked down at Kaylee to reflect on the question for a moment. “It's not as weird as you'd think. To me she just looks like a baby. She actually looks like Sa’dah with slightly darker hair.”

“Sa’dah?”

“My sister,” Kay explained. “She was ten years younger than me.”

"Sa'dah." Ruby froze for a moment, taken by surprise. She hadn’t expected to be talking about one of Kay’s siblings, let alone finding out something as telling as that name. "Sam let me give one of the kids an Arabic name?"

"My dad didn't let my mom do anything. She got her say in everything."

"I just figured that, since my meatsuit’s white and we're in the west..."

"You thought who you are doesn't matter?" Kay asked in Dagbani.

Ruby had to sit down on the edge of the bed for a moment. It made sense when she thought about
it, but it hadn't occurred to her that Kay would have been exposed to such a personal aspect of her own life. Finding out that her daughter would've learned her mother tongue was a lot to process.

"You speak Dagbani?"

"English, Dagbani, Akan, Abyssal, Arabic, French, and French-Creole. I know some Latin, Greek, and Shilha. I had a lot of time to study in Hell," Kay explained before continuing, “and we sometimes spoke Dagbani or Arabic in the house—Abyssal if Tom wasn't around.”

"Sam spoke Dagbani?" Ruby nearly chuckled at the thought, though she was too dazed to think the idea was actually laughable.

"Eh, more or less. He was always better at Arabic." Kay’s brow furrowed and she stepped towards Ruby. "Are you okay?"

"I’d figured he'd be willing to do a lot for our kid, I guess kids…. It's just it hadn't really hit me, how much he'd be willing to do for me, for him to get to know me. It's just been a long time since anyone wanted to know me like that, the me from all the way back… whatever's left of that me.” Ruby could feel a little tightness in her chest at the thought. “Sam learned some of my languages. I know he’s a bit of a nerd....”

“It wasn’t just the languages. We tried to keep in touch with the coven’s roots and history. We ate a good amount of Caribbean food at home. Tom lived in Haiti for a few years. Alex, my younger brother, went to school for a year or so in Ghana. My mom—both my parents, but my mom started it…. ” Kay anxiously played with the sleepy newborn. “She called me starlight as a nickname.”

“I... don't understand,” Ruby said apologetically.

“She used to tell me that the stars were this almost eternal thing, untouched by the war. That no matter where you are or how much time has passed, you can look up and see the same stars in the sky… the same stars that those who're gone looked at. It's a connection to our past and a comfort even when you don't have anything else....” Kay swallowed hard. “Starlight is something special.”

“I used to look at the stars when I was human, afterwards too. I would wonder…. " Ruby started, but she couldn't bring herself to voice all the questions she had about her own parents and childhood. That at one point the stars had been a secret treasure to her… but with time and distance from her human life she'd been less and less inclined to watch the night sky, cynically disregarding it. Only recently, with Sam had she started to indulge in the occasional quiet night, marveling at its magnificence and magnitude. “I hadn't watched the stars in maybe a century or more, but not quite a year ago, Sam wanted to watch a meteor shower. It was the first time I'd seen him want something since.... It was the first time he was sincerely happy and it was—I was sincerely happy.”

“You deserve to be happy.” Kay smiled meekly at Ruby.

They stared at each other for several seconds, truly seeing each other and being vulnerable to each other for the first time.

“Sam said I should get to know you better,” Ruby said. “I'm thinking maybe he's right.”

“I'm not her.” Kay indicated Kaylee.

“I know. I'll get to know her eventually,” Ruby assured her. “I want to know you.”

“What do you want to know?”
“What do I not want to know. Okay, big question that's been bugging me: how're you even doing this?” Ruby shook her head trying to think of a better way to express herself. “Everything is going to shit and you took a worse beating that any of us—”

Kay deflected the assessment. “Dyl's had it worse.”

“Fine, but that's not what I'm getting at.” Ruby pressed forward. “I've lost a lot in my life, but I can't imagine what it's like for you, and you're still kicking. It's just a hell of a thing. I don't know if I could do that.”

“You're a survivor. There's no doubt about it.”

“Yeah, well I want to know how you’re surviving this.” Ruby leaned back to show that she was prepared to settle in for a story. “If we’re risking living at the end of the world, I want to know how you survived there for 30 years along with the last week, which must’ve been unbearable.”

Kay sat down on the bed next to Ruby. “You really go for the jugular, don’t you?”

“You prefer I ask what your favorite ice cream flavor is?” Ruby smirked, earning a small grin from Kay, which faded into a pensive expression that reminded her of Sam.

“As long as I can remember, everything's always been high stakes. The world’s been ending my entire life… and we lost. We lost everything.” Kay chewed her lip for a few seconds. “The secret is that I was defeated. I was accepting that we’d lost. There were a few hours where I just knew that everyone was gonna die and we couldn't stop it. We’d run out of chances…. Everyone did die, but Dyl and I got lucky. It was dumb luck and I’m just trying to keep moving cause I’m scared what’ll happen when I stop.”

Ruby nodded at the painfully true answer. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“It’s okay, it’s not like I don’t think about it at all,” Kay confided. “I’ve just got a lot of distractions to hide behind.”

“You feeling at home in the chaos?”

“I'm a wartime leader. I only know how to manage a house that's on fire.” Kay chuckled. “Oh man, Dyl's a hopeless paranoid. He's always waiting for someone to pull a weapon. I might not be waiting for someone to jump out and attack me, but on a bigger scale…. It's kinda sad that it's comforting knowing that there's always someone trying to outmaneuver you. There's always something happening just out of your view, and maybe if you're lucky enough you can react. If you're smart enough you can plan.”

“Age old question: would you rather be smart or lucky?” Ruby asked out of curiosity, but also in an attempt to pull Kay out of the dark headspace.

“Smart for the year, but lucky for the day.” Kay smiled down at Kaylee, then looked up to Ruby. “One of the sharpest people I ever knew taught me that.”

“Did your mom also teach you that the clever make their own luck?”

“Yeah,” Kay replied. “But as I recall those spells were usually a huge pain in the ass and
occasionally end up in a building catching fire.”

“They really are a time sink for most of their applicable uses. These tattoos Sam and I have barely invoke luck as a force and they took days of master craftsmanship.” Ruby shrugged. “Do you have any tattoos?”

“Magical or generally?” Kay blushed slightly.

“Now I'm really intrigued.” Ruby raised an eyebrow. “I was thinking magical, but I'm also up for hearing some stories of a rebellious youth at the end of humanity.”

“Oh well, pull up a seat and let me tell you about the time a couple friends and I decided to help Tommy finish his sanguinem imperium ritual in one weekend.”

“That's supposed to take ten days.” Ruby furrowed her brow, unsure how that kind of corner cutting was possible and how destructive the results might end up. “At least eight in order to properly summon a wraith.”

“It takes a lot less time when you know where wraiths like to lurk and you have some stolen dune buggies packed to the brims with munitions, audio equipment, and intoxicants.” Kay smiled fondly at some memory. “Tom didn’t complete the ritual on that try, but it was a great camping trip.”

“One of these days when the world isn't ending we should get a drink and trade stories,” Ruby suggested, then reconsidered. “I guess you've probably heard all my stories already.”

“Probably, but I'd still like to hear them.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I believe this is yours.” Kay handed Kaylee back to Ruby, who studied her sleeping daughter for a moment.

“She is something special,” Ruby said softly, then looked back at Kay. “Maybe this is awkward, but… I kinda like the nickname starlight.”

“I think it suits her.”

Sam watched Ruby as she followed Kay out of the room. Before turning out of sight, she held Kaylee to her chest and kissed the top of her head while glancing back at Sam. He exhaled slowly at the little moment of contentment, unaware that Dean and Dylaniel were staring at him.

“I’m glad that you and Ruby have resolved your conflict,” Dylaniel said, causing Sam to look back to him.

“How’d you know we were having trouble?”

“For the last few days you were covertly glancing at her when she wasn't looking and furrowing your brow more than usual. Also, she’s been chewing her left cheek when you're around,” Dylaniel replied. “And with injuries that you're still recovering from, I expect that only reconciliation sex would justify the sort of exertion made last night.”

Sam felt himself turn pink, which was confirmed by Dean's only moderately successful attempt to not laugh.
“I…. How did you know?”

“My senses aren't as disparate as they were a day ago, but my hearing is still overly sensitive.” Dylaniel stared with pointed unenthusiasm. “And you two weren't exactly quiet.”

Sam cringed. “Sorry.”

“We're all adults. Anyway, I've observed worse. The brink of the destruction of the world evoked some very interesting recreational clubs.” Dylaniel turned to Dean. “I expected that Kit would've thought it hilarious to bring you to Club Defect.”

Dean’s face was borderline distraught. “I missed out on a futuristic sex dungeon?”

“Only the bottom floor is a dungeon. The upper floors are actually quite comfortable,” Dylaniel corrected. “Tom once stayed there for four weeks straight. I'm fairly certain he was working off a tab by his last week there.”

“Tom, you're kidding?” Sam asked.

“If you think I'm a ladykiller, wait til Tom grows up. I was with him for just a few days, and he was knee deep in—” Dean reconsidered something he was about to say. “I assume he was into just women. With his clothes, I guess, I don't know.”

“He’s only attracted to women,” Dylaniel confirmed.

“What about his clothes?” Sam asked.

“Tom enjoyed wearing traditionally feminine clothing, accessories, and makeup.”

“He was a….,” Sam hesitated, unsure of the politically correct term. “transvestite?”

“I believe he called it ‘gender-nonconformist,’” Dylaniel commented.

“Was that a recent thing?” Sam probed. “I didn't notice Tom wearing anything feminine all the times I've seen him.”

“As long as I can remember,” Dylaniel replied. “But my cousin was around twenty by then. He used to share jewelry and some makeup with Kay. She'd be able to give you a better idea on what to anticipate if you're concerned.”

“Not concerned,” Sam corrected. “just… attuned.”

Sam made a mental note to himself that Tom might be sensitive to concepts of gender norms and masculinity. In general he liked to think of himself as a very accepting and open-minded person, who wasn’t likely to trigger such potential points of insecurity. He’d have to warn Ruby, not because she was likely to make any hurtful statements, but more as a precautionary measure. All-in-all, Dean and Bobby were the people most likely to let slip some comment about ‘being a man.’ Yet after returning from 2039 Dean had displayed a bit more restraint, as evidenced by not assuming that Tom was straight just because he’d liked women.

“I think he embraced it more when he started traveling as an adult. His girlfriends all seemed to enjoy it,” Dylaniel elaborated. “Even if some of the soldiers on base weren't as approving.”

“Hey, he managed to fight angels in a skirt. That’s a level of combat skill above and beyond.” Dean raised his hands. “No criticism here. He saved my ass more than once.”
Dylaniel yawned, then furrowed his brow subtly. “That's unnerving.”

“What's unnerving?”

“I don't have that reflex,” Dylaniel answered, then elaborated after seeing their confused expressions. “I don't yawn.”

“Alright, let's get you back to your bed,” Sam suggested before getting up to help Dean.

“Be careful not to make skin contact,” Dean instructed as he nodded toward Dylaniel’s exposed wrist and hand.

“Okay….” Sam watched Dean to get an idea of how to lift their charge, then tried to follow his lead.

“I might not be very helpful in many respects right now,” Dylaniel turned his head to look at Sam as he was being lifted from the chair. “But if you’d like any advice on Ruby I could at least help with that.”

Sam glanced down at the visibly fatigued nephilim. “What?”

“For several years, I witnessed Kay’s parents’ flirtations. If you want... I can give you advice.”

“That’s nice of you.” Sam chuckled softly at the thought of Dylaniel giving him dating advice. “But I’m not about to go buy her roses right now.”


“What?”

“She prefers red hibiscus flowers.” Dylaniel’s comment made Dean grin and Sam's lips thin a bit.

“I think it’s cheating if you tell me stuff like that,” Sam responded after several seconds of conflicted thoughts.

“If that’s how you’d like to look at it... I won’t tell you things like that.” Dylaniel rolled his head from side to side in a allusion to a shrug. “But I don’t see a practical difference between that... and asking a friend of hers.”

“I’m not sure she’d see it that way,” Sam replied. “I’m not sure if she thinks of you as a friend yet, or at least friend enough to confide her secrets.”

“To be fair… she doesn't know most of her friends yet.”

“I think that logic only works if you think we’re in the past right now,” Sam commented.

“I’m the only one in this conversation... capable of perceiving the act of time-space displacement... I think I’m the most qualified... to decide the frame of reference.”

“Dyl can be a bit of a know-it-all,” Dean told Sam.

“I don’t know it all by any means.” Dylaniel yawned again, then continued, “But if I know more than you… I’ll absolutely correct you.”

“How did you ever get to such a high rank being such a smartass?” Dean asked Dylaniel.
“A combination of nepotism, killing people… and training my whole life for it.”

“Well, that would do it.”

They lowered him to the bed and Dylaniel dragged himself into a more comfortable position. It was reassuring to see that he was capable of some physical activity, even if it was so minor and left him so exhausted. Dean pulled the blankets over the nephilim, stopping just short of something that might constitute tucking him in.

“You're in no shape to be doing much of anything but digesting and sleeping. I'll try to get ahold of Anael and arrange the meet up for you. In the meantime, you get some rest while you can.” Dean picked up Dylaniel’s cell phone, then spoke in a comforting tone. “You’re gonna be fighting again before you know it.”

Taking advantage of the lull while Dean was trying to arrange a meeting with Anael, Sam and Ruby decided to go check on the coven for an hour or so. They opted to leave Kaylee at the bunker, despite the theoretical safety of the coven’s new campsite. Instead Bobby agreed to watch her. The old hunter immediately turned into a softie as he gently rocked his adopted granddaughter and told her the story of his first vampire hunt.

Ruby quickly blinked over to a store to steal them some heavy winter clothes. Then Sam piggybacked on her port to the camp. To her relief, his unique composition left him largely unfazed by the the demonic teleport and there wasn't any necessary recovery time.

The scene was picturesque. A dozen or so wood cabins nestled between a lush snow-covered forest and frozen lake. Despite the crisp air biting at his nose, he had to take a few seconds to relish the beauty of the place. Before he could get too caught up in whimsical thoughts, Ruby hooked his arm with her own, and they began trudging through the knee deep snow to Pascoe’s cabin.

The inside of the cabin was almost unnaturally warm and cozy. There was a fire burning in the stone fireplace. The furniture was plush and adorned with ample throw pillows and knit blankets. Sam smiled at the near cliche of the scene.

“This isn't quite the handful of snow days we're used to in Oregon, but the kids think it's fun. We’ll see how long it takes for the novelty to wear off.” Pascoe started digging through a cupboard. “Would either of you like something to drink? I've got some tea going and some harder stuff if you're feeling that.”

“I'll take some tea, but hold the booze,” Ruby replied from her spot on the loveseat, right next to the fire. “I've still got the suckler.”

“Tea is fine for me too.” Sam seconded as he walked around the cabin examining the cabin’s contents, which must’ve been provided by Hell.

“How're you doing with the change?” she asked Pascoe.

“Well, I'm used to giving directions to some of the coven... just not everyone on everything,” he confided.

“Delegate more. It'll save your sanity,” Ruby suggested.

“Belda and I were talking and we thought that it might be a good idea to locate the rest of the coven, the ones who live apart from us.” Pascoe handed them their drinks, then sat down in an
Two of the children who lost their parents have an uncle in Atlanta. I'm not sure if he'd move up here or if they'd want to go live with him. With the recent attacks, I'm not sure how comfortable I feel sending them to live in such a large city, and they might not even remember him, but we should at least notify next of kin.

"I can see about locating the others, even if it is just to notify them," Ruby volunteered. "It might take a few days to establish secure communication. I'm not risking them leading any angels back to you."

"I completely understand," the former head of security agreed. "Belda asked that her brother be brought in. She's concerned about his safety—nothing specific, just as a reasonable precaution."

"I have active links with five ex-pats, but I know that's not all of them. A few aren't doing upkeep and I'm sure there were family members who didn't go through with the ritual."

"I can think of a handful off the top of my head." Pascoe sipped his tea while considering them. "Some of them cut ties on purpose. They might not like you contacting them."

"Well, if their lives are in danger I don't really care what the blissfully ignorant think," Ruby countered. "Anyway, if things keep going off the deep end they might have other problems."

"What's wrong?"

"The Maji are seeing a boom in new witches. I'm not saying that we're going mainstream by any means, but even little shit can cause a reaction."

Pascoe raised an eyebrow. "You think they're gonna start burning people at the stake again?"

"In some places they never stopped," Ruby stated flatly.

"There's a group that might come up in this timeline, Templars," Sam explained.

"I'm listening."

"Think hunters with the full support of Heaven."

Pascoe's face lost its last ounce of lightheartedness. "How likely do you think it is that they'll find their way to us?"

"As far we can tell it's extremely unlikely that they'd find the camp, but they might push on witches as a whole. If they start hitting the streets then a whole lot of the community is gonna be in danger," Ruby answered. "I doubt they're gonna care if our ex-pats have been retired for a few years."

"How're the other covens preparing themselves?"

"It sounds like most of the old covens are arming up. The younger ones are scrambling to hide themselves or erase evidence of their activities. I don't know how effective that'll end up. Depending on how much angelic help the Templars are getting, their wards and links will show up a mile away."

"So our biggest asset is the isolation?"

"I'm not gonna lie, being isolated is helpful," she acknowledged. "But the protections on this place are higher quality than almost anything else you're gonna find on Earth."
“That's comforting,” Pascoe replied as some of the tension left his body. “Do you want us to change the kids’ lessons? If there's a chance they'll see fighting later.”

Ruby looked to Sam. She knew that he'd wanted to spare Kaylee a life of fighting. There was no doubt in her mind that he wanted to keep Tom and the other children sheltered from that existence to the extent possible.

“I want to prioritize teaching them utility and defensive spells for now. We aren't a combat coven and I want to avoid that if possible. This conflict is hopefully temporary and afterwards I want to coven to function like it used to,” Ruby instructed. “That being said, I trust your judgment when it comes to keeping them safe.”

“I'll watch the news and keep in touch. If things take a turn we can reevaluate our lessons.”

The front door opened and Tom walked in. He was bundled up in heavy winter clothes. He pulled his hat off, shook out his hair, then rubbed his face. When he spotted Sam and Ruby his eyes lit up.

“Hey, Tommy,” Sam said as the boy rushed over to give him and Ruby a hug. “This place looks pretty nice.”

“Yeah, it's really neat.” Tom agreed. “Sam, you want to see my room? I don't have to share it and it's got a window where I can see the lake.”

The boy didn't even wait for him to say yes before he took Sam's hand and dragged him into one of the two bedrooms. There wasn't much in the room beyond a single bed, chair, and desk. Tom climbed up onto the bed, then crawled over to the window and pointed to the view of the lake.

“The lake near our camp didn't freeze like this. Belda said she might teach us to ice skate if it's safe.” Tom looked back at Sam with a hopeful expression. “Can you ice skate?”

“I haven't tried in years.”

“You could practice with me.”

“I'd like that.” Sam smiled at the idea, then pulled out the small checkers box from the inside of his coat. “You ready to start that game back up? I think you were winning.”

They set out the board and started playing. Tom excitedly told Sam about the assorted living arrangements of the rest of the coven, specifically which kids had to share cabins and how that affected their ability to gather at night. They were still adjusting to being housed separately after being in the bunker together for several days. Sam suspected the heightened emotions made the kids want to stay closer to each other, but now they had to deal with the reality of partitioned housing divided by almost two feet of snow. It wasn’t impossible to get around by any means, but the only building big enough for all the kids to play together was some sort of dining hall that hadn’t really been set up for that kind of activity. From the sound of it, the coven wouldn’t have too hard a time adapting and come spring there’d be plenty of running around outdoors.

“Are you doing okay?” Sam asked after Tom came to the end of his nearly rambling update on everyone except for himself.

“Pascoe is nice, but….,” Tom hesitated. “I get nightmares and he doesn't know how to help. He gave me a hug and left the light on, but I'm not scared of the dark.”
“I’m sure he’s just not used to taking care of a kid,” Sam assured him. “It can take a lot of getting used to.”

“I know he’s trying to be nice.”

“He’s got a lot of new responsibilities.” Sam glanced at the living room, where Pascoe was still talking with Ruby about what seemed like an endless amount of coven business. “I’m sure it’ll get better.”

“When are you gonna be done with the stuff you have to do?”

Tom didn’t look up at Sam. He swung his feet back and forth, then started chewing on the pull string of his hoodie. Sam couldn’t tell if the little acts were actually anxious tells or if he was reading too much into it.

“We’re not sure, but we hope soon.”

Tom looked up at him. “Can I help?”

“Knowing that you’re safe and happy helps me.” Sam smiled. “When I’m feeling discouraged, I just think about how much I’m looking forward to being here and it makes me work harder.”

Tom nodded slightly, acknowledging that he wasn’t going to be given some larger role in the ongoing conflict. He moved to capture one of Sam’s pieces, then looked back up at a thought.

“Where’s the baby?”

“Bobby’s watching her at the bunker.”

“Does she not like the cold?” Tom glanced out the window at the snowy scene.

“Babies like to be warm, but she’s staying there because Ruby and I wanted to figure out how these visits work before we brought her. We’re not sure yet what’s the best way to get her here,” Sam explained. “But I know she’d like to see you. We’ll try to bring her another time.”

“Is she happy?”

“Yeah. She’s happy,” Sam replied, then added after a long silence, “you know you can talk to me about anything. You can be yourself around me. If you’re feeling sad or angry or scared, you can tell me. I’m gonna be there for you no matter what.”

“I was scared the last two nights,” Tom confided. “Sometimes I’m scared during the day.”

“Are you scared about the angels coming to camp?”

“No. I’m scared that you or Ruby are gonna get hurt.”

“Can I give you another hug?” Sam asked.

Tom nodded, then hurried around the board and hugged Sam tightly. Sam patted his back in reassurance.

“It’s going to be alright,” Sam whispered. “I promise.”

Dean called Sam and Ruby back to the bunker as soon as he was done talking to Anael. They
gathered in Dylaniel’s room to accommodate his limited mobility. Sam collected Kaylee from Bobby. When he looked down at his daughter a small clump of melting snow fell out of his hair, onto her cheek. She wriggled in protest, but calmed when he wiped it away, then kissed her forehead. He smiled at the mental image of her someday participating in a snowball fight with the kids at the coven, but his thoughts were drawn back to reality when Dean entered the room.

“Anael is up for meeting with us in fifteen minutes. She suggested some art gallery in Los Angeles,” Dean informed the gang.

Ruby raised an eyebrow at the proposed location. “An art gallery?”

“It's supposed to be closed to the public right now.”

“That is probably one of the last places Heaven would consider investigating,” Dylaniel commented.

“Angels aren't fans of fine art?” Bobby asked.

“Who is nowadays?” Ruby smirked.

“Well, Anael said it's safe and that's all I need out of this field trip destination,” Dean assured them. “It's only a mile from the restaurant we met her at. I'm guessing it's her neighborhood. She's trying to stay in familiar ground.”

“It's probably close to where the fallen angels are staying,” Kay speculated.

“It's kinda funny, hiding a bunch of angels in the City of Angels,” Ruby commented.

“Do you think she's going to hide the fallen from us?” Sam asked Dean or anyone else who might have insight.

“If they're as weak as Dyl was saying, then she'd better be keeping them in hiding,” Bobby mused aloud.

“Heaven is gonna be looking for them, especially while they're vulnerable,” Kay agreed. “And I'd expect a certain amount of resistance to exposing them to us.”

“You think she wouldn't trust us after what we've done? Dyl risked his life to start those angels falling,” Dean complained. “She has to know we're putting our asses on the line.”

“Oh, I'm willing to bet she's perfectly fine with Dyl, but we shouldn't assume she’ll have warm fuzzies for the rest of us. We’ve got three Abyssal, two humans she's never met, and you.” Kay nodded at Dean. “And I have no idea what she thinks of you at this point.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“As far as I know Anael always liked my uncle, but this one's been hanging out with Cas for the last three days and who knows what that's doing for your reputation.”

“Fuck.” Dean buried his face in his hands for a moment, then looked up. “She didn't seem upset on the phone.”

“Well, hopefully that means we'll get some work done like the adults we're pretending to be.”

“Who all’s going?” asked Bobby.
“Definitely Dean, and I should go introduce myself,” Kay said. “I’d like to bring one or two advisors.”

“I told her there wouldn’t be a lot of us,” Dean warned. “You sure about loading the deck with demons?”

“Okay, I’ll bring one assistant.”

“If Dyl’s not going we’re gonna need each human to piggyback or I’ll have to craft some site-to-site teleportation spells,” Ruby pointed out. “And personally, I don’t trust the angels enough to prepare anything that’d lead back here.”

“Piggybacking again, great. Let me go preemptively throw up,” Dean said unenthusiastically.

“Last time wasn’t too bad,” Ruby replied with a small shrug.

Dean crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I'm sorry, were you the one with their guts tied up in knots and on fire?”

“Unless you all really want me there, I'm gonna pass on the flamin’ guts spell,” Bobby commented.

“I can go,” Sam volunteered. “That stuff doesn't really affect me and Anael knows me. I think we actually got along alright.”

“You seriously don’t get wrung out by it?” Dean asked. “You lucky son of—”

“I'm part hellspawn. I get to catch a break occasionally,” Sam shot back.

“Telekinesis,” Dean muttered through a fake cough, then pointedly looked around the room with equally false innocence.

“I'll stay here this time.” Ruby chimed in, then gestured for Sam to give her the newborn. “I've got a few things to do for Pascoe and if I don't feed Kaylee soon I think my breasts are gonna explode.”

“Well, on that note,” Dean said, then turned and walked out of the room.

Sam, Dean, and Kay met Shola at the art gallery. It was located on the second floor of a small aging building that seemed to be mixed commercial and residential. The front door was covered in graffiti, but the placement of a clear sign listing the hours of operation hinted at the intentionally urban aesthetic. Dean knocked twice, then opened the door cautiously, revealing a fairly tame interior. The floors were a rich hardwood set off by brick facade walls holding various paintings, photographs, and samples of calligraphy.

The only people they found in their first minute or so of exploring were two women in a hallway deep into the space. The pair stood staring at a 2.5x3’ canvas covered in pink, purple, blue, and orange short brush strokes vaguely hinting at a castle. One of the women wore baggy jeans and a t-shirt while the other was slightly more disheveled in flannel pajama pants and an oversized knit sweater.

“They're angels,” Kay whispered to Sam and Dean with a little nod to the women.

“You sure?” Sam asked quietly.
“I recognize the vessel in the sweater. She was one of Cas’s friends, Rachel.”

Sam expected the angel to turn at the mention of her own name. If Dylaniel had been able to hear so much the night before, surely an angel could hear her own name from across the room. But she didn't react. She was transfixed by the painting, consumed by something he wasn't certain he could understand.

They tried to pass behind them quietly, but the one that wasn't Rachel turned and made eye contact. She took a startled breath as she looked both Dean and Sam over in surprise. She shifted slightly, away from Sam and towards Dean, but she didn’t actually flee. Dean raised his hands in a gesture of peace, but before he could say anything Rachel interrupted him.

“It's beautiful,” she said softly without looking away from the painting.

“Yeah, it's really… nice,” Dean agreed.

He wasn't sure how much he actually liked it, but he wanted to disarm the other angel by engaging in some polite conversation. She seemed confused by the sudden social interaction, yet not upset.

“Do you like this style of painting?" Sam asked the angels in a particularly soothing voice. “It's called post-impressionism.”

“I don't know what we do with it,” the angel that wasn't Rachel admitted, as she turned backed up toward the painting.

“Tie a room together?” Dean suggested.

“How does it tie?” She carefully peeked behind the canvas for strings or others binding mechanisms.

“It's an idiom that means the painting makes the room as a whole more aesthetically pleasing,” Sam explained.

“Why is it aesthetically pleasing?” the second angel asked.

“Uh… that's kind of a personal—subjective question. Not everyone feels the same way about these things. Rachel—” Sam wasn't sure if he was allowed to use her name without some kind of introduction, but he wanted to speak directly to her. “—why do you like it?”

“I can see mechanically how it was made, but I don't know why it looks the way it does. How does the creator decide where to put each stroke? How long should each stroke be? What direction should it go? It's imperfection without chaos,” Rachel mused aloud. “It's a manifestation of humanity.”

“That's very profound,” Sam replied.

“I still don't know what we do with it,” the other angel countered.

“I'll second that,” Dean agreed, making the skeptical angel visibly pleased.

“My name is Wigfrid.” The angel introduced herself to Dean, her eyes briefly flicking to Sam uncertainly in the process, but returned awkwardly to Dean as soon as Sam made eye contact. “Forgive Rachel’s manners. She's never been on Earth before.”

“Had you?” Dean asked.
“Briefly, I fought against the Rebellion.”

“I imagine things have changed considerably,” Sam commented.

“Yes,” she replied without looking up at his face.

“Tell you what, I’m going to go check on Kay and Shola,” Sam said, to Wigfrid’s visible relief. “It was nice to meet you both.”

He walked down the hall into a room where Kay and Shola were whispering, abandoning Dean to figure out how to successfully disengage from a conversation with two angels. Despite not knowing Shola well at all he felt much more comfortable on the demon side of the gallery. It was a slightly disconcerting realization that somehow in the organic segregation process he’d ended up on that side, but honestly the issue was losing some of its surprise and sting.

“What’s wrong?” Kay asked, probably seeing some sort of annoyance on his face.

“One of the angels doesn’t like me,” he answered.

“Did you do something?”

“Nothing. It’s like she’s afraid of me or something.”

“I always assumed most the angels didn’t like my dad because of the whole King of Hell thing. I guess it could be just an Abyssal thing, or maybe they don’t like Lucifer’s grace,” Kay said with a shrug.

“You think they can tell? I had to tell Anael that I’m Lucifer’s vessel.”

“Well at this point they’ve all probably heard that you’re his vessel.” Kay’s brow furrowed. “Actually, does that mean that we should be suspicious of any angel that instantly likes you?”

“This whole thing seems backwards,” Sam muttered while watching Wigfrid laugh at something Dean said.

“That’s what happens when your shadow is the devil.”

“Great.”

“Hey, I have that same shadow. I just have many more years of experience wearing it with class.” Kay turned to Shola. “And remember, don’t let them being angels intimidate you. They don’t have all the answers or the moral high ground. It’s any other business meeting.”

Shola smiled somewhat anxiously. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Each of you is more righteous than half of Heaven combined,” Kay told Shola and Sam. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Sam and Shola exchanged a confused glance. He’d never really spoken to Shola in a substantive way, and based on her expression, she was almost as unfamiliar with him. Kay had at one point encouraged them to work together, but it hadn’t been clear why they’d presumably be a good fit. He supposed that some sort of common decency was a fair starting place for a working relationship, independent of any anecdotes from Kay’s timeline.

Anael entered the gallery followed by a man, who she dismissed with a wave of her hand. She
approached the group, stopping just out of arm’s reach from Kay. Her eyes flicked to each of her four guests, but settled on the familiar faces of Sam and Dean.

“Sorry for the unusual meeting location. Several of my siblings are experiencing a change and I couldn’t leave them unprotected,” Anael explained.

“It’s fine,” Dean assured her as he approached the group.

“You’re the Demon Queen?” Anael asked without moving to shake Kay’s hand.

“I’m a demon and I am Queen of Hell,” Kay acknowledged. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s my understanding that you’ve known me for years,” Anael corrected. “You have me at a disadvantage.”

“Through no fault of my own.”

“Kay is completely behind our effort to stop Lucifer’s escape,” Sam reminded Anael. “She’s the one spearheading the demon defense of the seals.”

“You come from a time that couldn’t stop my brother.” Anael stared at Kay with the same wariness that she’d had for Sam at their last meeting. “I’m curious what great insights you have.”

“Primarily the importance of urgency and cooperation,” Kay replied. “As the person in the room with the fewest allies and the best sense of how close we are to the brink, I suspect you can appreciate their importance too.”

“We do need your help,” Anael acknowledged her point.

“And we want to give it to you.” Kay gestured to Shola. “This is Shola, head of Hell’s interplanar relations. She has been meeting with various contacts that Hell has on Earth over the last few days. Our hope is to be able to shortly begin incorporating resources from the humans as well.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Shola greeted Anael, who only nodded in a neutral acknowledgment.

“If our alliance proves tolerable, she will be one of the people most able to help you in getting protection and aid for your fallen siblings,” Kay elaborated in order to give Anael a greater appreciation for Shola’s presence. “You two are going to be good friends.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Shola offered Anael another professionally polite smile. “Once we address the seals, I’d be happy to work with you to improve your siblings’ current arrangements. Depending on the number of angels in need of assistance, I could liason on their behalf to locate physical sanctuaries and establish trusts or guardianships for them.”

“I don’t understand what you’re suggesting.” Anael’s voice betrayed her lack of familiarity with the nuanced issues.

“I’ll be happy to give you counsel,” Shola assured her. “And as an ally of the realm, I have been authorized to give it to you freely.”

Sam watched Anael slowly start nodding and wondered if the angel had realized that she’d just been enticed by a gift with purchase. There wasn’t any reason for him to believe that Kay or even Shola, all things being equal, would withhold vital information from the fallen angels. But it was interesting to watch them hold the assistance as both a carrot and a stick over Anael, who possibly hadn’t recognized just how out of her depths she was or soon might be. Granted, that assumed that
there was any significant value to the help Shola was offering. It was hard not to wonder whether
there was anything to be gained by appointing a legal guardian for a disabled or unacclimated
angel, but maybe he was selling the sophistication of the supernatural world’s laws short.

“How is Dylaniel?” Anael asked when she saw that he was not there.

“He’s still recovering,” Kay replied.

“Is he functional?”

“That depends on what you mean,” Dean chimed in. “He’s mentally okay, but physically and
energy-wise he’s still got a ways to go.”

“My siblings and I could tend to him,” Anael suggested.

“He’s being treated with healing magic and recovering.” Dean sidestepped the topic of Gabriel.

“He’s part of our family,” Anael said, showing her angelic interpretation of alternate timelines.
“He could stay with us—”

“With respect, I am his family,” Kay stated firmly. “His safety is of the highest priority for me and
he is safe where he is.”

“He’s profoundly important to the fallen—”

“There’s a difference between being important and being valued. I’m not exposing him to so many
wild cards while he can’t defend himself. I don’t care how much protection you offer. He’s not
going with you.” Kay’s eyes narrowed subtly.

“He needs to be seen,” Anael replied. “They need to know he’s still alive.”

“Knowing that he can’t stay with you,” Sam interjected in an attempt to stop a fight from breaking
out. “What can we do to accommodate that?”

“He should visit us in private or be seen in public,” Anael suggested. “Let him fly for us to see.”

“He can’t fly in his current condition, and he shouldn’t be in any more videos.” Kay rejected the
idea. “The humans are losing it over their false angels sighting.”

“Many of them don’t believe it.”

“Enough of them do. If we’re helping Heaven recruit then we’re just hurting ourselves,” Kay
warned. “I’ll talk to Dyl when we get back and see what he’s feeling capable of.”

To Sam that sounded like an empty appeasement. As far as he knew Dylaniel wasn’t able to walk
on his own, let alone any of the things Anael was suggesting. Though it did raise the question of
how much the fallen angels knew about the nature of Dylaniel’s condition. Anael’s initial and
main source of information had to have been Castiel and he’d left before the problem with
Dylaniel’s grace had been discovered. Subsequent to that, Anael had communicated with Dylaniel
via prayer and on the phone, so she knew he was somewhat physically recovered.

“Fine. Here is the current list of seals.” Anael withdrew a thumbdrive from her pocket, then
handed it to Kay. “We’re still translating the last thirty seals. I can deliver those to you when we’re
done.”

“Do you have any sense of how many are broken?” Sam asked.
“By our estimates forty-one of the seals have been successfully broken.”

Dean stepped a little closer at the alarming news. “Are those including Alastair’s eight?”

“That’s not including at least five of his,” Kay speculated. “He said that five of his would be done within a week, but three should’ve been done by now.”

Sam sighed. “We’re gonna be at 46 in just a few days.”

“At least 46. That's not including whatever else they knock out in the meantime,” Kay pointed out.

“We may have to pull Kay and Sam from the field as soon as Lilith's army of 440,000 demons get topside,” Dean speculated. “Once they're in play those seals are gonna start breaking a lot faster.”

“Would you return to Hell?” Anael’s question sounded like it was directed at Kay, but the angel looked to Sam while she spoke.

“What?” Sam asked softly, not understanding what she'd suggested.

“The final seal appears to require that one of yours or Lilith's death occur on Earth. If you return to Hell then the seal can't be broken.”

The warmth and peace that Sam had been feeling at the idea of having something like a normal life was rattled. If push came to shove the safest place for him to be might be Hell. It was a place he'd never wanted to go for all the obvious reasons, but also because he feared what changes it might provoke in him. Yet if it kept the world safe, it was hard to imagine being so selfish as to say no.

“Sam's never been to Hell.” Dean jumped in to defend him. “He’s not going there. He's not taking his daughter there.”

The thought that Kaylee might have to go to Hell along with him and Kay shook Sam. If it really was a matter of her life or death he’d take her to Hell, but short of that he refused to expose his daughter to such a potentially transformative environment. He didn’t want his daughter to grow up like Kay. He wanted her to have a better life.

“She's not going to Hell,” Sam said.

“As Abyssal, the environment shouldn't hurt any of you.” Anael tried to reassure him.

“They’d be trapped down there for who-knows-how-long waiting for us to kill Lilith. In the other timeline it took decades to find Lilith—and time is all screwy down there,” Dean countered. “You're asking for him to raise his daughter in Hell.”

“If that's what it takes to prevent Lucifer’s escape, it's a small price.”

“Not to the people paying it,” Dean argued.

“If we hide in the Citadel then it'll just redirect the war back into Hell,” Kay pointed out.

“It's better than having it on Earth,” Anael stated.

“It’d be different if we had a strong enough garrison in the Pits, but Hell doesn’t have the resources to defend itself again a conflict like that right now. If Lilith really wanted to hurt us and not just play at ruling, she could do it in a few quick moves.”

“My brother made your Citadel impenetrable,” Anael countered. “No one has ever breached it.”
“No angel has ever breached it,” Kay corrected. “But there have been dozens of coups in the history of Hell. Lilith is supported by half a dozen archdemons and over a dozen knights, all of whom lived and/or worked in the Citadel for centuries or more. We’re not buckling down there, just to let her drag us out.”

“So you’d stay on Earth until you’re driven from it with fire and bloodshed?”

“Whether we’re found in Hell or on Earth, it won’t reduce the carnage,” Kay replied. “Our collective goal is to end this before it comes to that. That’s why we need to get your fallen angels up and running and get those seals guarded. We have a safe place on Earth for Sam and me to stay once we have to pull in.”

“Once the sixty-fifth seal is broken, all of Lilith's forces will come for you and Sam. Eventually they’ll find a way of finding you or drawing you out,” Anael warned.

“It won’t happen. I won’t let it happen again,” Kay said sternly.

“You can’t make guarantees.”

Kay’s expression turned gravely serious. “If you think I’m not prepared to sacrifice to protect our worlds, then you’re severely mistaken.”

“Ana, I know that you don’t know us, but I’m asking you to trust me when I say she gets it,” Dean said while inserting himself between them. “If push comes to shove, she’ll be the one fortifying with corpses. We’ll cross that bridge if we get to it, but I hope you’re just gonna have take my word for it.”

“Coming here was a risk,” Anael criticized them.

“We need you and your siblings to work with Hell,” Kay replied. “It was a calculated risk.”

“When will you withdraw from taking calculated risks? 60 seals? 63 seals?”

“The two of us will pull back after 61 seals,” Kay proposed, then looked to Sam. “Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Sam agreed.

“That seems reasonably precautious,” Anael approved. “But if the rate of seals breaking increases, you may need to withdraw even sooner.”

“We understand. How many angels do you have and how many are capable of defending seals?” Kay took her turn pressing Anael.

“So far we’ve located 78 of our fallen siblings,” Anael answered. “I believe that a third of them should be capable of defending seals.”

“Do they need reinforcement?” Dean asked.

“What are you suggesting?”

“We don’t have many hunters, but the ones we do have could help.”

“I doubt that an angel would significantly benefit from the presence of human fighters,” Anael said, then added, “mortals are innately disadvantaged in direct combat.”
“Hey, if those humans are armed with angel blades, then I think you’d be surprised how much ass they can kick,” Dean argued.

“I’m all for integration, but we might want to spread our resources,” Kay pointed out. “We’re looking at 26 angels and a dozen or two hunters isn’t enough to double up or even cover the six hundred and however many unbusted seals.”

“How many demons can you pull up?”

“Nowhere near 440,000.” Kay did some quick math. “Maybe 50,000 for now, which is like 80 per seal. I'm trying to get more, but I haven't had enough time to instill the confidence to pull hundreds of thousands of demons out of Hell, especially when there still a war on down there.”

“If you called a ceasefire, could you reallocate troops to the seals?” Sam suggested.

“For any other war maybe, but we're fighting the same enemy on both fronts. Lilith's side and the High Council could see exactly how weak the firewall after the ceasefire is and ceasefires take both sides cooperating. The Council’d block me from leaving Hell exposed,” Kay explained. “I'll keep trying, but I don't know how much I can move things down there at this point. I don't have the right leverage.”

“What's the right leverage?”

“A clear and immediate threat to Hell’s interests. Right now we're either a few steps too far or people just have to take my word for it.” Kay shrugged apologetically. “I can't tell you how hard it is to get demons on board with fighting Lucifer.”

“Even some of us who don't worship him are reluctant to see him as a threat,” Shola corroborated.

“So what we're working with is about 80 demons and maybe 1 angel or hunter covering each seal. And in a few days we’ll have thousands of Lilith's demons charging them.” Dean groaned at the thought.

“We need more angels to fall,” Anael suggested.

“We need to find Lilith,” Sam corrected.

“We need a lucky break,” Dean synthesized.

“I've got thousands of Hell’s informants and interrogators running down intelligence leads looking for her. Luck or not, something’s gonna break,” Kay assured them. “Fingers crossed it's not seal sixty-five.”

“Ana.” Dean hurried to speak with her privately after the main discussion had finished. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Is it about Castiel?” She asked warily.

He smiled with false innocence. “Will that stop you from talking to me?”

“Castiel doesn't want to talk to you at the moment.”

It had been disappointing to find that Castiel hadn't come to the meeting, though it wasn't exactly surprising. The thought that Castiel was still so upset at him had rattled Dean a bit. It was strange to think that he'd managed to hurt him that much, yet Castiel had confided in him and placed his
trust in Dean while he hadn't done the same.

“Can you tell him I’m sorry?” Dean sighed. “I wasn't trying to keep it from him—I mean, I was, but only because I was scared. It wasn't about him. It was about me being too scared of figuring out my own stuff. And I'm sorry I betrayed his trust in the process.”

“If I find a moment alone with him, I'll tell him that,” Anael agreed. “He and I agreed that it would be best if our newly fallen siblings don't know that the two of you are fighting, so we are trying to avoid discussing you in front of them.”

“I'm not fighting with him—wait.” Dean lowered his voice, then glanced covertly across the room and out the doorway at Wigfrid and Rachel. “They don't think Cas and I are in a relationship or anything, right?”

“I suggested to Castiel that he not discourage them from the idea, though he's not doing anything to corroborate it.”

“I'm not okay with that.” Dean raised his hand in some attempt to physically manifest his objection. “I'm not dating anyone and I'm sure as hell not dating Cas. He won't even look at me.”

“But it could be the case—”

“But it's not right now.”

“Our siblings are risking their lives for some idea of love and personal freedom. I'm not going to pick them up from the most vulnerable moment of their lives and tell them that their inspiration was a lie,” she said in an intense whisper.

“It wasn't a lie. It's just not what's going on between Cas and me. I'm not gonna lie to them. That's what screwed things up between the two of us in the first place.” Dean took a step closer to her and placed a hand on her arm in what he hoped conveyed sincerity. “Listen to me, my brother and I used to lie to each other all the time because we were trying to protect each other and our relationship. It's dumb as hell and it fucks things up. I know you care about your family more than anything. You don't want to do that to your family.”

“I appreciate your concern and advice. I'll reconsider the situation,” she agreed, then after a moment she gently touched his forearm in an unexpectedly warm gesture. “Please don't hesitate to call on me.”

It only took a few hours for the news of another lead to break.

Kay sat on her throne and watched the many advisers scurry about in their attempt to relay ideas and information. At a superficial glance the war effort was going well. They were making much faster progress at conquering the Pits than under her father’s rule. But the problem was that the true war, on Earth, was just short of the boiling point.

Her swift assault on Lilith’s forces in the Pits had left no time for the populace of Hell to appreciate how much they needed to protect the humans. In her time, years had passed and Heaven had caused a significant amount of damage on Earth in an attempt to provoke some sort of reckless reaction from her father and uncle. Restraint had been their under-appreciated strength and also their eventual damnation.

This time around they'd been more hasty and there was no telling how harmful or helpful that was. They were too close to the fray. Their vision was shortsighted, not because they weren't thinking
of the future—Kay and the others seemed to only be thinking of the future nowadays—instead there were too many critical moments in time lurking ahead of them, but completely without visibility.

For over a week, ever since she’d heard that someone matching her uncle’s description had been captured in New Orleans, she’d been waiting for something bad to happen—and something had, many somethings. It’d been a largely unrelenting series of bizarre and devastating events, and she wasn't to the end of it. Yes, she was a wartime leader, but war had a rhythm and rules. This mess was something else. This was the desperate scramble of multiple players trying to win the game before all the pieces were even settled on the board.

She looked around the throne room, trying to pull her mind away from the apocalypse for a few minutes. By Hell’s standards, it’d been well over a year since she’d claimed the throne. The large stone hall’s appearance was far from what she'd left in 2039. Her old throne room was more lush, adorned with old vines that had originally been crafted by her father. The current throne room was still very young, a mere allusion to the greatness her realm could achieve with time…. If they end up so fortunate as to have time. Kay exerted a little energy to make the one of the clusters of silver vines climb up a nearby pillar several inches, but stopped when she sensed urgency.

Joseba entered the hall, escorting a shackled demon whose shell was clearly damaged. The knight gripped zir arm tightly and marched zir at a rapid pace that caused the prisoner to stumble. Rather than assisting zir up, Joseba simply dragged zir behind him. The spectacle silenced the room and caused a path to clear before him. Kay’s lip subtly curled up at the display of power, that reminded her of a dog bringing its master a gift.

“Ma’am, you might want to listen to this.” Joseba tossed the injured demon forward to rest in a heap before her.

Zie cowered for a moment, then looked up at her. Deep in the prisoner’s broken soul, zir disgust at Kay and everyone else in the room was drowned out by awesome fear.

“What should I find so interesting?” Kay raised an eyebrow, but didn't sit up in the Seat or do anything else to appear overly enticed by the prospect of news. She wasn't trying to insult Joseba’s offering, yet she wanted to make the prisoner know zie had to earn zir worth. Zie would need to give her something valuable. In Hell, propriety dictated that she make zir bargain or beg.

“Zie's from the Torquean, one of Lilith's.” Joseba kicked the prisoner’s back. “Tell her.”

“There… there is conflict… between Lord Alastair and The Knight Captain Abaddon.”

“Go on,” Kay instructed as she leaned forward. She could feel the informant flare with some small measure of hope at her visible interest.

“He attempted to order Abaddon to assist several of his aides, but she didn't accept his authority. He sent three of his senior vicedemons and five assistants to make her comply. She killed them, then strung their meatsuits for everyone to see.” Zie flared with hatred at the mention of Abaddon’s desecration of the bodies.

“Did she carve their foreheads?”

“She marked them with Lord Alastair’s sigil,” the prisoner hissed. “The insubordinate blight said she refuses to be in the same hemisphere as him.”

“Who’s Lilith backing?” Kay asked, brain already running through different scenarios and avenues
of investigation.

“Alastair, of course,” zie replied, earning another kick from Joseba for zir tone.

“Shola, tell our assets to keep an eye out for Abaddon. Give them authorization to run down leads and pull back up. I want to know where she is.” Kay looked to Joseba. “Tell me everything you know about your former Captain.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 24 of the Deleted Scenes depicts Kay's mom (2039!Ruby) giving her the nickname of Starlight and its associated meaning. If you haven't read it, it gives a little more context for Kay & Ruby's conversation in this chapter.
After a considerable amount of intel gathering in Hell, Kay returned to the bunker. She found the whole gang in the library. Sam, Dean, Bobby, and Jody were pretty well buried in laptops, maps, and a few reference books. Ruby was nursing Kaylee in an armchair while reading some aged tome on the effects of arcana on the divine. Dylaniel had even been brought out, though she wasn't sure if that was because the others wanted to keep an eye on him or if he was getting lonely. Regardless, he was on a laptop making some slower-paced contribution to the general effort of looking for seals.

“We have an unexpected and frightening new development,” Kay said in lieu of a greeting.

“Don't we always,” Dean muttered, but she ignored the comment.

“Abaddon appears to have gone rogue,” Kay explained, then realized that Dylaniel was the only person with sufficient knowledge to be surprised. “Operative word being new. As in Abaddon didn't go rogue in our timeline, hence the unexpected and frightening.”

“I thought that time was trying to not change on us?” Dean asked. “Kali said that time’s heading towards a common point of significance or something, but so far I'm not seeing it.”

“I don't see it either, which is unsettling as hell,” Kay agreed. “But if we can get some use out of a break like this, then we're shaking it down for all it's worth.”

“Let me guess, Abaddon is another badass archdemon.”

“Knight of Hell, actually,” she replied.

Bobby peeked over his laptop, thoroughly enticed. “What's a Knight of Hell?”

“They're Lucifer’s elite demon soldiers,” Dylaniel answered briefly.

“During the beginning of the Rebellion, in the lead up to the full on war, Lucifer created dozens of demons that were unlike your normal demons,” Kay added. “If you want to get technical about it they might actually constitute their own species of Abyssal since they have slightly different abilities.”

“Different how?”

“They're tougher. It's incredibly hard to kill them, so much so that most people think they're unkillable.”

“The power of an archangel can kill them. That means that with the right application blessed weapons or the First Light can do it. In theory, they can also kill each other, but as a custom they rarely fight each other,” Dylaniel explained. “Failing that, the best tactic is to bind them within their vessel and immobilize them.”

“Another big difference between them and normal demons is that their power is a direct gift from Lucifer, so their damage is as permanent as Lucifer’s,” Kay warned. “As in, if they hurt you, the only magical healing capable of working has to come from Lucifer, Michael, or God.”
“And that's about as likely as Lilith knocking on our door to surrender,” Dean speculated.

“That's the thing that makes knights such a tool against angels. If Lucifer had been able to make more of them before he was imprisoned he probably would've stood a fair shot at winning the war,” Kay commented. “Even after he was captured the knights kept up at least a defensive effort. Knights are sworn servants of Hell. By most accounts, they're the only reason Hell survived the war.”

“And Abaddon is one of them?” Sam asked.

“Their captain actually. The attempted coup and civil war has made a lot of the other knights uncertain about whose orders to follow. Most of the knights are waiting to see who comes out on top. But yeah, Abaddon is the biggest and baddest of the bunch.”

“Awesome. So how do we take him down?” Dean asked.

“You guys—” Kay pointed to Sam, Dean, and Dylaniel. “—aren't going anywhere near her. She's the Knight Captain, which means she's more than a tier above archdemon. I’ve talked to several of my loyal knights and I think I've got a good picture on her. She doesn't really like anyone, but she hates men. Apparently, she's not even above busting the male knights’ asses—though she only ever did permanent damage to Cain. I couldn't get all the details, but she decided he was too weak to lead the knights and took the guy down.”

“Cain, as in the father of murder?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “She thought the world's first killer was too soft?”

“The knights are all a little tight-lipped about Cain, like I said I couldn't get all the details.” Kay shrugged. “Regardless, she doesn't seem to play nice with men and especially with male superiors. She ended up abandoning the fight when Alastair tried to control her.”

“Wait, if she hates men, then how does she serve Lucifer?”

“Angels don't have sexes. As far as she's concerned Luci’s a woman. Aside from her loyalties as a knight, she wants a woman in charge of Hell, a queen. It's something she's complained about repeatedly. She's not a fan of the Council and wanted a strong female leader back in Hell. Until recently that meant backing Lilith.” Kay smiled meekly at her unspoken proposition.

“You're going to recruit her?” Sam guessed.

“I'm gonna try,” Kay confirmed. “I'm only taking women to go meet with her. Trust me when I say that we really don't want to bring a guy with us.”

“How bad could she—” Dean started to object, but was cut off.

“The vast majority of her victims were tortured to death and three-quarters of the survivors committed suicide within a year of being rescued,” Dylaniel interrupted. He may have been a child when she was killed, but it hadn't stopped him from reading everything he could on the demon that had maimed his dad. He turned to Kay. “She isn't the kind of person you want to take lightly. You shouldn't go without considerable support.”

“Yeah, I remember and I definitely am not underestimating her.” Kay looked at Ruby hopefully. “Which is why I could use some back up that’s good at nullifying big bads.”
“You need some magic,” Ruby summarized. She glanced down at her daughter, who was somewhere between nursing and dozing. “You know if the Council heard you invited me into the field, you’d probably get a small revolt on your hands.”

“I need someone I can trust, both to not turncoat and who knows what they’re doing if things go bad. You're quick on your feet and the only other witch I know that can do that is currently a six-year-old.”

“How dangerous are you talking about?” Sam asked as he closed his laptop, suddenly have a much larger personal stake in the conversation.

“She won’t know we’re coming, but we’d literally be walking in under a white flag,” Kay explained. “She doesn’t have a caste behind her, but she probably won’t be entirely alone. I couldn’t tell you exactly how many knights followed her away from Lilith and Alastair, but it’s not more than six.”

“I want to help and all, but I’m not sure about this kind of fight.” Ruby glanced at Sam and Kaylee, before looking back to Kay. “I know we’re running low on time with the seals, but I’m not really sure it's worth the risk. You're talking about ballpark half a dozen Knights of Hell and I've never even seen one.”

“She sounds dangerous. I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Sam added, more so directed at Kay.

“That's fair. It might not be a great setup, but if we pass this up, I don't know when the next chance is. Ruby, you don't have to do anything you don't feel comfortable with,” Kay acknowledged. “But I'm planning on bringing more than just the two of us. I just think you'd be a solid addition as our caster. I'm also bringing Jieshi and Tora.”

“Tora?” A reflexive grin flickered on Ruby's face as she straightened up in her chair a bit. “The Knight of Shadows? The Slayer of Olgolt? Crafter of the Nue?”

“No way. We’ve got a fangirl situation,” Dean commented.

“I'm not a fangirl,” Ruby objected to the characterization, then added with a little more restraint, “You'd have to be a complete idiot to not want to work with her.”

“Yeah, that Tora,” Kay confirmed. “Funny thing, my uncle Dean and Tora pretty much refused to work together.”

“I stand by my statement.”

“Is Jee-sure another knight?” Sam asked.

“Jieshi,” Kay corrected his pronunciation, but he didn't actually catch the nuances.

“Never heard of her,” Ruby said with a little shrug.

“She’s a Raberian. One of a thousand or so that didn't follow their arch over to Lilith.”

“She’s either brave or crazy; I'll give her that,” Ruby conceded. “Visdemon at least?”

“Nope.”

Ruby nodded a bit to herself. “Well, now you've really piqued my curiosity.”

“In this time she’s an up-and-comer, but in my time she practically could’ve applied for
“The knighthood,” Kay explained. “She's already clearing dungeons faster than any other commander and she can fight with the best of them.”

“I always found her to be a great asset,” Dyaniel agreed.

“Standard soldier type or any cute tricks?” Ruby asked.

“No cute tricks yet,” Kay answered.

Ruby purses her lips as she considered the mission and her potential companions. “I take it the knights’ weapons count as magical?” Ruby asked, earning a nod from Kay. “And knowing our luck they have iron blades?”

“That's pretty common if they don't have access to angel blades,” Kay confirmed.

Ruby sighed at the additional danger. It was bad enough facing enemies that could permanently destroy her meatsuit, but a magical blade containing iron could kill demons with three well placed hits. Sam spotted her less-than-thrilled expression and walked over to her. He sat awkwardly on the arm of her chair, then reached down to gently squeeze her shoulder in reassurance.

“How bad of an idea is it to bring Anael?” Dean suggested. “It might help to have someone who doesn't trip over salt.”

“Salt isn't really gonna hang up knights for very long, but point taken.” Kay thought for a moment. “Having a healer would definitely be an advantage.”

“You really think Abaddon would be okay meeting with an angel?” Sam asked.

“Actually, knights tend to be a little more open-minded about the whole angel thing.” Kay nodded to herself at the idea. “They all had at least one positive interaction with an angel.”

“I'm not saying it's a heavily weighted factor, but in the general interest of mitigating the repetition of history, do we want to introduce Jieshi and Anael?” Dyaniel interjected, drawing confused expressions from everyone except Kay.

“Enemies?” Bobby asked.

“Partners,” Kay clarified. “Professional and otherwise.”

“No way….” Dean furrowed his brow as he connected a few dots. “That woman that was with Anael when we were in India, she's her?”

Sam knew that Dean had traveled to India with Kay and Ruby to contact Kali and Gabriel, but he didn’t remember mention of anyone else being there. “Anael was in India?”

“Different time, long story.” Kay shot down the tangent, then turned back to Dean. “That was her.”

“This away party just keeps getting better and better,” Ruby smirked. “Jesus, I can't believe I'm considering this.”

“I'm hoping it won't come to a fight, but if it's necessary I think it'll be completely doable.”

“Have you two fought her before?” Sam asked as he interlaced his fingers with Ruby’s, taking her hand.
He didn’t like the idea of Ruby going off to a fight so soon after they’d reconciled, but it was too much to hope that they’d have some down time in the middle of the fight for the apocalypse. A significant part of him wanted to convince her not to go, to implore her to stay in the safety of the bunker with him and Kaylee. Yet if Kay was set on going and Ruby was the best qualified to help her, he wasn’t prepared to ask Ruby to turn her back on that. It was her choice, her tactical decision, her conflicting responsibilities. He’d made the same choice in agreeing to go after Samhain and he had to force himself to respect and support her the way she had for him.

“Abaddon died just before I saw my first combat,” Dyaniel replied.

“So you were a toddler?” Ruby joked.

“I was nine.”

Dyaniel’s correction evoked grimaces of pity from Ruby, Bobby, and Jody, which he actively ignored. Sam pursed his lips solemnly at the reminder that Dyaniel had seen combat at the age of ten. Maybe his first fight had been against Lucifer?

“Abaddon and I exchanged some blows, but I wasn't the one to kill her,” Kay answered, drawing the others out of their unpleasant thoughts about Dyaniel’s youth.

“How’d she die?” Bobby asked, searching for some sort of weakness that he could at least research as a contribution.

“Dyl's dad embedded a rusty nail in her brain,” Kay answered with a level of fondness at the memory that nearly was pride.

“A blessed rusty nail,” Dyaniel corrected.

“Wait, she's the knight that Dee was telling me about?”  Dean’s mouth hung open slightly in surprise.

“Small world,” Ruby commented.

“What'd he tell you?” Kay asked cautiously.

“She cut up his face or something,” Dean said as Dyaniel and Kay exchanged a quick glance.

“Yeah, if we're worrying about echoes in time, you might want to really stay away from her.”

“I’m on board with that. I like my face being all in one piece,” Dean agreed, then groaned at a new thought. “God, I really need to learn how to bless things.”

“I need to find out if I still can,” Dyaniel muttered.

Ever since the fight with Raphael, Dyaniel had been unarmed. In theory he was safe and the presence of a knife holster on his hip or chest would only get in the way. Still, there was something depressing about seeing him without the means to defend himself, especially considering how much he clinged to that as a core aspect of his identity. Eventually he’d get his weapons back, but with so little energy there was serious doubt as to how well he’d be able to utilize being armed.

“How do you test out whether you blessed a weapon without maybe getting your ass kicked?”

“Can someone bring me a prisoner to execute?” Dyaniel requested.
“I’ll be sure to pick one up at the store next time I go for milk,” Bobby joked.

“Let's get you walking first, then I'll see if I can find someone for you to kill,” Kay suggested warmly to her cousin.

“What the fuck even is our lives?” Dean sighed.

They arrived outside of what must've once been a military base in Niger, bordering the Sahara Desert. It hadn’t been hard to locate. For two hundred miles in all direction the local gossip was about a small gang of female mercenaries lead by a red-haired woman seizing the base as their own. The compound itself had suffered enough abuse over the years that significant portions had simply been replaced with corrugated metal walls. There was no doubt that the base was just a temporary stop on some greater journey of destruction since it had essentially no strategic value. The only appeal that Kay could guess at was the entertainment. The mutilated bodies of men adorned the exterior wall and a large pyre burned a few women’s bodies just outside the main gate.

With a little convincing, Anael agreed to carry the white flag. The idea was to leave everyone else's hands free to grab their weapons while visibly preoccupying her hands, which were known weapons all by themselves. Jieshi wore a sheathed bastard sword and Tora had two knives holstered on her hips. Kay wore a holstered angel blade, but she opted to leave Lucifer’s blade at the bunker after realizing that Anael might find its presence distracting.

Ruby carried a satchel of reagents and several spells that had already been queued up incase of an emergency. Most noteworthy in her small collection was a clay bottle containing a limited anti-flight spell. Unlike the fight with Samhain, ghosts and incorporeal creatures weren't a significant threat, so she had considerably more confidence with this approach. Despite having cleaned up the balsam flare gun mechanics, she decided that particular spell would be largely wasted inside a building. So instead they had a shorter range spell that would keep everyone within 500 feet stuck until she smashed the bottle. It might not be as dramatic as smiting or swordplay, but if things took a turn she’d have the most important job.

Ruby had been disappointed that there was no covert way for her to maintain a locator spell or something else that would allow her to monitor the number of demons in their immediate vicinity in real time. Luckily, Kay had inherited Sam’s gift for sensing demons. As they walked into the base, Ruby could see half a dozen demons watching them from a safe distance, following them to watch the encounter. At one point Ruby noticed Kay look to a doorway a split second before one of the observers became visible, which was a welcome reassurance that Kay was hopefully on her guard and observing various targets.

Abaddon sat in a metal and canvas folding chair at the head of a large room that had probably been a dining hall. She had bright red hair, black military style clothes and boots, and her hands were still wet with blood up to the wrists. Beside her seat, an ominous puddle of red liquid spread outward from some source that was obscured by a sheet covered side table holding a bowl of grapes. At her feet lay a gagged, naked man covered in lashes with his hands bound behind his back.

“Thank you for hearing us out,” Kay said in Abyssal, the common language of everyone in the room except for Anael.

“It's not often your enemies walk up to your front door for a chat,” Abaddon explained. She nodded to her fellow knight. “Tora.”

Tora remained at silent attention, but tipped her head slightly in respect.
“Are we really going to be enemies?” Kay asked with a professional smile.

“You’re the one who raised forces against Lilith,” Abaddon replied as she plucked a grape, then ate it, completely unfazed by the blood that had gotten on the morsel.

“Yes, against her. I don't have any ill will against you,” Kay lied. “I want to find out if we have more to offer you than she is currently providing you. From what I hear, you're experiencing a conflict within your organization. Maybe it's time you reconsidered your position or maybe you'd like our help eliminating some competition.”

“You're offering to kill Alastair?” Abaddon huffed a laugh. “If you were capable of that you'd think it would have been done already.”

“He hasn't been our highest priority.”

“That's your mistake,” Abaddon purred. “He's turned breaking seals into another one of his private pissing contests.”

“We’ve had to prioritize based on a number of factors, including how much information we have.” Kay reframed their lack of success as an unspoken request.

“You want me to tell you where he is.” Abaddon leaned back in her chair and studied them with an amusement that hinted at some level of relaxation.

“It would help us in killing him and I get the feeling you wouldn't be heartbroken about that.”

“He’s an obsessive and sneaky little shit,” the Knight Captain acknowledged, then huffed again, but this time in annoyance. “Sadists are such cowards—living just to torture for a cheap thrill, and Alastair is the king of the lot. You’re right I wouldn’t cry over his death, but helping…. That’s a very different thing. As long as he stays out of my hemispheres, I can manage. He spends half his time entertaining himself with his games. It’s not hard to ignore him as long as he doesn’t overstep again.”

“Games?” Ruby could almost hear Kay trying to conceal her anticipation.

“He has a pet project,” Abaddon muttered. “He hasn't crawled out of his dank lair for almost a month and he's acting like he's singlehandedly shattered twenty seals. But then he had to put himself between me and my mission.”

“He crossed the line,” Kay encouraged as Abaddon became more enthusiastic complaining about Alastair.

“He has the nerve to give me orders. I'm the Knight Captain of Hell appointed by our mother herself and he's some miserable little politician appointed by the most pathetic caste in our realm,” Abaddon growled. “He thinks he's the keenest blade to break a soul, but I've been pouring the whetstone with blood since its invention. Who is he to think he deserves more?”

“It's entitlement,” Kay suggested hoping to take advantage of the knight’s rage. “He thinks your service to the realm means that you serve him, but that's not true.”

“I have given millennia of service to our mother’s creations. I will not let them slide in and take our victory, our labor and vengeance.” Abaddon leaned forward in her seat. “A woman will rule Hell because the men have no vision or passion for carnage. They think they deserve power, like life will give it to them. They always want the same thing: more. And they don't know what to do with their spoils. They don't know how to dominate. They don't know anything beyond hunger.
There's no satisfaction in their conquest, just the fickle fucking kill.”

“Hell has a queen now and refining Hell into a magnificent and devastating machine is a passion of mine—” Kay was cut off by Abaddon laughing.

“Hell has a very glib puppet.” She smiled at her own observation, then turned slightly more serious. “I've heard that you’re partnered with Crowley.”

“He serves at my request,” Kay replied. “A good leader utilizes her best resources.”

“He's a snake.”

“I'm not about to disagree with that,” Kay conceded. “But he's my snake.”

“I'll believe that when he slithers across the ground on his belly at your command.” Abaddon ate another grape in a candid showing of her lack of concern over the increasingly tense situation.

“I don't waste the limited resources of Hell. I can dominate without having to tear those around me apart,” Kay countered, then glanced to the various demons lingering at the edges of the room waiting for Abaddon's orders. “You led the knights for millennia. I'd expect you to appreciate the need for assistance.”

“You want to rule me?” The corner of Abaddon's lip curled up in a silent snarl.

“If possible, yes. If not, then I want us to stay out of each other's way,” Kay suggested a lesser subordinating route to the conversation.

“Staying out of each other's way sounds awfully hard, especially since I'm betting you'll try to keep me from Hell.” Abaddon rubbed her fingertips over her mouth, absentmindedly painting her lips red with blood. She licked the blood away, before continuing. “And I don't see how someone like you will ever rule me. You're soft and you're surrounded by soft creatures. You've come to court me and all you bring is an angel, a knight, and two wisps.”

Ruby’s eyes flickered to either side of her to quickly assess Abaddon’s back up. It wasn't clear which of them were knights, though some were probably lesser demons based on the fact that there were almost ten of them. To her surprise, Abaddon's backup hadn't started encroaching on their smaller group. Hopefully that meant that in their experience Abaddon normal insulted her visitors, but Ruby wasn't about to let her guard down.

“You're underestimating them,” Kay warned. “Don't make that mistake.”

“You want to impress me? Tora might have a fair body count, but I know her tricks. All the knights know her tricks.”

“You only know as much as I've shown you,” Tora hissed.

“And when was the last time you laid to rest another knight? I've buried knights before and if you really try to dance with me, you won't be waking in your tomb,” Abaddon threatened, then looked at Jieshi. “This weak little demon—I don't even know your name.”

“I’m Jie—”

“You can tell me when you’ve earned my attention. But you” Abaddon turned from Jieshi to Ruby. “—I have heard of you. Ruby, isn't it? Rumor is that you've been coddling one of them for a good long time. He's a human, right? Or some sort of failed attempt at something more.”
“We're not here to talk about him,” Ruby said coldly.

“Why didn't you bring him? Worried about bounties or him getting hurt? So he sent you instead?” Abaddon probed. “A Maji stuck playing bodyguard and slave to some bag of meat and bone.”

“I'm a slave to no one. You could've asked my old arch—I mean except that your side killed her.” Ruby hoped that the death of a long time femme archdemon would mean something to the knight.

“You think that staying out past curfew is really what makes you free?” Abaddon asked, clearly unimpressed.

“No. I know I'm free because I don't have to stand here and take shit from a walking venereal disease.” Ruby smiled at Abaddon. “See, isn't freedom great?”

“Ruby, maybe—” Kay started to talk her down, but Ruby cut her off with false penance.

“You're right. Let's not be rash.”

Abaddon grinned, but her eyes glinted with predatory delight. “Oh, you've got some bite.”

“You wish.”

“You're a feisty wisp at least,” Abaddon commented before looking to Anael and switching to English. “And the angel.”

“Is that a problem?” Anael asked suddenly being drawn into the discussion.

“It depends. Where were you when Lucifer needed you?”

Anael's lips thinned at being put on the spot. Ruby and Kay exchanged an uneasy glance as they waited for Anael to answer. Unlike them, the lone angel had no insight into Abaddon’s feeling beyond whatever could be gleaned from body language and tone of voice.

“I was commanding the garrison, defending Earth against damage from all sides.”

“Defending Earth or the humans?”

“Earth.”

“You didn't even come to the aid of your own people?” Abaddon's tone was unmistakably critical.

“I had a job to do—”

“You didn't fight for what you believed in,” Abaddon snapped. “You were too weak to rebel then, and you're too weak to win now.”

“I fell,” Anael said in her defense, then she stood up a bit taller and spoke with more conviction. “I am fallen. I only fight for my beliefs now and I'll do it with my dying act.”

“And what do you believe?”

“That unusual times call for unusual alliances.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Abaddon agreed, earning raised eyebrows from the few people in the room who spoke English. “Lilith, she doesn’t really understand. I know she wants to use Lucifer to gain more power. I can see it, when she speaks of Lucifer. It’s not about her faith or the glory of our
mother. She actually thinks she’ll survive this war. She doesn't understand she's just another consumable tool for the true cause.”

“If Lucifer escapes there’ll be a war between Heaven and Hell. I’ve seen it. Lucifer didn’t win.” Kay tried to take advantage of Abaddon’s apparent concern for Lucifer or Hell. “You’d be damming everyone, all of Hell, even Lucifer.”

“You're a clever one,” Abaddon commented after considering Kay's new approach. “I'll give you that.”

Kay gave a subtle shrug at the unforeseen compliment. “Thank you.”

“It’s intriguing. You're a politician and you waltz into Hell out of nowhere. Part of me hates you because you slid in without the grind. You didn't even climb through a caste. But… somehow you pulled the Citadel out of the fire and here you are doing something incredibly brave or incredibly stupid.” Abaddon stared at Kay for a long time with sincere contemplation. “You've seen some horrible things. Hopefully you've done some horrible things.”

“I do whatever’s necessary,” Kay replied coolly.

Abaddon stood up and put her hands on her hips. She studied Kay for several seconds, before walking over to the man on the floor. She rolled him onto his back with her foot, then rested her boot over his eyes. He started yelling through his gag as he pissed himself. She watched her five guests to see if any of them would try to stop her from killing the prisoner.

Ruby considered saying something, trying to stop her. Sam would’ve tried to save the man’s life regardless of the fact that it was almost certainly a test of their character. Personally Ruby didn't have strong feelings about preventing the death of a single stranger, especially when it might be weighed against the cooperation of such a powerful resource. None of them there were without sin. None of them would risk messing up the negotiations by stopping her. None of them would make the first move… and now Abaddon knew it.

Ruby slipped her hand into her bag as Abaddon crushed the man’s skull. There was a split second when Anael and Kay refused to look down enough for the burst of bone and brain to enter their field of view, while Tora and Jieshi enjoyed the show. The act was two different diversions in one. Two of them looked to the violence, two of them intently kept their gaze fixed on Abaddon’s eyes in some small competition of wills—but Ruby spotted Abaddon’s right hand slip from her hip behind her back.

“Shit!” Ruby shouted as she reached for the clay bottle containing the anti-flight spell.

Abaddon pulled a gun from behind her back and fired at Kay. Kay flinched reflexively, but managed to block the bullet with telekinesis just a few inches short of being hit. Tora and Jieshi both drew their weapons and made for Abaddon, but before they could cross the room towards her, three of the other knights and lesser demons intercepted them. Anael dropped the flag before summoning her angel blade, then joined the brawl.

Ruby pulled the clay bottle from her bag and made to throw it onto the ground, but one of the knights from the sidelines charged and swung a knife at her, causing her to fall backwards while dodging. When she hit the ground, the bottle fell from her hand and rolled across the room that had just erupted into melee. Rather than trying to immediately crawl after it, Ruby rolled roughly ninety degrees to her attackers left, then kicked up at the side of the knight’s knee, causing her to buckle. Taking advantage of her new mobility advantage, Ruby began scrambling after the bottle.
Kay threw Abaddon across the room with telekinesis. Abaddon hit the thin metal wall so hard that it dented and the pistol was knocked from her hand. Kay quickly pushed the gun away with her powers, then turned back to the rest of the fight just in time to see a knight swinging at her. She dodged the strike, grabbed the attacker’s throat, and burnt her to death with the First Light.

Anael tried to clear some of the group of four demons approaching Kay when another knight grabbed Anael’s wrist as she was swinging down to strike with her angel blade. When Anael moved to smite the attacker with her offhand, the knight grabbed her other wrist too, then head butted the angel. Anael stumbled back from the unsportsmanlike hit and found herself pinned to a wall. She could feel the knight exerting telekinetic force against her, trying to undoubtedly free up an arm to attack with. Anael was trying to summon the strength to use her own telekinesis, but before she could her foe was taken from her.

Jieshi’s sword sliced through the knight so quickly that she was able to cut the meatsuit into quarters before a drop of blood had hit the ground. When she realized that the knight’s two upper quarters were still desperately holding onto Anael's wrists, Jieshi gestured for Anael to hold still, then quickly severed the knight's thumbs. Anael looked to Jieshi, who smiled at her for a split second before turning back to the fight. The smoke of the quartered-knight dribbled weakly onto the floor and swirled slowly in frustration.

“Smash the fucking thing!” Ruby yelled to Tora, who was closest to the clay bottle.

Tora moved to step on it, but was tackled and fell to the ground several feet from the bottle. She grappled with the other knight, stabbing her attacker twice in the heart in the course of making an opening for herself. Before she could break away, the other knight stabbed her hard through the back, pinning Tora facedown to the ground. After a moment’s hesitation, Tora pour her cloud out of her meatsuit and forced herself down the other knight’s throat. The shared meatsuit convulsed on the floor. Its left arm reached for the bottle, but the right arm pulled the knife from Tora’s former body and started trying to cut off the left hand. With the knife no longer pinning her old body and the other knight focused on removing a significant portion of its own limb, Tora hastily reentered the old body and stabbed the knight in the heart one last time, killing her. But before she could reach the bottle she was tackled by two more enemies.

Anael stabbed a lesser demon in the chest killing it, but another foe was thrown into them. Anael lost her grip on her angel blade, which had remained in the dead demon's meatsuit. While Anael was trying to get her blade, a knight came up behind her and stabbed her through her torso. The force of the hit made her fall to the ground. She groped around for her blade as she rolled onto her back face the knight. In the chaos she accidentally grabbed a pistol that was on the floor beside her. For a moment she stared at the weapon that was ineffective against a knight, then opted to try smiting the knight instead.

“Ma’am!” Jieshi called out as she threw one of the knight’s daggers past Kay, who’d just finished burning her third foe to death, impaling Abaddon’s torso just a few inches shy of the heart. Kay spun around as Abaddon pulled the dagger from her chest and took a few swings at Kay. Kay parried with her angel blade, then attempted to hit Abaddon with the Light. Unable to see passed her own illumination, Kay missed Abaddon ducking down below the blast and lunging forward to stab Kay.

Ruby saw Abaddon lining up to blindside Kay and completely forgot about finding the clay bottle. She dove at Abaddon, tackling the Knight Captain to the floor and grappled her. Abaddon stabbed at Ruby, who mostly dodged, suffering only a large gash on her left shoulder. Kay tried to knock Abaddon off of Ruby with telekinesis, but Abaddon wouldn’t let go of her. The pair barrel rolled
across the floor as Kay was grabbed by her own new opponent.

When they finished rolling, Abaddon was on top of Ruby pinning her to the ground. The Knight Captain leaned forward to squeeze her throat as Abaddon raised her knife. Ruby's satchel had ended up between them, but it was too low to protect her heart. She could feel the charms, vials, and other trinkets pressing into her, but her arms were being held down by Abaddon’s knees making her unable to reach the bag’s potentially powerful contents.

“ Anything you want me to pass along to your boy?” Abaddon hissed, then loosened her grip on Ruby’s throat.

Ruby’s eyes quickly took it the rest of the fight. Kay was fighting two knights at once. Anael was bleeding from a wound on her chest, holding a pistol in a moment of visible confusion. Tora and Jieshi were both more than half covered in blood, but she couldn’t tell whose blood. Meanwhile there were still a handful of Abaddon’s minions trying to finish anyone off that they could.

“Fuck it,” Ruby groaned, causing Abaddon’s brow to furrow at what had undoubtedly looked like resignation. “Incendo.”

One of the grenade-like potions in Ruby’s satchel exploded. Her guess as to the orientation of the charge in her bag was mostly accurate, though she hadn't been able to feel which direction it had been facing in the left-right axis. The result was a blast that was mostly forced upward and to Ruby's right, with some minor ambient damage in the immediate area generally.

Ruby barely missed the split second when Abaddon was knocked back and almost cut in half… actually ill-portioned thirds. The knight’s left arm was nowhere to be seen when she hit the ground. Huge sections of skin and muscle had been torn and burnt away from her thighs, torso, right arm, and face. So much of her abdominal cavity had been destroyed that the weight of her upper body threatened to snap her spine. Yet somehow, despite the catastrophic injury, she managed to point the knife in her right hand at Ruby. Her jaw moved, but when she realized she couldn't speak she dragged her knife in front of her throat as a threat. Ruby weakly flipped Abaddon off before being distracted by the sound of a gunshot.

Anael was standing, slightly hunched, pointing the pistol at the shattered clay bottle. With the anti-flight spell destroyed, the fight turned into a dizzying collection of failed strikes using teleportation. Jieshi blinked free of her attacker’s grasp, but couldn’t land a strike because her target had moved. One of the knights made to attack Ruby, but Tora, who was the most versed in stealth attacks, had already moved to intercept the inevitable attack on their most vulnerable ally. Abaddon was gone before anyone else thought to check on her. Seeing that their leader had fled, the other knights and lesser demons hastily retreated to parts unknown.

“Angel,” Ruby called out faintly to Anael.

The explosion hadn't done nearly as much damage to Ruby as it had to Abaddon, but looking down at her body she was deeply grateful to not be human. Almost the entire front right of her abdomen was missing. Half of her pelvic bone was shattered or completely absent, leaving her right leg connected by only two inches of flesh. She didn't technically need blood to live, but the massive blood loss made it incredibly difficult to operate her meatsuit.

“Others go,” she whispered as her body went limp.

“I’ll get her,” Anael told the others as she knelt down beside Ruby's body. She healed Ruby’s self-inflicted wounds and repaired Ruby’s clothes in an attempt to restore her modesty—as little as may have previously existed.
Being healed relieved the pain, but did nothing for the mental fatigue that had resulted from the trauma. Ruby gripped Anael's arm to stop her from immediately departing.

“Can you take me?” Ruby asked weakly.

The five of them reconvened in a tranquil tea garden that Anael had selected as their rally point in an emergency. Kay was the only one of them that had less than a pint of blood on her clothes, but she wasn’t exempt from the crimson stains. There was a long pause where they all checked themselves and each other for damage while waiting for the combat high to wear off. Once enough time had passed that it seemed unlikely that they’d be followed, Tora and Jieshi returned to Hell to recover.

“Thank god Sam didn't see that,” Ruby sighed while slowly rubbing her face. “Can we leave out the part where I lost about twenty pounds in one second?”

“Yeah,” Kay agreed. “I'd like to have that mental image burned from my memory.”

“I think we have some more whiskey at the bunker.” Ruby tried to smile reassuringly, but didn’t hold it very long.

“Do you want me to transport you back to your refuge?” Anael volunteered.

“Did Castiel tell you where we're staying?” Kay asked in what she hoped wasn’t perceived as disrespect.

“No. He considers it a sacred confidence” Anael said, then added, “I understand the precaution. I won't be offended if you decline my offer. I wouldn't want you locating my home either.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I'll be able to blink in a few minutes,” Ruby replied. Anael started to stand up, but Ruby touched her wrist, stopping the angel once more. “Thank you. I'm glad you came with us. You angels aren't all bad.”

“And some of you demons have admirable qualities,” Anael acknowledged before disappearing.

“Hey, Kay.” Ruby looked up at Kay from her position on the ground. “Diplomacy is fucking awful.”

Kay and Ruby returned to the bunker as soon as Ruby had collected herself enough to teleport. Despite having a small explosive detonate just inches from her, she was generally in good shape thanks to Anael. However, the angelic healing hadn’t been able to do anything about the gash Abaddon had inflicted on her upper arm. Kay had wrapped a few strips of cloth around it as a temporary bandage, but it was easily the first thing Sam saw when they descended the stairs into the bunker.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked as he hurried over to check on Ruby’s injury.

“Nothing a dozen stitches and some revenge won’t fix,” she replied as she let Sam wrap an arm around her for support.

“I take it things didn’t go well,” Dean guessed.

“If it’s still possible to get revenge, then I’m guessing things really didn’t go well,” Bobby speculated.
“Everyone on our side survived. Abaddon isn't with us, but at least we got a little more information about Alastair and that whole situation.” Kay summarized the outing while heading straight to the intoxicant cupboard in the library. “It sounds like just because Abaddon hasn't been in touch with Lilith since Alastair stepped up, it doesn't mean Abaddon's about to risk exposing Lilith.”

“Abaddon and Lilith are like two different flavors of fanatics,” Ruby added. “It didn’t sound like Abaddon even cares much about Lilith. She’s just a means to the end of getting Lucifer sprung, and that's Abaddon’s real interest. We never stood a chance on recruitment.”

“Why would Lilith just cut her off like that?” Sam asked.

“I'm not sure.” Kay pour herself a drink, then took a sip. “There was a fight or something at that place in Wisconsin that Lilith was at a day or two ago. I just can't tell how Alastair and Abaddon fit into this.”

“With this whole thing so muddy, does it even make sense to look for Alastair right now?” Sam asked unenthusiastically. “I know he's been breaking seals, but there's something going on that we don't have the full picture of and we can't afford anything else going wrong.”

“He's a source of information and if he’s as close to Lilith as everyone is saying—” Dean started, but he was cut off.

“There has to be another way to find out what’s going on,” Sam countered. “We can't keep striking out on these dangerous missions without getting burned forever.”

“You don't have to go,” Dean replied. “You and Ruby have done more than enough on these runs, but that doesn't mean that the rest of us just give up leads.”

“He's not even a lead at this point. We don't know where he is.”

“Actually, Abaddon did give up some little tidbits,” Kay corrected. “It sounds like he's somewhere in North America. She described him as being hunkered down in a lair, so it might be subterranean, possibly in a city.”

“He likes having room to work, but he doesn't like being exposed,” Dean advised. “I'm guessing it'd be close to the way his dungeons were laid out, like a big maze.”

“So we're looking for abandoned buildings with large basements,” Bobby suggested. “That just about narrows it down to half of the factories in the Midwest.”

“Just when I thought we’d finished all the research in the world, you guys come up with a new project,” Jody bemoaned.

“Research is fine—it's good. We need more intel.” Sam looked down at the bandage that was slowly turning red on Ruby's arm. “I know we don't have much time, but we have some. We should try to use it wisely.”

“You're right. We didn't have a clear enough image on the last two missions and it nearly bit us bad,” Kay acknowledged. “We’ll do more homework before we go after anyone else.”

“Can I skip the homework?” Ruby asked with a fatigued smile. “I need a few minutes to bounce back.”

“Come on,” Sam said as he helped Ruby out of the room, towards the bedroom. “I want to check your arm and you look like you need to lie down.”
“I'm definitely not about to fight you on that,” Ruby agreed.

Sam helped her back to the bedroom, put Kaylee down on the mattress, then unwrapped the bandage on Ruby's shoulder to examine the wound. It was slightly deeper than he was expecting and still bleeding a bit. There wasn't any doubt in his mind that it'd been inflicted by one of the knights and would therefore require more mundane forms of healing.

“I'm going to stitch this up,” he said after reapplying the improvised bandage, then went to collect part of the first aid supplies that had been left in Dylaniel's room. When he returned, he found Ruby laying on her side on the bed, curled around Kaylee. He sat down on the mattress behind her back, then started cleaning the gash.

“How'd it go?”

“She talked a lot of shit and tried to stab me in the heart. I called her a walking venereal disease and blew her up,” Ruby replied while caressing their daughter’s hair. “I don't think she likes me.”

“You always fight the most interesting people.” Sam kissed some of the skin beside her wound before starting to stitch it up. “Are you okay?”

“I'll be fine…. It was a little rougher than our usual fights.” Ruby shook her head. “That's such a weird statement. Such a wholesome environment you're growing up in, starlight.”

“Starlight?”

“A nickname for Kaylee that I'm trying out.”

“Interesting.” Sam commented with a small nod of approval. He tied off the last stitch, then gently began wiping up the excess blood.

“Abaddon’s was talking about you.”

“What'd she say?”

“Insults and threats. The kind of stuff you probably don't need the details on.” Ruby paused, then added, “she was disappointed you didn't come, so I'm guessing she wants to take you apart. And it was fast, but I'm pretty sure she mentioned something about a bounty on you.”

“I'm not really surprised. Might as well add to the mountain of troubles.” He put away the supplies, then moved the first aid kit off of the mattress. He gave her a kiss behind and below her ear before lying down to spoon her. “Does she know about Kaylee?”

“She didn't say anything specific, but she probably knows.” Ruby sighed. “We have to assume they all know.”

“I wish they'd just leave us alone.” He exhaled warm breath onto the back of her neck. “Even once this is over—if we can stop it, it's not like everyone’s just going to forget about us and Kaylee. How're we supposed to have a normal life?”

“Normal hasn't really been in the cards for awhile, but quiet and happy, that might still be doable” Ruby assured him. “We're at how many seals? Before too long you're gonna be a stuck-at-home dad. Is there anything you want to do before you get put on house arrest?”

“I should probably want to go out and do something, but honestly,” He leaned over and kissed her lips. “I can't think of any place I'd rather be right now.”
Ruby gently held Kaylee to her chest, then rolled onto her back so that their daughter was sleeping on top of her. Sam intertwined his legs with hers to rest his head on the pillow next to her cheek. He half-wrapped an arm around Ruby’s torso, reached up, and softly pat Kaylee's back causing her to let out a little sigh.

“Maybe this is better than the road,” Ruby mused aloud. “We don't have to live out of a trunk and a duffel bag anymore.”

“No cigarette burns in the sheets.”

“No weird stains on the carpet.”

"No furry shower drains."

“No swarms of mosquitoes hanging around all night.”

“They never bit us.”

“Their loss.” Ruby playfully snapped her teeth in Sam’s direction, then rested her cheek against his chest and neck. “You know I’m not trying to put myself in danger. I'd much rather have you pinning me to the ground instead of some knight.”

“Should I be jealous?” Sam joked.

“No of a single person in the world,” Ruby replied. “I know it was a risk, but if I hadn't been there… I don't know how it would've gone.”

“You saved the day?” he whispered while giving her a soft kiss on the cheek.

“Maybe? I think I at least helped.”

“You always help.” Sam ran his fingers through her hair. “And most of the time you save the day.”

“You're biased.”

“Hey, you saved me: every time I needed you, every way I needed you.”

“I think a new seal ended up online,” Jody said as she stared wide-eyed at her laptop.

After taking a half hour to recover, Ruby and Sam had returned to the library to check on the progress and assist with research. Ruby had stuck mostly to reading through a few divination tomes while the others were utilizing every computer available to them for either looking for Alastair or keeping an eye out for seals, depending on the researcher’s personal preference. It was deceptively slow and silent work, until Jody’s comment.

“What does that mean?” Kay asked warily.

“It's probably easier if you just watch it.”

“This isn't like something from The Ring, right?” Dean joked, but his smile disappeared at Jody’s answer.

“Worse.”
Jody placed the laptop down in front of the group and hit play on a YouTube video. It was cellphone video of a busy traffic intersection in some city. The person recording was narrating some aspect of his family vacation to Seattle when a few people screamed out of frame. He turned the camera toward the center of the intersection, where a handful of people had stopped traffic.

The group included a man, a prisoner. He was naked, handcuffed, and hunched over in visible pain. His captors knocked him to the ground, then started some sort of ritual. A group of bystanders tried to come to the man's rescue, but a woman involved in the ritual knocked them back using telekinesis.

“Witch, demon, or angel?” Dean quietly asked, still transfixed by the video.

“Not a witch,” Ruby answered. “And angels can't bust seals.”

“If it even is a seal,” Sam pointed out.

Two of the people performing the ritual forced the prisoner to lay on his back. He tried to resist, but he was clearly disoriented. More onlookers screamed as a third ritualist stabbed the prisoner in the heart with an angel blade. White light flashed from him and ash wings scorched the asphalt below him. A burst of flames erupted from the silhouette of the wings, then spread outward engulfing the entire intersection, turning the angel’s attackers to cinders.

“Jesus fucking chri—” Dean started, but he couldn’t even finish his exclamation.

Suddenly, a massive creature emerged from the flames. It was a giant bird of prey that stood a head taller than a man. Its feathers were ashen grey and as they ruffled the glow of embers could be seen below them. Its eyes were large white pupils surrounded by a thin ring of bright red iris. Oversized razor sharp talons adorned its black feet.

The beast screeched so loudly that the person taking the video dropped the cell phone onto the sidewalk. A crowd that had formed to watch the ritual ran, kicking the phone, sending it spinning and knocking it into the gutter. The video ended.

They all stood in stunned silence as YouTube immediately loaded another video of the same incident as recorded by a department store’s security camera. This new vantage point only caught the bird in the upper right corner of the recording, but in the few seconds that it was visible, the bird took flight and clutched a fleeing pedestrian’s german shepherd as it left.

Jody closed the laptop in order to break the morbid thrall. No one said anything for a moment. The shock of what they all had just witnessed was still sinking in. Kay covered her mouth, then looked around at the others with wide eyes. Jody gave her a sympathetic half-shrug, having started recovering from the surprise before telling everyone else.

“Holy shit,” Kay exhaled.

“What the hell was that?!” Sam exclaimed.

“I think it's a monuth,” Kay replied. “They're an extinct species of Abyssal.”

“That looked pretty fucking unextinct,” Ruby observed aloud.

“That thing is on Earth,” Dean groaned.

“Tell us you know how to deal with them,” Bobby told Kay bleakly.
"We didn't have to deal with them in our world. I mean, it's possible they were revived, but those things would've been feral or away from the cities," Kay speculated. "At least I've never heard of a spotting."

"I don't recall ever hearing about anything resembling them either," Dylaniel added. "So either they didn't get resurrected or no witnesses survived."

"It took a dog," Sam commented. "When you say witnesses... Do those things eat people?"

Kay tilted her head from side-to-side uncertainly. "Well, that's a complicated question...."

"I don't fucking believe this," Dean muttered.

"This is gonna be a problem, isn't it?" Ruby asked.

"The cat is getting pretty far out of the bag," Kay replied.

"I was thinking more that it looks dangerous. You know with that maybe-eating-humans thing. What do we know about them?"

"They're made from the ash of angels wings, so that explains the sacrifice. They're guardians of despair, as in they protect souls that are sad. They're supposed to be tough as hell," Kay explained. "As for eating... monuth eat happy souls."

"Happy souls..." Ruby paused for a moment, processing the same ambiguity that everyone else was noticing. "Does that mean they eat the whole human or just the warm, fluff, incorporeal interior?"

"I have no idea."

"What do we do to stop it?" Jody asked.

"I don't know what we can do." Kay gave an apologetic shrug. "We kinda have our hands full with the seals and that thing flies."

"We're seriously just gonna ignore the giant soul-eating hellbird that's flying around Seattle?" Dean replied, uneasy with the idea of leaving a creature like that on the loose.

"Washington has hunters, right?" Kay suggested, then added, "if it's still out there when things calm down, I'll send Mir after it."

"Mir?"

"He's a knight. He's hunted a monuth before."

"This feels wrong," Sam commented.

"We can't fix everything," Dylaniel agreed with Kay.

"Jesus," Dean muttered.

"This is more of a publicity-damage-control situation," Kay assured.

"Really? I thought the killing-people damage might be a big deal," Dean said.

"Sometimes in the grand scheme of things, public opinion counts more than the individual threats."
“This isn't normal.”

“Normal is relative to the times,” Dyaniel replied. “Times might be changing.”

“You're talking about a setup with humans not being the top of the food chain. That's not a change the world’s prepared for,” Bobby countered.

“Humans have never been the top of the food chain,” Dyaniel corrected.

“Yeah, well, we didn't know that,” Dean pointed out. “There's gotta be a way of walking this back.”

Ruby rolled her eyes at the additional near-impossible task. “Good luck with that in the middle of this mess.”

“We might not have the luxury of keeping all of this secret,” Sam conceded. “I can't even tell you how many demonic killings I've been seeing flashes of. With the seals breaking, the video of Dyl, and now this…. I don't know how we get back to last year. The witches are already getting ready to be outed.”

“It's mostly precautionary, but yeah, the idea that Templars might show up on the scene is about as terrifying as it gets for the covened community,” Ruby clarified.

“Everything’s such a powder keg,” Sam groaned.

He didn't have to strain his imagination to see how the presence of a previously extinct Abyssal might spur either Heaven or the Templars into further action. But one beast out in the entire world was a difficult target. It'd be much more feasible for Templars to target demons or the considerably more vulnerable and easier to locate witches. And with many of the witches primed for war, there could be some very public, very unnatural combat in the streets before too long.

“Why’d they do this seal now, but not in your time?” Jody mused aloud.

“Pressure’s a little higher right now,” Kay guessed.

“There was the opportunity,” Sam said. “There are more angels on Earth this time around.”

“Fallen angels,” Dyaniel corrected.

“We're escalating things, even accidentally,” Sam summarized.

“Yes, this maybe comes back to us, but this is time travel and the Apocalypse. Yes, this changes things and it’s nuts, but we don’t have the luxury of beating ourselves up over this or dwelling on it. As the stakes get higher, the picture gets bigger. We have the end of the world in front of us.” Kay tried to get everyone back on the same page. “We fight what's in front of us.”

“Compared to what's in front of us.” Dean tilted his head back and worth weighing the options. “The soul eating demon megabird is looking pretty good.”

Dean lay on his bed, unable to sleep. He was struggling with a strange mixture of feelings that seemed to only have the unifying theme of helplessness. The revelation of the monuth combined with yet another mission yielding underwhelming results had just underscored the feeling that he couldn't affect any positive change.

In the last few days he hadn't been involved in combat. On some level he didn't mind avoiding the
danger. He'd had too many close calls in the last two weeks and a little peace was overdue. Unfortunately, the lack of combat had nothing to do with peace. He'd been ill-equipped to fight Raphael, Samhain, and Abaddon, and that had left him somewhat stuck at the bunker.

He felt discouraged and restless in a way that reminded him of his time at the bunker in 2039. Back then he'd felt almost claustrophobic, but that had partially been the doing of Michael whispering unpleasant doubts in the dark corners of his mind. For a moment he humored the unnerving thought that maybe he was being manipulated again, that his feelings weren't entirely his own, but he knew rationally that he was well protected and even so, that the situation wasn't so close to the brink that Michael was likely to be pushing him.

He had a fleeting desire to get out of the bunker, to unwind away from everything he'd been going through recently. The escape was tempting. He glanced at the two cell phones on his nightstand. Dyaniel's had Anael's number in it. She seemed interesting, but too close to the situation. His own phone held Jeremy's number…. He wasn't ready to talk about himself or how he was doing. Not with someone who wasn't already familiar with the supernatural world. At some point he'd have to figure out whether to be honest or just stick to superficial relationships for the rest of his life—assuming he even was interested in a civilian. He supposed there were some merits to dating an angel or the like. Granted depending on how much of Hell literally broke loose, maybe he wouldn't have too much explaining to do. But that whole thing was another collection of concerns that he pushed to another day.

Giving up on sleeping, Dean got out of bed and started making his way towards the kitchen. He passed the doorway to one of the still dust covered parlors, which included a small piano in the far corner. It had been years since he'd screwed around on a piano, though he wouldn't really claim to play it. Back when he was hunting solo knowing a few songs had proven to be a nice way of picking up women at the jazzier bars. Caught by the absurdity of the moment, he sat down at the piano and softly tried to remember the beginning of a simplified version of Embraceable You.

"The second D from the right is broken."

Dean looked up to see Dyaniel standing in the doorway. The nephilim was leaning against the door jamb and holding onto the framing for a little extra stability.

"You're up," Dean said as he moved to help him.

Dyaniel instead waved him off before slowly walking over to the piano bench. He carefully lowered himself to sit to Dean's left.

"How're you feeling?" Dean asked.

"I'm no longer nauseous when I'm walking and sounds are generally tolerable, but I can still feel the heat radiating off your soul…. I can feel the heat from my own soul, which is continuously distracting."

"I'll bet," Dean said, unsure of how else to respond. "But you're doing better, right?"

"I'm improving. It's just a path I'm not used to." Dyaniel pointed at Dean's hands. "Your starting position is off."

"Thanks, I... huh." Dean looked down at the keyboard and realized that he couldn't remember whether his thumb was on an A or a C. He repositioned his hands a few times, then gave up. "Do you play?"
"Not to any significant extent." Dylaniel shrugged weakly. "I understand the theory and see the patterns, but I've never had time to practice."

"What do you like to do in your free time?" Dean asked, suddenly realizing that he couldn't really picture Dylaniel spending down time.

"I don't have much free time—I didn't." Dylaniel looked in the general direction of his bedroom. "Now, I'm researching demonic omens. Sam found me a laptop to use. At least it's more practical than studying your judiciary branch of government."

"You can probably skip that whole government part and still pass for normal."

"I'm not sure that being normal is adequate," Dylaniel replied.

"I'm not criticizing, but you really didn't learn much about all this stuff, did you?" Dean tried his hardest to keep his question from conveying pity. He'd barely learned anything and he'd more or less gone to high school.

"Most of my history lessons didn't get into the daily life. It was a moot point since it didn't help with my work."

Dean nodded at the pragmatism. "I know you were playing assistant to Kay while I was there, but what'd you actually do? I know you didn't just follow her around all the time."

"I advised on combat operations, ran various special operations as the Sword of Heaven, and had many responsibilities as CAG." Dylaniel spoke with a pride that Dean had rarely seen in the reserved nephilim, though Dean didn't quite understand what he was being told.

"CAG?"

"Commander Air Group. I coordinated and led flight-related operations, primarily by angels and a few of the older nephilim by the end."

"It still blows my mind that you can fly." Dean smiled, caught up in the fantastic idea. "What's it like?"

"Flying is…." Dylaniel thought for a moment, considering how to explain it. "Angels take flying for granted. It's in their nature to move beyond the limits of the material world, to look down and see the Earth. Nephilim, we—I sometimes have that impulse, but I'm stuck in my body. Flying is transcendental."

Dean was reminded of the feeling of driving on the highway with nothing dictating where he went. The expansive sensation of freedom. It was strange to think that maybe he could relate to Dylaniel on such an inhuman concept, but having him explain it… it was nice. It was comforting to get to know Dylaniel on a deeper level, to foster their… friendship?

"Are your wings okay?"

"They're fine," Dylaniel replied reflexively, then hesitated. He looked at Dean for several seconds before admitting, "They're sore and I don't know how functional they'll be going forward. I should practice flying at some point, but I doubt Kay will approve of me jumping off the roof of the complex."

"Speaking as someone who's made that ER run, I'm gonna have to agree with her."
“When I was a child I jumped out of a tall tree in an attempt to learn to fly. I couldn't get far enough away from the center of the tree to open my wings fully. That was the first time I broke a wing.” Dylaniel moved his shoulders subtly, unconsciously flexing the muscles that would've supported his wings. “I was lucky that my xe was able to catch me. I suppose this time around I lack such safety nets.”

Dean couldn't imagine Castiel as a parent, he had hardly interacted with Dylaniel's xe. He still wasn't fully used to the fact that Dylaniel's parents were dead and that he'd never have a chance to get to know them beyond stories. His opportunity had been much shorter than anticipated and he'd wasted so much of it fighting them, well, fighting the idea of them. Dee had made a concerted effort to bridge some of the gap with him, but he'd been too self-conscious to attempt any involved conversations with Cas.

“I can't picture Cas as a parent, let alone him giving a kid flying lessons.” Dean shrugged.

“Kay and Alex were better instructors. Like me, they don't—didn't have angelic physical strength to assist them,” Dylaniel corrected. “I think it took my xe a few years to realize that my flight posture would never be the same as his.”

“What was he like—I'm sorry.” Dean stopped himself. He didn't want to cross the line into painful territory. “If you don't want to talk about him—”

“It's alright,” Dylaniel assured him. “He had flaws just like any other parent, but he was patient and caring. My xe tried his hardest to make an ideal home and life. It was very common for fallen angels to develop those sorts of aspirations. To his credit, in many ways he was accepting of imperfections, in others and just in the course of life on Earth... but he had a much harder time accepting his own imperfections and struggled with what he was able to attribute to his own failings.”

Dean was reminded of his conversation with Kay and Tom about Dylaniel's youth. They'd told him that their cousin had been slightly delayed in his development and suggested that Cas had felt somehow responsible. The picture was starting to fill in a bit more. It was actually surreal to imagine a person, who used to live in a 'perfect' environment like Heaven reconciling that feeling with such a messy thing as love. He supposed it would make sense that Cas had attempted to give some sort of near-perfection to his family, who lived in about as imperfect a world as Dean could imagine. And if Cas had been in love with Dee, on top of the weird infatuation that some of the angels seemed to throw his way, then it wouldn't have surprised him if Cas had carried more than his share of guilt in the relationship.

It was hard to imagine what this meant for Castiel, the one in their time. He’d struggled to accept a nephilim, a living breathing manifestation of the imperfection of Heaven on Earth, only to learn that he would’ve been partially responsible for creating him. This Castiel was much less experienced with flaws. Cas had been in a relationship with Dee for almost thirty years; he’d had to have been intimately familiar with character defects. If Castiel had the same self-deprecating tendencies that Cas apparently had had, then he was facing more than feelings of betrayal.

“Cas, this one, not your xe... he was angry at me for lying to him, at your parents for being, I don't know, reckless?” Dean felt uncomfortable saying anything negative about Dylaniel's dead parents. “I think he was maybe upset at himself on some level... for trusting me or not figuring it out. I don't know.”

“Anger is a reaction to actual harm, but it's also a response to fear.” Dylaniel’s eyes didn't meet Dean, instead he looked past him at nothing in particular. “I think he's probably scared. He was confronted with his own potential to fall farther than he'd ever expected. Seeing what he could be
and not understanding how he could've gotten from point A to point B. I expect there's a feeling of lack of control and helplessness.”

“Oh, believe me, I get that.” Dean pursed his lips, then took a breath to gather some courage and composure. “I'm sorry I was so freaked out about your parents. I was confused and scared. I shouldn't have taken it out on them or you. I'm sorry—I'm sorry that I didn't get to know them better. They seemed like good people.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

There was an uncomfortable silence where they both waited to see if the other was going to add to the little heart-to-heart. Dean had no idea what to say to segue them out of the vulnerable moment and Dylaniel wasn’t exactly helping. Granted, he suspected that the nephilim wasn’t really the sort of person he’d have to finesse with segues as long as he could at least find a substantive enough topic to lead them forward.

“Anael invited you to stay with the fallen angels.” Dean offered the new subject, which Dylائيل jumped at immediately.

“I'm not interested in leaving Kay at this point.”

“We told her you weren't gonna head over there,” Dean assured him. “What I was trying to say is that the fallen angels want to be there for you.”

“Or they want to use me,” Dylائيل suggested, then added, “consciously or not.”

Dylaniel's comment didn't seem particularly mean-spirited. Dean supposed that the kid was accustomed to a significant number of the people in his life seeing him as a resource more than a person. For the brief stretch that he was in 2039, multiple people had only really shown an interest in him to the extent that he could be used. Never mind the fact that Dylaniel had grown up training for service in a militaristic machine that undoubtedly assessed its members as their individual parts instead of the more important whole. No wonder he assumed people wanted him for their own gain.

“I think she was serious about wanting to help you,” Dean replied.

“She might have noble intentions, but she doesn't know me. To her I'm just a symbol, some sort of redemption or hope. I'm not her nephew or whatever familial relation she's decided upon,” Dylaniel countered. “It's nothing against her. There's just a routine involved in being a novelty.”

“You're not a novelty.” Dean shot down the dismissive characterization.

“Yes, I am. I don't mind though.”

“Is it hard—sorry, that's a dumb question.”

“Is what hard?”

“Being half human,” Dean said. He couldn’t imagine what it must be like to be a hybrid of two species, let alone one divine and one, well, mundane.

“I like humans. When I was a child I’d wanted to be a human more often than I'd wanted to be an angel,” Dylaniel admitted “The other species don't give you enough credit.”

“You didn't want to be a nephilim growing up?”
“I didn't know how to be a nephilim growing up. It took me many years to learn to accept having a dual nature. It's still frustrating at times, but it's who I am. The other nephilim, my godsisiter, my cousins—they all looked to me. I owed it to them to be confident, to prove to them that we belong in our own right.” Dylaniel traced some of the keys with his fingertips, preoccupying his hands and eyes. “It's important to know that you deserve to live in this world.”

“Has anyone told you that you're wise beyond your years?”

“My favorite aunt used to say, ‘grace ages the soul. Twice as much when it's grace under pressure.’” Dylaniel nearly smiled recalling the memory.

“Did she have a kid?”

Dylaniel nodded. “Miro, my godsisiter. I don't think you were ever introduced, but she was the one that healed you after the attack.”

“The teenage girl?”

“Yeah.” Dylaniel hesitated before adding, “Her xe's vessel was my biological mother.”

Dean took a moment to parse the relationship. “That girl was your sister?”

“Biologically, half-sister, but none of our real parents were shared, so we didn't actually make much of it,” Dylaniel corrected. “My aunt Hael was my xe's best friend…. I hope she falls. She died when I was ten and I don't know what her rank and postings were while she served in Heaven, except that she was one of the soldiers sent to kill my parents. If she had been given such a sensitive combat mission…. I don't know if I could kill her.”

“You're not fighting anyone right now, so try not to worry about it and just focus on getting better,” Dean said as cold comfort.

“My life is war. I'm not sure how to stop worrying about it short of severe intoxication and I don't want to attempt that in my current state.”

“Find something you care about that isn't fighting and indulge?” Dean suggested with a shrug. “I'm gonna get a snack. You want to come with?”

“Not right now. Thank you though.”

“Want me to help you back to your room?”

Dylaniel thought for a few seconds before replying, “I think I'd prefer to stay here for a bit. It's nice to be out of bed.”

“Alright. Just shout if you need anything. I'll be right down the hall.”

Dean went off to the kitchen and made himself a sandwich. After eating he went to the library and got onto one of the laptops. With a little guilt he avoided reading the latest news on whatever else might be going wrong in the world. He was on a short-term mission that could easily become derailed by whatever might be more important by conventional standards.

Opening up a new tab in the web browser, he recalled the massive comic book collection of Dylaniel’s and the enthusiasm he'd had while talking about them. He remembered Dylaniel saying that his favorite comic book character was the Red Hood. Dean decided that the next time he was out he'd pick up some comics for him, but in the meantime he pirated a few dozen digital copies. It
wasn't the same as a paper comic book, but it was a start.

While walking back to his bedroom Dean could hear the piano being played. Standing in the hall, he peeked through the doorway. Dyaniel was experimentally hitting a few of the keys. It took several seconds for Dean to realize that the nephilim wasn't just screwing around like he had been. Dyaniel was systematically reconstructing a song, occasionally missing a note, but correcting it on the next pass. After a minute or two Dean could start to recognize the piece as *Kashmir* by Led Zeppelin. In no more than ten minutes, he'd completed an almost flawless playthrough.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not gonna lie, I really wanted to have a fight between a bunch of BAMF ladies. Way back when I was first working on the outline for the ending, I knew I wanted to dig into Abaddon a bit. I was musing aloud to my brother/sounding board and mentioned the idea that Abaddon (referencing the show) didn’t want to be queen of Hell because she was just some generic power hungry villain, but instead she just wanted to see a woman in charge and she was the one for the time to step up. I made some jokes about her going after the “Men” of Letters and it kinda turned into a little headcanon thing for me. So I decided to run with it a bit.

Originally, the chapter opened with a purely narrative story of Abaddon’s life as a human, her dislike of men & visionless sadists, Lucifer visiting her, & her becoming a Knight. That was part of the reason for the title chapter (and as a reference to the chess puzzle). I played with it a bit, but it felt a little out of place, especially when I looked at the tone of the scene and the composition of the overall chapter (and the chapter within the segment of this act). Sometimes I have to remind myself that there’s such a thing as too many words… Hell, I actually had to cut a significant amount of dialogue from the Abaddon scene- though that probably comes as a big surprise.
Dean was walking through the hallways of the bunker. They seemed to go on forever, some strange maze that had somehow become his indefinite home. It was nice to be back together with his little brother, and on good terms. Actually they were probably closer than they'd ever been… but he missed his car. He missed the road. He missed helping people, making a difference.

As he walked, he noticed the subtle smell of blood. Most people wouldn't be able to recognize it, but he'd spent so much time spilling it that he could pick it out with confidence. He looked around for the source of it and found a few drops on the floor. Unpleasant thoughts started slipping into his mind as he started running through the halls, searching for the others to make sure they were alright.

He turned the corner to find the parlor that had been used a few times as a dining room, but it was different. It was the parlor from 2039, the one Cas had died in. Cas was lying in a pool of blood, atop ash wings. Dean screamed, calling out to him, but he was being held back by Tom and Ruby. He was in the fight from a few days earlier. There was an unseen wave of force that knocked him backwards through a wooden door. He landed on his back and couldn't bring himself to move. The pain was too much.

When he looked up, Michael was standing over him. The archangel was the same old righteous fire clad in ornate, golden armor. He didn't bother drawing his sword; his awe inspiring appearance was immobilizing.

“You can't talk to me,” Dean whispered. It occurred to him that this Michael, while intimidating, didn't produce that burning hate within him. “You're not real. You can't hurt me.”

“Oh Dean,” Michael grabbed Dean’s throat and squeezed. Before his eyes the archangel transformed into Alastair, then leaned in until there was nothing else was in his field of view. “You'd be amazed at the things that can hurt you. Just wait.”

He was dropped to the ground. Gasping for air, he realized he was back in the hallway, near the bedrooms. There were screams, but they echoed from far away. There were thousands of screams. He was in Hell again, but it was also the bunker. Part of him knew it didn't make sense. He knew that he was dreaming, but that didn't quell his fear.

He look around for Alastair. It was another game for the archdemon. They were back at it again. He was being hunted by his old master, but for the first time in one of his dreams he was holding an angel blade. Gripping it tightly, he went on the offensive, on the hunt.

Dean could almost sense Alastair, both stalking him and being stalked himself. Each waiting to get the jump on each other. But Dean saw the brilliance to Alastair's maneuvering, as they moved...
through the halls, they were getting closer and closer to Dean's family. In that moment of realization he saw Alastair turn into Dylaniel's bedroom. Dean ran towards the door, but before he could get there there was a flash of white light.

Dean woke up panting, sat up in his bed, and looked around the dim room. He tossed on some temporary clothes, then staggered down the hall to the bathroom. He locked the door, turned on the shower and climbed in. Despite the nightmare, he tried to jerk off. If he let having nightmares prevent him from masterbating, he suspected he'd never cum again in his life. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great either. Nothing was great.

Afterwards, standing in front of the mirror he stared at the scruff on his face that was nearly a beard. He took his shaver and started trimming it. Out of curiosity he sculpted himself a goatee in the same style as Dee's. He had to admit that he kind of liked the look of it, but the similarity made his insides swirl with gnawing anxiety and guilt. After a moment he shaved it all off.

He dried his face with a towel, then turned back to the mirror. He looked like himself again; the same old Dean. It was another day of slipping closer to the edge of civilization while trying not to crumble under his own helplessness…. That wasn’t fair. He wasn't helpless. He supposed he could research. Whether it yielded anything was just chance augmented slightly by whatever skill he had.

“You can do this,” he told his reflection even though his heart wasn't fully in it. “Stay strong. Everyone needs you to stay strong. One day, and then the next, and then the next.”

Dylaniel entered the library where the others were hunkered down researching. He walked around the room checking over their shoulders to see what each person was working on. No one bothered to glance back at him. It was normal for people to come and go, milling about the workspace. When he determined that at least a few of them were somewhat available, he posed his question.

“Is there anyone else who isn't needed for researching? I need some assistance,” he requested.

“What's wrong?” Bobby asked as everyone looked up from their work, drawn into the discussion.

“I need to start practicing again.” Dylaniel held up a pair of shinai. The bamboo practice swords might not have been lethal, but even without a sharp edge the prospect of fighting Dylaniel gave everyone pause.

“I'm not great with a sword, but I'll try,” Sam volunteered after everyone else hesitated noticeably. “At least for a little bit.”

“I think there are a few empty consecutive carports in the garage where we could spar.”

Sam grabbed an unopened bottle of water from the pile of refreshments between his and Jody’s laptops, then followed Dylaniel. As they walked to the garage Sam watched Dylaniel for any lingering signs of injury or fatigue. The nephilim appeared to be in decent shape, though Sam supposed a significant amount of the harm was below the surface.

“What do you think about this whole Alastair thing?” Sam asked to break the silence.

“He could be a useful source of information, if he really is as close to Lilith as it appears.”

“What about the situation with Dean and him?” Sam looked over his shoulder to double-check that Dean wasn't in earshot. “I have this feeling that there's something he's not telling us.”

“My father was troubled by thoughts of Alastair for many years, even after witnessing his death,”
“I expect that Dean is troubled by them as well.”

“When I first saw Dean, before Cas and the other angels showed up, he was pretty torn up and it'd been months. I mean I wouldn't be surprised if he had PTSD or something from Hell, but then with everything that was going on with the time travel and now the Apocalypse....” Sam sighed. “I'm just worried about him.”

“He's resilient,” Dylaniel said in an attempt to be helpful.

“Resilient, yes. Well adjusted person...” Sam commented as they entered the garage. He put down the water bottle, then accepted the shinai. “So, how do you want me to do this?”

Sam swung the shinai a few times experimentally. He'd had some training with a sword when he was a teenager, but he wouldn't have claimed to be good with one. And despite Dylaniel's weakened state, the nephilim had his own sword adorned with two or three aesthetic embellishments that betrayed his proficiency.

“You can just come at me however you'd like,” Dylaniel assured him.

Sam thought for a moment about strategy, then charged at him swinging. Dylaniel deflected two strikes without much difficulty. Dylaniel's eyes quickly scanned Sam’s posture, then he intentionally left his right side exposed for a moment too long, but Sam didn't take the opening. He knocked Sam's shinai to the side, then raised his own to just below Sam’s chin.

“Are you going easy on me?” Dylaniel asked, trying not to narrow his eyes.

“You're still recovering,” Sam replied meekly, though he immediately knew that he'd fucked up. It wasn't clear just how offended Dylaniel was, but Sam was almost certain that he was about to get his ass beat by the trained killer he'd just pulled a pitch on.

Dylaniel's lips thinned as he lowered his shinai. “Never go easy on someone during sparring,” Dylaniel advised. “It's a disservice.”

“I’m sorry. I just don't want you to get hurt. I didn't mean—”

“A few bruises now is nothing compared to overconfidence in the field,” Dylaniel said then raised his weapon again. “I forgive the mistake. Now try to hit me.”

Sam raised his shinai, then attacked Dylaniel harder and faster than before. Dylaniel parried three hits, then counterattacked so quickly that Sam nearly fell backwards. Sam blocked another strike and attempted to shove Dylaniel back by leaning in with his larger build, but Dylaniel dipped to the side while tripping Sam, knocking him to the ground. Sam let go of the shinai and raised his hands in forfeit.

“I'd help you up, but I think I need to sit down,” Dylaniel admitted between labored breaths. He plopped down onto the floor a few feet from Sam. “You might want to work on your telekinesis, to supplement your defense. It probably could've stabilized you there.”

“Thanks. I’ll take that under advisement,” Sam groaned as he sat up and grabbed the single bottle of water he'd brought along. He opened the bottle, paused, then held it out to Dylaniel. “You need this more than me.”

“You're human. You need water more.”

“You're sick,” Sam countered, but Dylaniel just stared at him resolute. “Okay. Can we agree to
split it and save our pride or whatever?"

“I'd have to drink first,” Dylianiel stated, then explained, “My sense of taste would make it intolerable otherwise.”

“Fine.”

Sam handed off the bottle, which Dylianiel raised to his mouth, but he stopped just short.

“I refuse to finish this bottle,” he warned in an attempt to stave off any tricks by Sam.

“Has anyone told you you're paranoid?”

“Yes,” Dylianiel replied before taking a few sips. “Countless people have.”

He handed the bottle back to Sam, who had a little. Dylianiel stared at the shinai for several seconds, studying it for some quality that Sam couldn't even guess at.

“I haven't really done anything like sparring since I was a teenager.” Sam filled yet another silence. It seemed like Dylianiel wasn't ever the initiator of small talk. “I take it you sparred regularly?”

“When I was training, at least an hour a day. It became less necessary after I started serving in the field, though it was good to keep my skills up or explore non-conventional combat styles and weapons.”

“Non-conventional?”

“Bare hands, flail, push dagger, kusarigama—honestly with the ability to bless weapons the most important fighting skill to have is improvising a weapon,” Dylianiel explained.

“I'm trying to imagine practicing fighting with improvised weapons. Do you set up a bunch of random objects and just see what happens or do you actually analyze your surroundings beforehand?”

“I've been told that most other people don't give the same attention that I do to threat and weapon assessment upon entering new locations. So I expect them to find a safe exercise in reviewing their surroundings helpful,” Dylianiel theorized. “It's incredible how delicate bodies can be, even those of angels and demons. There's almost always something that can serve as a weapon. It's just a puzzle to solve.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “You think of killing people as a puzzle?”

“It makes violence much more palatable,” Dylianiel answered. “I like puzzles. They're easy forms of entertainment when you're physically preoccupied.”

“Physically preoccupied?”

“When I'd be on patrol for example. Some of the angels I'd fly with enjoyed riddles. Others find them to be the bane of their existence,” Dylianiel elaborated, then added, “‘Until I am measured I am not known, yet how you miss me when I have flown.’ Nordael particularly enjoyed that one.”

Sam stared at Dylianiel for several seconds. The kid had just told him a riddle, completely unsolicited, and he knew it off the top of his head. They were almost doing something recreational together.
Sam considered the prompt for a moment, then answered, “Time”

“Yes.”

“What can go up a chimney down, but not down a chimney up?” Sam countered.

“That's from the “Dark Tower” series,” Dyaniel observed. “There's no use in asking me any of those. I've read the whole thing.”

“Alright…” Sam thought for awhile. “What goes up and what goes down? Sometimes straight or round and round. What is this thing that doesn't move? And never is perfectly smooth?”

Dyaniel sat for a long while considering it. “I haven't heard that one before.”

“You never traded riddles with your uncle?” Sam asked, a bit surprised that Dyaniel hadn't heard one of his old standbys.

“He was possessed before I became interested in them.”

“Oh.” Sam nodded in acknowledgment.

Dyaniel had been too young to really get to know his uncle before Lucifer had ruined so much of their lives. This conversation was probably an entirely new experience for him.

“Do you want me to tell you the answer?” Sam asked.

“No. I'd rather work on it for a while.” Dyaniel picked up his shinai. “I think I've recovered enough to continue practicing, if you're ready.”

“Yeah, okay.” Sam stood up and smiled. “You sure you aren't going to be too distracted trying to solve the riddle?”

“Being able to divide and properly allocate attention is a vital skill in combat. So is utilizing distractions.” Dyaniel got up and readied his weapon before saying, “You saw me where I never was and where I could not be. And yet within that very place, my face you often see.”

——

“Hell is in an uproar over the fucking monuth,” Kay groaned as she walked into the library. She had just returned from another one of her trips downstairs and was still dressed in her dark grey, regal long coat. Without asking for permission, she checked Sam's fresh cup of coffee to see if it was still warm, then took a sip. “Every archdemon and visedemon with vocal cords has an opinion on it. And don't even get me started on the humans. We’re sending hundreds of envoys out to try to control this situation, but it’s not that easy.”

“I'll bet,” Sam acknowledged while eyeing his lost beverage from behind his laptop. It'd been almost ten hours since being beaten by Dyaniel five out of five times and he'd been counting on that supply of caffeine.

“Hell wants it captured alive.”

“What?” Dean and Bobby both asked at the same time.

“It's an Abyssal. It belongs in Hell,” Kay recited the fundamental policy. “Hell’s getting spooked about a rare specimen like it being lost. They don't want some scared humans or hunters taking it out. It just made the endangered species list of Hell.”
Dean closed his laptop to give her his full attention. “You guys are gonna protect it?”

“Her, technically… we think. She’s a guardian of Hell. She’s just in the wrong place at the very wrong time.” Kay reframed the context, hoping to practice giving the creature a slightly more sympathetic spin. “With a little luck Shola and the rest of the envoys can make us capturing her a selling point. By the way, if there are any hunters you know going after her, tell them to back off or they might get more than they bargained for.”

“More than a giant, demonic bird of prey?” Ruby smiled.

“The hunting party is mostly demons who used to be hunters. They're calling themselves ‘slayers.’”

Dean sat up more in his chair. “No way?”

“Who do they have?” Bobby asked.

“I'm not sure. I could find out, but if you know any of them I don't suggest a visit. They're all a bit twisted from the change. They won't be who you knew.” Kay finished Sam's coffee, then returned the empty mug to his disappointment. “If you really want me to check I can make a call before I take off.”

“You're going somewhere?” Sam asked, though he wasn’t particularly surprised that Kay’s visit was so fleeting. Ever since Dylianiel’s health had improved, she'd returned the majority of her energy towards ruling Hell. She stopped in for a quick snack and updates, but she hardly seemed to stop moving for more than an hour or two. It made him wonder just how different the circumstances and ruling styles were between Kay and her dad. He couldn't imagine trying to juggle her workload with a newborn.

“I need to do some damage control and lay some groundwork with the humans. I want to try to get a diplomatic leg up on Heaven. Last time we were a necessary evil.” She reconsidered her word choice, but didn't correct herself. “This time I'd like to be an old acquaintance.”

“You're talking like it's a given we're gonna hit seal 65,” Dean observed aloud.

“Right now we're at 52,” Kay pointed out. “It's part precautionary measure and part spinning the current news cycle.”

“Be careful you don't make yourself a target,” Bobby warned.

“That's just part of having power.” Kay smiled in an attempt at reassurance. “You're always a target.”

They had two days of relative quiet. Rumor was that Abaddon and her loyalists were only barely starting to reemerge after taking some time to heal their wounds. According to Kay, tensions with several human governments were high, but at least temporarily stable. As for the general population, there was a battle of opinion as to whether the incident was real or if there was any possible reasonable explanation. It was the whole Dylianiel video fiasco over again, just worse. And a few seals broke, but not as many as a few days earlier. It was hard to tell if that was due to the loss of Samhain and the unclear absence of Abaddon or if they were just in a period of labor about to be rewarded with a significant payoff.

On a more personal front, there had been very little progress. With the exception of Kay and Dylianiel, the majority of everyone’s time was spent monitoring the delicate political climate,
looking for potential seals, and trying to locate Alastair or Lilith. After over forty hours running on all cylinders, Kay conceded to taking a little time to rest at the bunker. Technically she had quarters in Hell, but she could sense everyone scurrying about in the Citadel, which gave her insomnia. Dylaniel grew considerably more mobile and insisted on training with anyone who would grant him the time, though when pressed he admitted to having some lingering sensory discrepancies. He managed to teleport himself across a room, but he hadn't yet dared to try transporting another person. All-in-all the two days had been a small scale return to near-normalcy, engulfed in a greater backslide. It was a draining, anxiety-producing routine, waiting for a turn for the better or worse.

“I might have a location that fits your Alastair guy,” Jody said from her corner of the library. “There's a section of a few city blocks in Toledo, Ohio that are run down industrial. Local police have flagged three murders in the neighborhood and ten missing persons in the last two months. All unsolved.”

“That is definitely above average,” Bobby agreed.

“That's not all, back during prohibition there was a booze running group out of there. Apparently the whole area used to be connected by underground tunnels and filled with hidden rooms.”

“So it's basically a horrible place to assault,” Sam commented.

“It's far from ideal, but depending on the layout and how many people we have, it might be doable,” Dylaniel corrected. “We couldn't attempted it by ourselves.”

“How many angels can Anael spare?” Dean asked.

“The whole Samhain and Abaddon things were messes. I don't see how Alastair is any different,” Sam said unenthusiastically.

“They went bad because we didn't know them well enough. You didn't know Samhain was the world's biggest troll and Kay didn't know that Abaddon would let Alastair’s shit slide,” Dean argued. “But Alastair is different because I know him, not some alternate-future-maybe him. I spent decades with this one.”

“Listen, maybe you know him, but that's not a good thing if that's gonna be what ends up biting you in the ass,” Sam disagreed.

“I can find him and I can fight him.”

Sam shook his head. “Dean, I don't know if you're the right person to fight him.”

“But I know him,” Dean said a little indignantly. “I know how he thinks!”

“That's why you shouldn't face him. You have a history. If he's half as good as you're all saying, don't you think he's going to use that against you?”

“I can do it. I need to do it!” Dean snapped, knocking over his empty beer bottle as he hit the table. Everyone stared at him as he picked up the bottle. He took a few breaths before continuing. “You don't know what it's like. He's out there—knowing he's out there…. I need to kill him, see him die. I need to know it's over.”

“If we’re going after him, we're going with a hell of a lot of support,” Sam stated firmly. “And before you go, you need to seriously ask yourself if it's a good idea.”
“I don’t…” Dean instinctively almost rejected the idea of help. He didn’t want to expose the others to Alastair for many reasons, not the least of which was his own shame. They didn’t know what Alastair was capable of and that left them vulnerable in a way that they didn’t truly appreciate. He didn’t want to see any of them hurt. They were just being too stubborn to see it. He didn’t know if he could make them see it, but with the tension in the air he knew there wasn’t any chance of salvaging the conversation. “Fine.”

Everyone was staring at him. He got up and went to his room. He wanted to get away from their judgment. After closing the door, he sat down on his bed and tried to think of anything other than Alastair, but it was nearly impossible. His hands were shaking, so he gripped his knees. He was humming “For Whom The Bell Tolls” in order to calm his nerves when there was a knock at his door.

“Can I come in?” Sam asked through the door in a distinctly non-hostile tone.

“Yeah.”

Sam cautiously entered and walked around the room a bit. He was probably gathering some courage for what would either be a heart-to-heart or a full blown fight. He leaned against the dresser and ran his hand over the completely bare surface of the large piece of furniture.

“I was thinking we should get some…” Sam rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t even remember what people put in their bedrooms. It’s been so long since I had a room. You stayed at Bobby’s while I was gone, right?”

“Yeah. I had the room with the blue wallpaper.” Dean played along with the small talk. “I had a record player—collected the vinyls of almost every cassette in Baby.”

“You should get another one for here,” Sam suggested.

“You’re giving me déjà vu.” Dean exhaled a wary laugh. “The other me had one on the dresser where you’re standing.”

“ Weird.” Sam looked at the surface again, then back to Dean. “Maybe the other me suggested it to him?”

“That’s a fucking terrifying idea.”

“Or I guess, where else would you put a recorder player in here?” Sam shrugged. A long silence stretched between them while Sam watched Dean, hoping that he’d volunteer something, but he didn’t. “Please talk to me about this Alastair thing. I know it’s really upsetting you and I don’t know how we can deal with him until we deal with this.”

“I don’t know where to start,” Dean admitted after a long pause.

“Tell me anything, whatever comes to mind,” Sam prompted.

“I have nightmares, every night. It doesn’t matter how my dream starts, but I’m always back in the dungeon. I can’t escape. I know he’s coming for me, and when he finds me…” Dean pursed his lips. “It was…. There aren’t even words.”

“Are you scared he’ll hurt you?”

“No. I know he’ll hurt me, someday—he’ll try and maybe just seeing him again….” Dean rubbed his face. “But not seeing him again, not seeing him die with my own eyes…. I think this fear
would just drown me.”

“I don't want you facing him when just the thought of him is getting you upset like this,” Sam
warned. “It's not safe. You know that, right?”

“But, you guys need me. You don't know what he's capable of.” Dean looked at his hands. “I can
be strong. I can do this.”

“Dean, look at me,” Sam said firmly, causing Dean to raise his head and reluctantly meet Sam's
eyes. The younger Winchester watched him thoughtfully for a moment. “I don't know what the
first seal was. I'm not going to go behind your back to find out. But look at me and tell me that
there's nothing else. Tell me that you're being straight with me.”

“I…. ” Dean tried to speak, but his throat was too tight. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Please tell me.” Sam's voice was as gentle as ever. “Let me help, please.”

“When I was in Hell… I wasn't just tortured. I tortured other souls... because Alastair told me to. I
tore them apart, and I liked it. It didn't hurt as much when I was making someone else suffer. I was
good at it. He said I was good at it…. He said he was proud of me.” Dean buried his face in his
hands for a few seconds. “I just wanted someone to be proud of me so badly. To care about me
like I was worth something, like I was more than… whatever I am.”

“I care about you. Bobby, Kay, Dyl—we all care about you. You are worth something. You're
worth more than you know.”

“I just don't feel it.” A few tears rolled down his cheeks. “I’m no good compared to all the shit
we’re facing. I was barely any good before the demons and angels started showing up. My whole
life I haven't been good enough and the only reason I flew under the radar was because Dad was
too distracted fighting with you.”

“You're a great hunter.”

“You hate hunters.”

“I hate people who try to hurt my family,” Sam corrected. “You save lives and you make the
world a better place.”

“Whose life have I saved?” Dean gestured around, having given up on hiding his tears. “I damned
the world. All I've ever done has failed or fucked things up.”

“That's not true. You saved me—”

“And started this whole thing.”

“I'm not talking about the Hell thing. I know how much you tried to protect me when we were
kids. You gave me a chance. And maybe we haven't always seen eye-to-eye, maybe one or both of
us made mistakes, but at least when it comes down to it, no matter what, you want to make things
right.” Sam smiled down at his big brother. “You're strong, smart, and whether you recognize it or
not you care about people more than most. You try like hell. I respect you. I forgive you.”

“If I'd have been stronger…. ” Dean tried to argue, but some of the self-loathing-wind had been
taken out of his sails.

“It wasn't a matter of being strong. It was a matter of needing support.”
“The things I've done….”

Sam sat down on the bed next to Dean. He rolled up one of his sleeves and held the inside of his wrist out for Dean to see. Hidden beside the redder, wide, jagged scar from the handcuffs were a few thinner, lighter scars that ran along the veins. He'd tried to kill himself.

“We all do things we regret,” Sam said meekly.

“When?” Dean asked, but he could guess.

“A few weeks after.” Sam pursed his lips. “One day I just couldn't take it anymore.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad.” Sam rolled his sleeve back down to cover the scars. “Sometimes I think about it and on some level it scares the hell out of me, but every good day between then and now… it scares me a little less because that's not who I am anymore.”

“If I was back in that same spot, I don't know if I'd break. I don't know if I'm still that person,” Dean confessed.

“You were in a terrible situation,” Sam told him. “And whatever you might think of yourself, I can tell you that you’re definitely not the person you were back then. If you need to be there when we take Alastair down, then I'm going to support and trust you.”

“You aren't gonna fight me on this?”

“No. I'm going to help you.” Sam spoke with conviction. “Because I believe in you.”

“Is everything okay with you and Dean?” Ruby asked when Sam got back to their bedroom. It was his turn to watch Kaylee, who she’d just put down for a nap in her crib. Ruby closed the book she was reading and sat up from her place on the bed.

“We're okay. We talked things out,” Sam replied while peeking into the crib. “He's been having a rough time since Hell. He's just good at hiding it.”

“I can't imagine carrying that stuff as a human,” Ruby said in a surprisingly sympathetic move. “It's supposed to mess up those squishy parts.”

“Yeah, well, he's not coming apart at the seams, but he needs some help. I think he's finally ready to admit it.” Sam knelt down on the mattress and took her hand. “Can you do something for me?”

“Probably,” she replied warily.

“I doubt he'd go to you, but if he talks to you about Hell or reaches out to you, please don't burn him. I need him to know that he can count on us.” Sam sighed. “I don't want him putting up a wall again.”

“If he plays nice, I'll play nice,” she agreed, earning a kiss.

“Thank you.”

“But if he—”
Sam kissed her again to cut off her cynicism, then pulled back an inch. “I promise, he's different.” Sam caressed her cheek with his thumb. “Things are going to be different.”

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into the bed. He lay down next to her, readjusting slightly so she could snuggle up next to him.

“You're worried about this Alastair hunt,” Ruby whispered. It wasn't a question.

“I'm worried about a lot.” Sam held her closer. “I know the alternative is just sitting around waiting for the answer to fall in our laps. I know we can't take many more days of doing nothing while the seals break, but we're just running into danger over and over again with almost nothing to show for it.”

“We might've slowed them down a bit.”

“I know, I do,” Sam assured her. “And I think I'm fine with Dean coming along when we go after Alastair, but we're going to have to interrogate him and I have no idea how that'll affect Dean. Alastair made Dean torture souls for him. If we let Dean watch or help with the interrogation does that help him heal or just make it all worse? I don't know what to do.”

“This isn't exactly the kind of thing that has a textbook answer. Just see how he's doing and play it by ear.” She kissed his neck. “You're a smart guy. You'll do fine.”

“Thanks.”

“Unless you want me tagging along, I should probably just stay here with Kaylee,” Ruby said before he could even ask. “You can cast the demon locator spell and it sounds like you're gonna have plenty of heavy-hitters against demons.”

“Can you kit up all the reagents for me?”

“Sure.” Ruby poked his chest experimentally. “You feeling up for combat?”

“My ribs are fine.” Sam took her hand to stop the assault. “Anyway, hopefully this won't be too bad. He's a demon without Samhain's ghost summons or emotion twisting tricks.”

“Your perfect foe, but still watch your ass.” Ruby manually turn his head to face her, then kissed his lips. “You're too good looking to let someone put a bunch of scars on you.”

“I've got plenty of scars already,” he replied.

“I'm gonna have to check.” Ruby's hand slid up below his shirt, clawed lightly at his chest, then moved down to his pants.

“I'm pretty sure I don't have any scars down there,” he smirked, though she unbuttoned his pants. “But if you insist on checking.”

“I'm very thorough,” she hummed as she moved down his body.

The blowjob was a pleasant surprise, but part of the way in he wanted her to enjoy herself too. He cupped her cheek, gently turning her eyes up to him, and pulled her off of him. He drew her back up until they were eye-to-eye. They kissed deeply as he started undoing her jeans. His fingers slid into her panties and rubbed her, eliciting a small moan.

Ruby pulled her head back a bit to look down at him. He rubbed her again while licking his lips.
She ground against him eagerly and nodded. Sam grabbed her, rolling her onto her back, then pounced on top of her. There wasn't any bed frame left to brake, but they did knock a lamp off the nightstand before they were done. Afterwards they were a tangled mess of sheets and limbs, hearts pounding against each other.

“Yep. You've got just the perfect amount of scars,” Ruby panted in his ear, then nibbled the earlobe. “So you better come back without any new ones.”

“Hypocrite.” Sam kissed her shoulder that contained the fresh red scar from Abaddon. “No new scars. I'll be good.”

“You always are.”

Their lips had barely touched for another kiss when there was a knock on their door. Ruby shook her head in annoyance, then rested her forehead on his chest.

“Sam, wheels up in fifteen minutes,” Kay shouted through the door.

“Fifteen?” He sighed, then started crawling out from under Ruby.

“We just lost number 57,” Kay explained, causing Sam and Ruby to exchange a concerned glance at the news. “That's why you all need to haul ass if you're going with them.”

“You're not going too?” Sam asked as he started getting dressed.

“Twenty something fallen angels, you, and Dyl—”

“Dyl's going?”

“He wants some field practice.” Kay relayed the request. “With all you guys stacked up against some demons, it should be a pretty safe mission even if one’s an arch. Anyway, I've got an emergency diplomatic meeting in a few minutes.”

“What's the emergency?” he asked while pulling on his pants.

“Seal 57 involved an attack on a mall during holiday shopping. The death toll is in the hundreds. Some demon on Lilith’s side has a real sense of humor; their team only used meatsuits from Saudi Arabia. I'm gonna go try to do what I can to cool the situation.” He could almost hear her roll her eyes at the task ahead of her. “After that I need to head back downstairs. I'm overdue for a few reports.”

“Good luck with all that,” Sam told her while buttoning his shirt, then grabbed his ring and necklace. “I'll be out in a second. I'm almost ready.”

“Make sure your cell phone is charged,” Kay advised. “Everyone’s keeping their phones glued to their hands. If we get word that anymore seals break or other weird shit, then you're coming back in immediately. We need answers, not excitement.”

They arrived at the large rundown bottling plant about mid-afternoon. The four-story building’s windows were nearly opaque with dirt, except for the handful that were broken. Rather than going straight in they waited outside for a moment to let Sam perform the locator spell as well as allowing Dylaniel and the two dozen angels that were helping them to get their bearings. Dean frowned slightly at the realization that Castiel hadn't come with the group of Anael's angels. The angels hesitated to approach the building, but Sam stepped forward consulting the magical imbued
“I can’t sense Alastair and there’s some kind of aura that’s confusing the spell. It’s strange. I think I can feel it,” Sam commented. He carefully reached his hand out towards the building. “I don’t know how to describe it.”

“The whole area is desecrated. It looks like it hasn’t been in place long enough to be too deeply ingrained,” Dylaniel explained, then looked back to the angels. “Do any of you know how to cleanse desecration?”

“We should be able to purge some of this,” Adriel, their leader answered. Ten of them stepped forward. “It will take time though.”

“Any progress you can make will be helpful,” Dylaniel assured them, indicating that they should begin.

“Do we need to do it?” Dean asked, worried by the surprise loss of manpower.

“Angels teleporting into desecrated territory are essentially flying blind, we’ll be considerably weakened, and we won’t be able to pinpoint people inside. As long as that’s up, we’re searching in a sickening fog,” Dylaniel clarified. “The safest thing would be for our angels to work their way in from the edges. It could take hours depending on how deep these basements are.”

“Can angels fight in desecrated areas? At the very least we can scope out the areas on the fringes for signs of recent activity, even if we can’t get really deep in,” Sam commented, then added, “Dyl, are you going to be okay with this stuff?”

“Desecration has never really hindered my powers significantly before.”

“But you aren’t running at 100%,” Dean pointed out.

“I brought an angel blade in case my sword is ineffective.” Dylaniel’s expression was nearly pained at the possibility. “But I’ll try to conserve my strength for any emergency actions. Aside from the impact on my powers, I think that because of the desecration I might be perceiving reality on more of a human spectrum. Normally, it doesn’t impact me this noticeably, but with the ongoing disparity…. It’s not what I’m used to.”

“Maybe you should just go back to the bunker,” Dean suggested.

“I’m at no more of a disadvantage than a human,” Dylaniel countered, pointedly at the only pure human in their group. “And my combat training is probably the best here.”

“Fine, but if anything’s off with you two speak up,” Dean warned his brother and Dylaniel.

“Same goes for you,” Sam added.

The team of cleansing angels spread out in a semicircular configuration and everyone else slightly preceded them looking for threats and protecting them. By the half hour mark, everyone had fanned out enough that reinforcements were getting dangerously thin. Sam suggested to Dean and Dylaniel that they backtrack a bit, collect their party and restart a tighter search and cleansing pattern, originating from a new point.

The longer he was in the building, the more uncomfortable Dean felt. At first he couldn’t put his finger on it, but as they started walking back he noticed his ears playing tricks on him. He could hear howls of pain in the wind that was blowing through the broken windows. The air from down
one hallway smelled faintly like burnt flesh, but before he could comment it was gone. He could feel his heart pounding and his skin was clammy.

“I'm feeling a little sick,” Dean confessed as he stopped next to a small broken window to get some fresh air.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked.

“This place, it kinda reminds me of Hell.”

“What?”

“Dude, I don't even know. It's like the smell or lights, maybe the air. I feel like I’m ten seconds away from the walls bleeding and the floor turning into razor blades.”

“It's possibly that once more of the desecration is gone you won't be as affected,” Dylaniel suggested. “Some humans can be sensitive to it, especially when they're already in a weakened state.”

“I'm not weakened.” Dean rejected the idea. “I’m just having some shitty déjà vu feelings. I'm gonna head back to the entrance. I need to get some fresh air. When you round up our angels, come get me and we’ll try again.”

“You sure?” Sam asked with visible concern.

“Yeah. I just need to pace myself or something.”

“I'll walk you back.”

“Don't,” Dean told his brother. “Dyl shouldn't waste the energy either and you guys need to find like twenty people before they all get too split up. Meanwhile I just need to walk through some already cleared hallway. I'm not about to faint or anything. I just need some air before I go any deeper.”

Sam and Dylaniel both exchanged an uncertain glance. Neither of them particular liked the idea of any of them walking around alone, though he was literally just retracting his steps through cleansed and already searched halls. If it had been any other enemy there wouldn't have been any question about whether Dean was capable of traveling by himself. Sam didn't want to leave his brother unprotected, yet part of him cringed with guilt over the idea of keeping Dean on such a short leash despite his reassurances.

“Remember: you've got support.” Sam conceded after a long pause. “Yell if you need anything. Don't be proud; be careful.”

Sam and Dylaniel reluctantly let Dean head back to the entrance on his own while they went in search of the rest of their group.

Dean was fine. In fact, he felt a small boost in his pride at the moment of self-sufficiency… until he rounded a corner and lost sight of the illumination from others’ flashlights. For just an instant he heard a whisper of doubt in his mind that he was alone. The flicker of negativity in the face of such a minor task triggered a pendulum swing in his confidence. The doubt and sudden isolation in a place that might be so near Alastair made him feel a bit shaky. He almost yelled out to Sam and Dylaniel to come back, but the thought of needing such immediate hand holding was embarrassing.

He kept walking towards the entrance, yet the trip seemed agonizingly long for only being a few
hundred feet. The many corridors leading off in various directions reminded him of his nightmares. A gust of wind screamed in the distance and a door slammed loudly in a nearby room. He shined his flashlight down the corridor in question, then raised his angel blade and went to make sure that no one had gotten past the line. The smell of rotting and burning flesh tickled his nose, but it vanished just as quickly as it had started. It was his fear dabbling in his imagination.

When he was about to turn back, his arm caught a jagged piece of metal protruding from the darkness. It felt like a claw or one of the sickles they’d used to dismember souls. He stumbled back onto the rough cold concrete ground that was nearly stone in its sensation. His arm was bleeding a tiny bit, but the pain from the cut was nothing compared to seeing the blood on his hand after checking the injury. He started breathing faster. The blood, the dark, the hard cold floors, the jagged walls—he wanted to run. He just needed to find some place less exposed to catch his breath and pull himself together.

Dean looked for a room that he could sit down in that only had one door to watch. He turned a corner and stopped dead. He’d found himself at a six-way intersection. The sight was horrifying in its familiarity. There had been a six-way intersection similar to this one in Alastair’s dungeon. The second hall to the left of the main corridor had led to his work room. His hands recoiled from the wall, worried that he'd find the blades that had lined this area before.

He started walking down the hallway that would’ve taken him to his one-time home. The memory tricked his mind, but in Hell there had been a room he could hide in nearby. Rationally, he knew it was insane to be checking. He knew he was in a factory. But some part of him wondered if he was dreaming, if he was in another nightmare. He felt a little disoriented by the idea and leaned against a wall to try to get his bearings. He was pretty sure it was real.

After a few deep breaths he glanced around him. He’d taken one too many wrong turns in his fearful disorientation. He should’ve stayed closer to the south facing exterior wall that had contained the windows, but when he flicked his flashlight off there wasn’t any hint of light, not from windows or his companions.

Standing in the pitch black, he strained his senses for any signs of life. There was nothing, not even the howl of the wind or the smell of…. He smelled decay, but it wasn't the mold growing on the damp wooden parts of the building. It was too warm. Someone was breathing next to him.

Dean clicked on his flashlight and swung the angel blade in one fluid motion, but there was no one there. He'd stabbed the blade into the wall in his panic, deeply embedding it. While repositioning his flashlight between his head and shoulder in order to free up both hands to collect the blade, the light flashed across something shiny on the ground a few yards away. He yanked the blade free, then went to investigate.

He knelt down to look at the object that somehow wasn't covered in grime or rust. It was the blade of a scalpel. There was a little bit of blood on the blade. It was still fresh. He tried to turn around, but he was grabbed from behind by the throat. He attempted to thrash his way free, but a needle pierced his arm. His limbs struggled to fight more and more, then his head became heavy and rolled back. The man who was holding him pressed his nose and teeth against Dean’s cheek. He tried to turn away or call out to the others for help, but he couldn't move. It was taking all his energy to not pass out.

“Welcome home, Dean.”

Dylaniel and Sam had notified six of the angels and were working their way back to the main, southern hallway when Dylaniel's phone rang.
“Am I getting pulled?” Sam whispered as Dylaniel answered the call.

The nephilim put his finger to his lips, asking for silence, then covered his ear that wasn't against the phone. “I'm here,” he said while taking a few steps to improve the reception.

“Intel came in.” Kay didn't bother with pleasantries or even identifying herself. “Lilith’s visitors were angels.”

“From your vision?” Dylaniel asked, causing Sam to stop looking around and start listening with more interest.

“Our Maji were searching for other possible monuth sources when they got a hit on the crime scene with the explosion. I sent some techs to check it out. There was a dead angel in the rubble. The best we can tell it was probably killed before the building collapsed, maybe by a knight,” Kay explained. “Heaven is messing with the wrong end of this thing.”

“We're coming back, at least the three of us. I'll notify our angels and they can make their own call,” Dylaniel told her, earning a confused expression from Sam, who'd only heard his half of the conversation. “Something is wrong with this scenario. I don’t like it.”

Dylaniel hung up then started walking back towards the building entrance. Sam hurried after him, covering their rear with an uncertain extra sense of caution.

“What's going on?”

“The building Lilith was inhabiting in your vision, the one that was destroyed, there was a dead angel there,” Dylaniel replied as he gestured for a few of the angels they'd collected to follow them. “If Heaven was observing Lilith’s movements, then it's possible they'll be monitoring her lieutenants.”

“Are you okay to teleport Dean and me back or should we ride with an angel?”

“I should be fine and it'll save the logistical problems of an intermediate stop. I doubt we'll have —” Dylaniel began saying as they exited the side door that they'd entered through, then looked around at the empty lot. “Where's Dean?”

When Dean woke up the first thing he noticed was that he couldn't move his body. He was being dragged by his ankles down a dark corridor. The air was noticeably staler than where he'd passed out, but the architecture was that same aging, early 20th century style. He might've been in the basement, in a different building or maybe just deeper, whatever the case he was undoubtedly off the beaten path.

The man dragging him left him in the center of a cluttered dimly lit room, a workshop, then went to collect tools. He might not have recognized the meatsuit, but the way the man moved, the looming grace and sudden motions interspersed with ominous stillness—it was Alastair. There was no question in Dean’s mind. He tried to keep the archdemon in his sights, but his head wouldn't turn. The only movement he was capable of was trembling.

After collecting a knife, Alastair began cutting off Dean’s clothes, tossing the tattered coverings aside, then began inspecting him. Cold hands meticulously checked him for hidden surprises. Alastair stretched over him, pressing against his naked torso while leaning in close to inspect the scars that Tom had made on his far arm. Without lifting himself from Dean, Alastair looked at his blank face and brushed a few stray hairs from his eyes. A tear rolled down Dean's cheek, causing Alastair to smile at him.
“I'm so glad you're waking up.” Alastair's voice was suppressed joy. “I can't tell you how much I've missed you.”

Alastair looked around the room, then started repositioning equipment. He grabbed a meat hook and glanced back at Dean.

“I've had many students in all my years, but you're special.” Alastair attached the hook to a steel support beam at approximately shoulder level.

“It's not just that you broke the first seal.” He grabbed Dean, dragged him to the beam, and propped him up in a sitting position against it. “It's nothing so superficial as that. You have a gift for inflicting pain. I see a bit of myself in you.”

Alastair pulled Dean's wrists backwards behind the pillar, then tightly tied them with rope. Without any warning, an incredible burning pain shot through Dean’s shoulders as Alastair lifted him up, twisting his arms backward in the process, and suspended Dean's bound wrists from the hook. Several of the lesser used muscles in his shoulders tore under the burden of supporting his weight.

“Don't.” Dean managed through the pain and the fading drugs. “No.”

Alastair placed the cutting edge of a knife to Dean's lips, but he didn't slice the flesh by dragging it downward. Dean froze, scared to risk cutting his own lips by moving at all.

“You know how I feel about that sort of tone,” Alastair warned. “I don't want to gag you this time, but I will if you make me. Instead, I'd like us to talk like we used to. I have so many questions for you.”

Alastair lifted the knife an inch away from Dean's lips. The archdemon leaned his face in closer so that his hot breath was on Dean's left cheek. When Dean tried to turn from him, Alastair moved his knife to touch Dean's right cheek, preventing the retreat.

“Let's talk about your brother.”

The topic was a terrifying reminder that Sam was likely somewhere nearby, even probably looking for him, unaware of the fact that Alastair had a keen interest in him. When Dean didn't answer, Alastair dragged the knife along his cheek, cutting a long shallow wound. He held the bloody knife in front of Dean's eyes for him to see.

“This isn't Hell,” the archdemon reminded him. “It's far worse because this is your real blood. When I take that last drop from you, you're done. You're back in the pit and you aren't getting out this time.”

Alastair went back to his work table and started studying the various tools. To Dean's eyes, some of them looked particularly lethal. He glanced at a few dismembered bodies on the far side of the room in varying degrees of decay. Alastair had been trying to learn the finesse necessary to torture a live human.

“Don't kill me. You don't want to kill me,” Dean begged. “Hell won't get my soul.”

Alastair narrowed his eyes at his prisoner’s odd request. “Then why would you not want me to kill you? Don't you want to go to Heaven?” When Dean didn't answer right away, Alastair picked up a bullwhip and struck him with it.

“Please, I can't go to Heaven. You don't even want me to go there. I'm a weapon for them. That's
why they took me from Hell in the first place.” Dean felt ashamed for giving Alastair what he wanted so easily, but at the same time he had to stay alive. “Torture me, tear my soul apart with razor wire, but if you kill me we’ll all lose.”

“What are you to them?”

Dean hesitated. If the last seal did break, he would be incredibly valuable to either side: an asset to Heaven and a hostage to team Lucifer. He didn't want to tip his hand to Alastair, potentially risking some greater confinement being placed on him. Yet he needed to ensure that he wasn't killed by an uninformed host.

“I can't.”

“You're going to tell me,” Alastair informed him coldly. “Don't you remember? This whole game we're playing, it's all just prolonging the inevitable.”

Dean’s lip trembled, but whispered, “No.”

“Tisk, tisk. I'm still learning which tools work best on live bodies, so be a dear and speak up.” Alastair cracked the whip again for theatrics. “Tell me, what hurts the most?”

Dean felt a little faint. He thought back to his conversation with Dee. He'd been asked what hurts the most before. It wasn't the truth, that was a trick. It was his insecurities thrown back at him. The torture would be real, but everything that was about to happen beyond that was going to be calculated manipulation. Alastair was going to try to twist him, to break him again. He'd go after his weaknesses, his fears—what he saw as his failures. Dean steeled himself as best he could. It wouldn't be like last time. Things were different. It'd be different.

It had been several days since Dean had seen Castiel, but not the other way around. Since confronting Dean and leaving the bunker, Castiel had returned on seven occasions. As hurt as he'd been by the betrayal, he was frequently concerned about the wellbeing of the group that had originally taken him in when he was most in need. He’d watched quietly, unseen and unheard by them, except for Dylaniel, as he moved about the bunker. Part of him wanted to stay and assist the group, but he wasn't sure how to move past the conflict.

Castiel still didn't know how to interact with Dean. He’d briefly watched him sleep, tossing and turning in bed, struggling to endure the memory of Hell. On more than one occasion, Castiel viewed the nightmares and recalled the ordeal of rescuing the Righteous Man. The memory was problematic for even Castiel. It conjured emotions; it always had. And the more emotional he became, the more he needed to make sure everyone was alright.

A while after he left, one night Castiel went to check on Dylaniel and found the nephilim talking with Dean. The pair were seated at a piano discussing various deeply personal topics. Part of him felt like listening was a violation of some sort of trust, though he wasn't sure what that feeling actually implied. Dylaniel's trust wasn't being violated. He'd looked directly at Castiel—clearly his angelic sight was working at relatively healthy levels. Dean was the one whose trust he was violating, and rationally he wasn't sure why it should bother him so much. But he pushed those concerns from his mind and listened. They were talking about him.

“Anger is a reaction to actual harm, but it's also a response to fear,” Dylaniel said as he turned to face Castiel. “I think he's probably scared. He was confronted with his own potential to fall farther than he'd ever expected. Seeing what he could be and not understanding how he could've gotten from point A to point B. I expect there's a feeling of lack of control and helplessness.”
Castiel stared at Dyleniel, while trying to decide if he would leave. For some reason he wanted to flee. He was embarrassed, or ashamed, maybe even scared. Not only was he worried about his potential self, but somehow Dyleniel had seen through the mess of emotions to what he could not. He felt exposed and confused.

When he was just about to leave, Dean did something wholly unexpected. He apologized to Dyleniel. It seemed that Dean had also been scared by their relationship. He'd apparently lashed out at Dyleniel's family and panicked upon being told. But he didn't seem scared of it anymore. He seemed more confident.

A few minutes later, Dean suggested that Dyleniel find something that he cared about beyond fighting and indulge in that. Castiel considered himself. He had nothing in his life that he cared about beyond his family: Anael, their fallen siblings—he supposed Dyleniel was his family too. In general he did care for the wellbeing of Sam, Bobby, and the others. They'd been there for him when he'd needed them and treated him like a completely independent and valid person for the first time in his life.

Then there was Dean. He'd trusted Dean in a way that he hadn't risked with anyone else. He'd started forming a relationship and feelings for him—not in a romantic or sexual way, but there was some level of vulnerability that didn't exist with other people. Dean had treated him more like a person than any non-angel. He may have even been a friend.

Castiel had no idea what he was getting himself into when he went to Hell to save Dean. He had known that it was dangerous, but he hadn't anticipated how upsetting it was to see his siblings die as they fought their way through the Abyss. It'd been so long since any of his siblings had been killed and then in a matter of minutes four of them, angels more powerful than him, had been destroyed. He was scared, for the first time in his life. But just when he was sure that he'd die too, he saw what he'd come for.

Dean may have been damaged, a few poor choices from irredeemable, but below the fractures and the flaws, there was still a brilliant soul. Looking back Castiel wasn't sure if it was his own fear and relief, the fact that he was in the presence of the grace of Michael, or the display of resilience itself, but in that moment more than anything else he wanted to protect and find his own comfort in Dean's soul. He'd embraced his charge beyond the limits of protocol. He'd wrapped Dean in grace, offering whatever peace was possible.

After rescuing Dean, he'd been hailed as a hero of Heaven for saving the Righteous Man. He was a champion of the lower choirs. The diagnosis of his illness was largely kept secret, except for his replacement Uriel and a few other peers. The illness had been attributed to the exposure to Hell, but deep down he knew that it had truly taken hold during their ascent. He'd wanted more—he'd wanted to be more for Dean. Castiel had cared for the Righteous Man when he should've only cared for the safety of Heaven... and he didn't want to have that feeling taken away.

He wanted to care about more than just Heaven. He wanted to do what was moral and good, not just what he was told. When the time came to side with the rigid chain of command by following Uriel or to side with the protection of innocent lives, he had chosen innocent lives. He had chosen to care about more than the limited existence he'd always known. It had been a dangerous endeavor, but even when tempted by Heaven at the coven, he had no desire to return.

But then, Dean kept the truth about Dyleniel from him. He and Dean had spoken about Dyleniel on multiple occasions. He had confided his concerns and discomfort about the nephilim in him. And despite the countless opportunities to come clean, Dean had withheld the truth. He'd harmed Castiel when he was just learning how to be vulnerable, when they might've worked through the
situation together, maybe not as a romantic couple, but at least as friends. Caught up in these new
emotions, without the guidance he'd once found in Dean, he didn't know his place or how to
proceed.

Then there was a hunt for Alastair. Despite knowing that he could be an asset on that search, he
didn't volunteer to go with the other angels. He didn't want to be exposed to that kind of
vulnerability. He didn't know how to work with Dean because he didn't know how to forgive him.
He didn't know how to face Dean, how to face that uncomfortable potential. The realization that
he was scared shook him.

It was late in the day during the afternoon raid on a possible location for Alastair. He was helping
care for one of their newly fallen siblings when he heard something like a prayer. It was Dean,
some frantic thought that struck out desperately trying to find help. Before hardly any coherent
words could make it out, the prayer cut off.

“Cas, Alastair's got—”

Castiel didn't hesitate. Their tension and petty fight didn't matter. He teleported to approximately
where the prayer had been broadcast from. There was desecration all over the site making it
impossible to find the exact point of broadcast or teleport to it, so he searched on foot. He
summoned his angel blade while his powers were unhindered by the desecration, then looked
down one of the cleansed hallways trying to locate either allies or signs of Dean. Within a few
seconds he noticed the faint smell of Dean's blood amidst the hundreds of unpleasant aromas. He
followed the scent down two halls until he located a sharp, metal piece of L-channel that was
sticking out from the damaged plaster. It had some of Dean's blood on it.

Castiel looked around the immediate area and found an intersection of six corridors that reminded
him of the dungeon where he'd found Dean. After a moment’s debate and no better ideas, he
followed the same path he'd taken in Hell. It only took a few minutes for him to smell more blood,
then a bit longer to find a small smear of it on the concrete floor. Dean had been dragged
somewhere.

It was slow work, but he followed the intermittent trail deep into the building, where it stopped
abruptly. Not far from the last smudge of blood, there were a pair of freight elevators. It wasn't the
stone spiral staircase leading down to the Lower Pits, but it was something. He pushed the button
to call the elevator, but nothing happened. For a moment he thought that maybe it was broken, a
dead end, but then he noticed an irregularity in the dust on the metal threshold at the bottom of the
elevator door. Something had recently been dragged across it.

Castiel pried opened the elevator doors with his bare hands, then looked down the shaft. It was at
least six stories down, maybe more. From the look of it, that elevator car was at the bottom of the
shaft, but the other one was stopped on the floor just above him. He pried open the doors to the
other shaft, rechecked to see that his path was unobstructed, then stepped off the ledge.

Dean coughed, spilling some blood from his mouth. His tongue checked for any missing teeth, but
the last hit hadn't dislodged any more than the two from earlier. Some morbid part of his brain
nearly admired the skill it'd taken for Alastair to work his face so much without breaking the jaw.
He pushed the technical appreciation out of his mind. They weren't master and student anymore.

“You don't belong out there with them. You were weak until I taught you how to be strong. I was
so proud of you. You could be that magnificent and powerful artist again.” Alastair tried to tempt
him. “You remember how you were before, how scared you were…. How scared you must be
now.”
“I wasn't strong,” Dean whispered, thinking of when he broke in Hell.

The grin on Alastair's face was the misplaced arrogance of someone who thought that he was winning. “You've done horrible, cruel things. I accept you for it. I celebrate you for it. You could be great if you just let me help you once more.” The archdemon gently lifted Dean’s head up to look him in the eyes. There was a sincerity in Alastair's smile that almost concealed the vileness below the surface. “Do you think anyone else could even stand to be around something like you? The real you?”

“Sam knows. I told him. I told him everything. He forgave me.”

Alastair’s smile faltered at the news, but he recovered immediately. “He’s nothing more than a spoiled experiment of Azazel’s. What's some abomination not even fit to step foot in Hell matter?” he snapped, then squeezed Dean’s face in frustration. After a tense moment, he let go and went back to his workbench, urgently needing to preoccupy himself with something. Dean stared at Alastair in shock.

Alastair was upset by the idea that Sam had been supportive. His brother's forgiveness had undercut Alastair’s entire strategy. Alastair wasn't stealing some undefended soul this time around. Sam cared about him. There might've only been two people in that room, but he wasn't lost and alone, and that made everything different this time around.

“Sammy's stronger than you. He's stronger than Lilith. He's stronger than your god. And he believes in me,” Dean said with conviction. Alastair grabbed a scalpel from the table and came at Dean, but that didn’t stop him from talking. “My family believes in me. You don't even matter.”

“We're going to work on your manners,” Alastair snarled as he pressed the scalpel to Dean's belly button. “So remember—”

“Leave him alone.”

Alastair and Dean both turned their heads to see Castiel emerge from the dark hallway. He had his angel blade in hand and raised it as he cautiously approached.

“Why don't you teleport over here and stop me?” Alastair dragged the blade along Dean's flesh cutting a shallow slice down his abdomen. “That's right, you can't.”

Castiel charged at Alastair, who disappeared, then reappeared behind him. The archdemon swung at Castiel, cutting into his neck. Before he could move to counterattack Alastair had blinked to a new side and struck again. Castiel raised his hand in a gesture clearly meant to be a build up to smiting—whether he could actually smite while in desecrated land, Dean had no idea. Either way, Alastair avoided that entire half of the room.

When Alastair reappeared away from the potentially-smiting hand, Castiel was ready for him. He had his angel blade in hand and raised it as he cautiously approached.

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They crashed into a floor-to-ceiling glass display case, breaking it. Splintered wood and shards of glass scattered across the concrete floor. The pair grappled on the ground, fighting for the angel blade. Alastair's eyes turned white, then widened with enraged surprise.

“You're the one that stole him from me!” Alastair yelled as he slammed Castiel’s head into the cold, hard floor. “He's mine!”

Castiel tried to swing up at Alastair, but Alastair counterattacked, slicing the tendons in Castiel’s
wrist. The lack of motor functions and the momentum of Castiel's attack made the blade fly out of his hand and across the room. Alastair blinked toward where the blade was rolling across the ground. As he bent down to pick it up, Castiel tackled him, pulling him up and away from the weapon. Castiel kicked at the angel blade, knocking it under a large cabinet.

They spun around and slammed into Dean. The impact forced him a few inches up the metal beam and in the process his bindings slid up and off the meat hook. When Castiel and Alastair's brawl moved away from him, Dean dropped hard to the ground. He landed on the broken glass, but only suffered a few small cuts to his bare thighs and ass. After a second or two of searching he felt a large piece of glass behind him and began cutting at his bindings with it.

Alastair gripped Castiel tightly and used his meatsuit's height advantage to lift his foe up. He pressed Castiel onto another meat hook that pierced the angel's back between the shoulder blades. Castiel struggled to get some sort of leverage to free himself, but Alastair was still beating him.

"Maybe I can't kill you, but I can at least send you back from where you came from," Alastair hissed, then started reciting an Enochian incantation causing Castiel's mouth and eyes to start glowing.

Dean cut furiously at his bindings, ignoring the slices he was putting into his own flesh. When the last rope broke, he charged at the archdemon. The pain in his arms and back faded to a dull ache, drowned out by adrenaline. Alastair turned just in time to grab his whip from the nearby workbench, then swung it. Dean held up his arm to protect his face and the whip wrapped around it, cutting a spiral around his forearm. Before Alastair could pull back for another strike, Dean grabbed the whip and tugged the archdemon towards him, away from Castiel.

Alastair punched Dean hard in the stomach, making him keel over. The uncharacteristically brutish attack was just a temporary stall while Alastair moved to grab a knife.

"You can't stop us," Alastair warned. "You can only hope to be on the right side when our father returns. I can save you, make you strong enough to survive. I can make you what you need to be."

Dean lunged forward at Alastair. He didn't even notice the pain from his shoulders or the broken glass on his bare feet. He dodged one swing of the knife, ducked down while grabbing a metal tray of pliers and swung it at Alastair. The tray knocked the knife out of his hand and was brought back up to collide hard with the demon's face. Alastair fell backwards to the ground, dazed by the direct hit.

As soon as Alastair landed on the ground Dean was on top of him, punching him in the face over and over. Dean didn't ever realize he was screaming as he bludgeoned his abuser.

"I can save myself. I can be whoever I want—whoever I am! I don't belong to you! I don't owe you anything! You don't get to tell me how to live my life!” Dean shouted at the archdemon while pummeling him. “I deserve to live in this world! I deserve to be happy! I deserve to be loved!”

"You've forgotten your place."

"No!" Blood sprayed from Dean's mouth as he yelled. "I've found my place! With people who love me and want to help me, not just use me. I'm not some blunt instrument! I'm not a monster! I'm not weak!"

Alastair teleported out from under Dean, appearing standing, but hunched forward in front of Dean, blood dripping from his face and torso. He kicked Dean in the chest, knocking him onto his back.
“You have no idea how much pleasure I'm going to take in breaking you back into your true position.” Alastair climbed on top of Dean, clutched his throat, then leaned in close. Blood and spit dripped onto Dean's cheek as Alastair whispered to him through a shattered jaw. “How much pleasure I'm going to take making you beg again. You'll tell me everything just hoping to get scraps. You'll tell me where to find your brother—”

“No,” Dean mouthed, unable to speak while Alastair choked him. He thought he might pass out, and knew that if he did he'd wake up securely bound and Castiel would almost certainly have been sent back to Heaven. He kicked his legs wildly trying to do anything to keep himself moving. His arms flailed over the glass covered ground, looking for anything that might help him. He could barely hear Alastair’s words over the blood pumping in his ears when his right hand finally settled on a large piece of glass.

“You'll tell me where to find her.”

Dean desperately swung the shard at Alastair’s throat, slicing it deeply. The archdemon's meatsuit flickered with orange light, then collapsed onto him. Dean looked at the piece of glass in his hand, then dropped it to the ground. He forced Alastair's body off of him before he curled up on his side and started sobbing.

Castiel slowly managed to push himself up and off of the hook. After getting to his feet, he took his trench coat off and draped it over Dean before crouching beside him. He wordlessly healed Dean's injuries, then his own.

“He cannot hurt you anymore,” Castiel said, trying to find some way of comforting Dean. He looked around the room, at the mutilated bodies and instruments of pain. “He can’t hurt anyone. You stopped him.”

Even after being healed, Dean was so emotionally exhausted that he couldn't bring himself to stand. After collecting his blade, Castiel cautiously took Dean's hand and draped it over Dean before crouching beside him. He wordlessly healed Dean's injuries, then his own.

“I should've told you. I was scared,” Dean whispered into Castiel’s neck. “I'm sorry I made everything worse.”

“It's not all your doing,” Castiel replied. “I made choices. Every since I met you, I’ve made choices and they’ve greatly affected our lives.”

“You didn't choose to get corrupted in Hell. It was because of me.”

“You're wrong,” Castiel corrected. “When I was carrying you from Hell, you were so devastated…. I made the choice to embrace you, to shelter you as much as I could from the pain, even if it might hurt me. I chose to risk the harm.”

Dean turned his head to look up at Castiel in confusion. “Why?”

“You were the brightest soul I'd ever seen.” Castiel didn't look down at him. “You still are.”

He helped Dean into the elevator, then they leaned against the wall. Castiel embraced Dean as they ascended once more from Alastair's liar.
“Dean wasn't feeling well. He might've been disoriented,” Sam theorized as he turned from Dylaniel and the empty lot, then started walking back into the building.

“We can't—” Dylaniel said, candidly looking around for a potential attack. “If Heaven is here—”

“If Heaven took Dean then we’re already f**ked, but if he's just in there—”

“If Heaven finds you, they'll kill you.”

“I left him alone.”

Dylaniel stared at Sam for a moment, weighing the risks and the personal need to act. Both of them had let Dean go off by himself against their better judgment. It had been a showing of trust and it wasn't clear to either of them if it had been worthwhile. Regardless of whether it'd been the right decision, Dylaniel was sympathetic to the need to rectify the situation. Arguably, it was more dangerous for Dylaniel to stay there than it was for Sam. Heaven wanted them both dead, but aside from Raphael’s comment dismissing a nephilim as a sufficient vessel for Michael, he could be a potential asset to Heaven. Dylaniel pursed his lips, not entirely pleased with another one of his decisions.

“You two—” Dylaniel picked out two fallen angels. “—keep him alive. And no one goes off alone.”

Sam appreciated that Dylaniel wasn't trying to talk him out of looking. They both knew that the situation might be dangerous. They still hadn't located Alastair and there was a new threat that Heaven might send an attack party at almost any time. But neither of them was prepared to just leave the search for Dean to someone else.

“If he did get lost, he wouldn't have changed floors.” Sam wasn’t sure what the best course of action was if Dean was missing for some other reason than a few missteps. If that was the case, they would have to regroup. “I'm going to start checking down the right hallway. You try down there.”

“Stay within earshot,” Dylaniel suggested as he led the other angels down another corridor.

Sam nodded, then began making his way back into the labyrinth. He had a much better sense of direction than Dean and started systematically checking the area while trying to stay within range of Dylaniel's hearing. Despite voicing the suggestion that Dean had just taken a wrong turn, Sam was reluctant to call out to Dean for fear of losing the element of surprise. That realization made him grip his angel blade a bit tighter.

He heard a faint noise around the corner. Sam gestured for one of the angels escorting him to go in first. He turned the corner after her, ready to attack, then saw his angelic escort standing over a man on the ground in front of him. For a second he worried that it was Dean, but noticed the ashen wings on the floor around the body. It was another one of the fallen angels that had been helping purge the desecration.

“Dyl!” he yell as he turned around, but before he could do anything else two fingers touched his forehead and everything went black.

Sam woke up on a cold concrete floor, staring up at some monotonous light grey ceiling lit with spartan fluorescent strips. He lay there for a few seconds, too dizzy to move, trying to regain some sense of direction. When he tried to sit up, he noticed that he was handcuffed and wearing cheap, blue scrubs. All of his belongings were missing, even his underwear, silver ring, and necklace.
He was in a barred cell that had been constructed within a windowless room. Aside from the bars, the room felt like a laboratory, clean and clinical. It even smelled like solvents. In front of him there was the cell gate with a locking mechanism. He crawled over to it, pulled himself up, then placed his hands over the lock. He tried to melt it with the First Light, but nothing happened. After trying to bust the lock with telekinesis he looked closer at the handcuffs. There were strange symbols engraved into the handcuffs. They were warded.

He turned around for the first time to get a better look at the situation. There was someone else in the cell next to him. Actually it was the same cell, but some sort of temporary clear plexiglass barrier separated them. With some effort he dragged himself closer to the smaller form in matching handcuffs and blue scrubs. As soon as he saw the woman’s blonde hair, he knew it was Lilith.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to put in the rape/non-con trigger warning because I wanted the Alastair scenes to be very uncomfortable, which called for a certain degree of disregarding Dean's autonomy. I honestly haven't decided in my head if there was any/to what extent there was sexual assault in Dean’s torture, but this is not meant to be sexual in any way. It's all about domination.
A Different Sort of Strength

Castiel was helping Dean through the abandoned building, out to an area that wasn't consecrated when they saw Dylaniel rush up to them. Despite being exhausted from the entire encounter with Alastair, Dean could recognize the subtle concern in Dylaniel face.

“Have you seen Sam?” Dylaniel didn't stop to ask how Dean was or why he was with someone who’d just spent the better part of a week avoiding him.

“No. He's not with you?”

“We were going to leave, but we couldn't find you. We split up into two groups to look for you.”

“Alastair's dead, so the risk is—” Dean stood up straighter with growing alarm. “Wait, why were you leaving?”

“Lilith was attacked by angels. They might be monitoring her lieutenants,” Dylaniel answered.

“Shit!” Dean moved to go toward the entrance of the building, back where Sam had undoubtedly started searching for him, but Castiel grabbed his arm. “Cas, let go—”

The three of them were back in the library of the bunker. Bobby and Jody both got up from their computers at the new arrivals. Dean looked between Dylaniel and Castiel, unsure of which one had transported them back, but he figured it out in an instant. Dylaniel's eyes narrowed at Castiel, also having suffered the indignity of being forcibly removed from the field. Dean turned to Castiel, who stood with conviction, bracing himself for resistance.

“Take me back!” Dean demanded.

“You're both targets of Heaven. They can't be allowed to find you,” Castiel warned both Dylaniel and Dean. “My siblings and I will look him. Have Kay send who she can. But you two stay here or you risk all our lives.”

Castiel disappeared.

“I'll call Kay,” Dylaniel said as he pulled out his cell and started dialing her number.

“Dean, what's going on?” Bobby asked.

Dean couldn't even think straight. His brain had barely recovered from the low of being tortured and double-edged high of confronting his abuser. Now he was faced with the sudden disappearance of Sam and the host of fears associated with that. All the emotions and information flooded him, cluttering his thoughts at the worst possible time. He gestured at Dylaniel, who was starting to recount the series of events to Kay.

He tried to focus on the most important task, but he had no idea how they were supposed to find Sam, who was missing in the middle of a desecrated site, that was probably about to become a battlefield. And of course Sam was also decked out with magical anti-scrying tattoos. He and Bobby had pulled out all the stops trying to find Sam before, but nothing had ever—

Dean ran through the halls until he found Ruby. She was in her workshop doing some sort of calculations while Kaylee lay on her lap. She turned from her work and stared at the bizarre sight of him wearing only Castiel's trench coat, though that was clearly not a concern of his.
“What happened to y—” Ruby started to ask, but Dean cut her off.

“How did you find Sam?”

Her brow furrowed and her eyes reflexively looked back at Dean's lack of pants and shoes.

He tried again. “When you were tracking him to Samhain, how’d you find him?”

“I tracked the ring he wears.” Ruby’s confused expression started to fade into concern. “Why?”

“Do it again. We need to find him.”

“What do you mean find him?” Ruby’s voice rose with alarm and probably some anger. “What happened?!”

“We don't know. He's missing.”

Ruby handed Kaylee off to Dean, then started scrambling around her desk grabbing materials. He anxiously watched her mix reagents for awhile, until there was a tugging sensation that distracted him. Kaylee had woken up and grabbed onto the collar of Castiel's trench coat. The sight of his niece while Sam's status was unknown made his stomach drop. He looked back to Ruby, who was leaning against her desk, shoulders slumped and head down. She wasn't a flurry of activity and it scared the hell out of him.

“He's gone.” Her voice was ominously quiet.

“Can you do a wider search for him?” Dean pressed, taking a step forward.

“I can't find him.” Ruby pursed her lips.

“Ruby, can you—”

“I can't fucking find him! It's not working!” She gestured at the map in front of her. “He's either hidden or not on Earth. I don't know how to find him.”

“But—”

“I don't fucking know!”

Ruby grabbed the porcelain bowl containing the locator spell and threw it across the room, breaking it against the concrete wall. She gripped the edge of the desk, then crouched down, and covered her face with the hand that wasn't being used to stabilize herself. Dean reached out to touch her, but reconsidered it. Instead he rocked Kaylee, who had started crying at the crash of the bowl shattering.

“Give her to me,” Ruby said after a few seconds. Her tone was barely contained devastation and her body was visibly tense. She stood up and reached out for Kaylee, but Dean hesitated while she was so upset.

“Just like take a breath,” he suggested, unsure whether a person who didn't need to breathe found that sort of thing calming.

“Give her to me or I'll—” Ruby caught herself just short of threatening his life.

She paced the room while taking a few deep breaths, then turned back to him and extended her arms. He handed her the crying infant. She held her daughter close, rocking her for several
seconds. They stared at each other, then Ruby walked around him and out the door.

Dean walked over to her desk to look at the map she'd been casting with. He couldn't tell what was supposed to have happened, but he did recognize something. Lying on top of the map was a silver ring, the same silver ring Kay's mom had worn, the matching ring to the one Sam wore. Ruby must've had it on her... she'd probably been wearing it.

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Sam was sitting on the floor of his cell trying to get a grasp on the situation. He'd been taken, presumably by angels, from the factory while looking for Dean. Beyond that he didn't have any more information beyond the contents of the room he was in. There were two male guards on either side of the door, watching him with relative disinterest. Lilith was still unconscious, so Sam tried to reason with the guards.

"Please let me out." He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, so he jumped straight to the point, though he at least tried to be polite about it. "I don't know what they've told you—"

"We aren't letting you go, so stop," the black haired guard said, interrupting him.

The blonde guard watched the other give instruction with an eager attentiveness that made Sam wonder if he was a subordinate.

"Please, you don't understand—" Sam tried again, but he was cut off once more.

"Stop or I'll remove your vocal chords."

Sam closed his mouth and stared at them for several seconds debating whether he'd risk testing their commitment to the threat. He couldn't be sure of their plan for him, but he suspected that the only word Heaven needed him to be capable of saying was yes. Anyway, whatever damage the guards inflicted on him could almost certainly be healed by a superior. As much as he wanted to resist their instructions, without any back up it'd be vital to do whatever he could to keep himself in one piece, physically and mentally.

He nodded to the guards in acknowledgement of their command, then leaned against the bars and stared at them. It wasn't clear what was to be gained by watching them, but he had nothing better to do. The angels stood at mild attention, unmoving by the door. The black haired one on the right was next to a table that held two clear plastic tubs containing personal effects. He recognized his clothes, which meant the other probably contained Lilith's belongings.

Sam looked down at the warded handcuffs and tried to remember anything he could about them or how they might work. Kay had told him about them, about her dad wearing them. His heart started pounding a bit faster as he recalled her account. Her uncle Dean had gotten into a jam of some sort; he hadn't asked Kay for details. Her dad and Cas had gone after her uncle, but things went wrong and somehow her dad had ended up wearing... Sam rubbed his face.

He couldn't tell if it was fate or chance or if he was reading too much into the situation, but the thought that maybe there was some similarity between his circumstances and the events leading up to Lucifer's release, it made him feel sick. Sam actually lay down on the floor of the completely bare cell, in some primal attempt to find stability. Despite the fact that his wrists were bound, he managed to drape an arm over his eyes, shutting out the confusion of the outside world for a few minutes.

Sam took a couple deep breaths. He tried to focus on the calm state that he'd learned to adopt when letting his visions roll off of him rather than overpowering him. The situation was alarming and
maybe there were common elements with the other timeline, but he refused to believe that they were all subjects of fate. If this was all predetermined, then there was no reason for him to keep fighting, and he knew, above all else, that he had to keep fighting to protect his family. Just as he started getting himself under control, he heard a strange whispering sound that made him uncover his face.

“Sam?”

He looked around trying to find the source of the whisper. It was very faint, but it felt incredibly close. After a moment he realized the voice had been inside his head.

“Sam, can you hear me?”

“Cas, is that you?” he whispered, unsure how else to send a message from just his background thoughts. The guards exchanged a glance and watched him closely, but the black haired guard shook his head, rejecting some shared concern.

With the guards no longer an immediate threat, Sam refocused his attention to trying to discern the voice. There was only silence. He wasn't sure what to do, if there was anything he could do. Never in his life could he remember trying to communicate on that sort of level. In a strange way it was almost like trying to use his powers, exercising his willpower like that. Granted he wasn't even convinced that the voice was real.

“No,” the voice replied.

He couldn't tell if the voice was struggling to communicate or if the silence had been hesitation. The latter possibility made Sam feel even worse.

“Who are you?” he asked.

After another long pause it answered, “I'm a friend.” The voice echoed and seemed far away. “I want to keep you safe.”

“Who are you?” he pressed, but the voice didn't answer.

Sam rubbed his temples. He couldn't tell if the voice was someone legitimately trying to communicate with him or something else. It had sounded familiar, almost like his own voice.

The gang gathered in the library to discuss their very limited understanding of the situation. Castiel was standing quietly to the side conversing telepathically with his fallen siblings. Dylaniel was hovering over Bobby and Jody’s shoulders, feeding them the details of the last few hours in an attempt to see if there were any leads that could be found in the breaking news. Kay was pacing the room on her cell phone, giving directions to some underling. Ruby took a moment in the hall to collect herself before entering.

“I tried tracking his ring,” she started explaining, drawing everyone's attention. “It's either in an area that's warded against scrying or it's—he’s not on Earth.”

“Wait, if Sam's not on Earth….?” Bobby broached the subject cautiously. “What does that mean exactly?”

“He could be in Heaven,” Castiel replied unenthusiastically as Dean entered wearing some new clothes.
“While alive or….”

No one said anything for a long time.

“He could be dead.” Dyaniel acknowledged the previously unspoken scenario. “Though I don’t understand why his body was taken if that is the case, aside from instilling confusion or as a distraction.”

“He’s not dead.” Dean made the baseless claim.

“We don’t know that for sure.” Kay was almost interrupted by Dean & Ruby both getting ready to argue, but she continued, “I’m not saying we don’t look for him, but we have to be careful not to start jumping to conclusions.”

“How do we find out if he’s alive?” Ruby asked. “That’s gotta be our first step.”

“The same way as last time,” Dean answered while looking to Bobby.

“You’re gonna talk to Tessa again?” the older hunter guessed.

“Unless anyone else has any contacts.”

Dean and Bobby set up the summoning ritual while Castiel and Kay discussed the ability of the fallen angels to help in the search. Ruby oversaw the summoning process, occasionally making suggestions, but she didn't do the work herself. Instead she held Kaylee in the same anxious manner that Sam tended toward. Dyaniel moved to stand beside Ruby, watched the work for a few seconds, then looked to her.

“I should have stayed with him,” Dyaniel said as something akin to an apology.

“He’s a grown man, who’s more than capable of taking care of himself,” Ruby countered. “This isn’t your fault.”

“He’s resourceful.” Dyaniel nodded to himself. “If he’s alive, I expect that he’ll find a way to improve his situation.”

“Uh, thanks.” Ruby looked down at Kaylee, then at the summoning ritual. “I know we’re in a hurry, but maybe we should summon her outside the bunker.”

“Reapers are as apolitical as they come,” Bobby replied.

Dean struck a match and tossed it into the copper bowl. When the smoke from the flash of flame cleared, Tessa stood in the chalk summoning circle. She wore a delicate black dress that one might wear to a funeral. Her face was ever so slightly fatigued, but she brightened visibly when she saw Dean.

“Hello again, Dean,” Tessa greeted him, glanced at the others, but returned her attention to him. “I thought you might be calling on me.”

Dean felt a bit lightheaded at the thought that there was some reason she’d expected him to contact her. “Sam, is he….”

“As of a few minutes ago, he was still alive and his reaper hasn’t been notified of any interplanar transfer,” Tessa assured him. “He’s on Earth somewhere.”

“Any ideas how we find him?”
“We don't keep track of our charges until their end is set.” Tessa smiled at Dean. “Even then it seems as though mistakes are possible.”

“We're desperate for any information.” He knew that reapers tended to be very closed-lipped creatures, but she liked him, so he gave her a broad invitation to give him whatever she could.

“Fate or destiny, it moves in front of us and it can be hard to see what's coming. Reapers, we do our duty wherever it lands, but that doesn't mean we don't occasionally try to peek at what's ahead.” Tessa pursed her lips, debating something.

“Please tell us.”

“We’re preparing for the possibility of massive fatalities coming as early as tomorrow.”

“Something's gonna happen?”

“Something might happen,” Tessa corrected.

Bobby pushed for clarification. “When you say massive...”

“Thousands?” Dean asked, but Tessa didn't answer. “Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Millions?”

“A lot can change in 18 hours.” Tessa let the sentence hang in the air for a beat. She was giving them more intel than she was probably allowed to divulge, a timetable—leading to what they didn't know.

“Please, Tessa. I'm begging you.” Dean stepped forward and touched her arm. “Give me a place or event, something else.”

“You of all people should know, sometimes even reapers don't collect what's sown.” Tessa touched his cheek softly. “For what it's worth, I'm rooting for you.”

She was gone.

“We have 18 hours before something goes seriously wrong and Sam just went missing,” Jody summed up. “That can't be a coincidence, right?”

Bobby started rattling off the bleak possibilities. “So is Sam a hostage or a source of intel—”

“Also a distinct possibility” Dylaniel tilted his head in an unenthusiastic shrug. “—is he a weapon?”

“Sam’s powerful, but he isn't like kill thousands of people powerful.” Dean rejected the idea. “Not without Lucif—”

“Heaven went after Lilith.” Ruby reminded everyone.

Dean covered his face. “Jesus fuck.”

There was a painful silence at the bleak implications. Lucifer being the cause of the mass casualties was by far the worst case scenario and they all knew it. It also wasn't particularly outside of the realm of possibility. If Sam really had been taken by Heaven and if Heaven had Lilith as it appeared they might, then it was likely just a matter of time before seal sixty-six would be broken. The idea of Sam ending up as Lucifer’s vessel raised some unpleasant questions, but until they had more information, they couldn't do anything to change things.
“We don’t know that all those people are gonna die. And even if something does go down, we don’t know it’s Lucifer.” Kay tried once more to stop the group from making too many assumptions.

“We don’t know that it’s related to Sam,” Dean agreed. “Sam would never say yes to Lucifer. He knows it won’t fly. That’s the last thing that’s gonna happen.”

“Can Lilith be a vessel for Lucifer?” Jody asked. “If she—if she’s still standing after… could she say yes to Lucifer?”

Everyone noticed her trying to skirt the issue of Sam potentially being killed. None of them wanted to be talking in such stark terms, but when faced with the threat of so much death it was hard to ignore the tactical consequences, even with Sam missing. Until they knew more about what was going on they wouldn’t be able to find a way to help him, so they looked to the broader picture.

“Lilith won’t do. If it isn’t Sam, it’d have to be me,” Kay replied.

“So the mass death thing isn’t Lucifer,” Dean speculated. “You’re not gonna say yes. He’s not gonna say yes. That threat’s something else.”

“Lucifer could easily cause that degree of damage, but Sam is one of the very few people, who are that dangerous in their own right,” Dylaniel cautioned. “We shouldn’t assume that the threat is independent of Sam. My uncle killed millions.”

“When Lucifer—” Dean started to excuse his brother’s double.

“No, he also did it before Lucifer was freed,” Dylaniel corrected.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“It wasn’t his fault. He was upset,” Kay said, trying to defend her father’s memory. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, clearly uncomfortable with the turn in the discussion.

“He killed millions of people on accident?” Jody asked what nearly everyone else was thinking. “What makes Sam so upset that he kills millions of people?”

Kay sighed, then answered, “My sister was murdered.”

Nearly everyone cringed to some degree, though Dylaniel turned even more unreadable than usual. The whole horrible situation had just been cast in a new light. Kay’s dad had been capable of killing an entire city worth of people in a grief-fueled rage. None of them had ever seen Sam act out like that, but that didn’t mean that it couldn’t happen. For all they knew Sam was being tortured by either Heaven or Lilith’s forces. There wasn’t any way of knowing what state he’d be in when they found him, if they found him. Based on Tessa’s timetable and the theory that Sam was somehow related to the disaster, then he would only face at most 18 hours before something gives… and no one was prepared to say that Heaven or Abaddon wasn’t capable of doing extensive work in 18 hours.

“You’re saying that not only do we have to be worried about Lucifer,” Jody mused aloud. “But Sam by himself could—”

“We aren’t gonna start treating Sam like he’s a threat,” Ruby said firmly. “If grief’s the thing that makes him break, then fine—we don’t want that to begin with. We take reasonable precautions, but we don’t do that by tiptoeing when he needs us fighting. He’s an adult. He’s been through a ton of shit, and he’s still a lot more stable than the rest of us.”
“His powers are stronger than they were before,” Bobby warned.

“Than when that angel tried to kill me and Kaylee? Or when Samhain was torturing me?” Ruby pursed her lips and shook her head. “He's stronger than before, but I’m not talking about his powers.”

“Lilith’s army should be ready any time now. Maybe Lucifer and Sam aren't even in the equation?” Kay offered another possibility, though she didn't appear very convinced. “I hadn't really thought of her using the army as an army, like for causing mass casualties, but it's a force we can't just forget about.”

“No, you can't forget about them,” Ruby corrected. “You've actually got an army. Meanwhile the rest of us can't fight 400,000 demons. We focus on Sam.”

“We're gonna do everything we can to—” Kay was interrupted by Dylaniel's cell phone ringing. Everyone watched him answer the call, hoping for news.

“I understand. We'll contact you momentarily,” he replied to the caller, then hung up. “Six angels were found at the site, including two who hadn’t fallen.”

“How many seals—” Dean started to ask the big question, but Jody was way ahead of him.

“Sixty-one.”

Kay pulled out her cell phone, dialed a number, then held it to her ear. “Put Shola on too,” she instructed. “We’ve got confirmation that Sam is still on Earth. He's probably being held by angels, so the hunts really on for anything with a halo. Get his picture to every asset we have and pull strings to get our contacts in law enforcement searching for him. Anything we can do to get eyes and ears on the ground. Bribe and kill for intel. We’ve only got hours.”

After a little while Lilith stirred. She slowly got to her hands and knees. Sam watched her look to the guards, completely unaware that he was seated just out of her view. Her body coiled with tension, eager to spring on the angels, but without an opportunity. It seemed she had a preoccupation with their captors. He wonder how many headaches they had caused each other over the last hours or days.

“Don't misbehave or you won't wake up next time,” the dark-haired guard warned her.

“You can threaten all you want, but you're the one that's going to die with my hands wrist deep—” Lilith turned her head to confirm what she'd spotted out of the corner of her eye. When she saw Sam her lips curled into a broad smile, then she started cackling. She clutched her ribs she was laughing so hard. “I take it all back. This is perfect.”

The guards leaned back ready to resume ignoring their prisoners, now that Lilith had a new target. Sam didn't care about the previous threat. He had to try reasoning with the guards again.

“She wants this to happen. Doesn't that tell you anything?” Sam gestured at Lilith, who was wiping a tear from her eye. “Don't you get that you won't be able to make him play your game?”

The guard pointed at Sam, then gestured for him to turn his attention anywhere else.

“You really think angels will listen to you?” Lilith sounded positively delighted by his desperation.
Sam turned to her, hoping that someone would listen to him. “Please, Lilith. Lucifer's not going to save Hell. He'll destroy everything—”

“He is our true king and if you think that I'm going to betray the faith because I'm told some tale—by you of all people.” Lilith barred her teeth at him in disgust and anger. “You don't even deserve to know of him. How you ended up gifted with his power, I have no idea.”

“You want to know how I got these powers?” Sam tried appealing to any sense of providence he could. He needed to get somebody on his side. “Azazel found vessels strong enough to bear Lucifer and then he had us fight to survive. If you want to complain about me being Lucifer's second or whatever, then take it up with Azazel or Lucifer.”

“You betrayed your place. You were given his power so that you could lead his army and you spat in our face.” Lilith glared at him. “I used to think that it was an offense to his will, but this here—how I hate you—now I understand. You betrayed him so that I wouldn't hesitate to kill you. In fact I'm going to relish it.”

His hope of talking her out of fighting him dwindled. He wasn't sure who to try to reason with at that point. For now the only person that would talk to him was zealously committed to murdering him, and the other two didn't seem personally inclined to stop that sort of thing. The only thing keeping him from just being disposed of was probably orders from on high and that didn't make him feel any better about the situation. He turned away from Lilith, trying his best to ignore her in such close quarters.

After a minute or so Lilith said, “I heard quite the rumor about you. That you knocked up some demon.”

Sam tried to not respond to her baiting, but his eyes helplessly flicked to her. The corner of her lip curled up, amused by his discomfort.

“Here and I thought dying was the only thing you're good for,” she purred.

“Go to hell,” Sam muttered.

“All in good time.” Lilith looked around the room with a leisurely glance. “It's funny; we're in a race of sorts. Your people against mine against the clock. If your people come first they'll kill me. If my people come first...well, I'm sure we could put you to some use before I kill you. And if seal sixty-five breaks before either side gets to us...I guess we'll just have to see who ends up on top.”

Sam knew that he was a vessel for Lucifer, but he wasn't sure if Lilith could be. He suspected not. For a moment he humored the idea of letting Lilith kill him if they really did have to fight to the death, but then he remembered that Kay and his daughter were still vessels. His death would only delay the conflict, not resolve it. Maybe that would be valuable at some point, but right now there was still time. There was still hope that maybe there was some way out. He didn't feel particularly optimistic, but he'd promised Kay that he'd try to hold onto hope.

“I heard them talking. I didn't understand it until you arrived, but they're gonna have us fight. They'll toss in a single angel blade and let fate choose which of us survives. That's how they're going to determine my master’s favored.” Lilith’s voice was playful in its anticipation. Clearly she felt she'd win the fight. Personally he couldn't blame her. Even if he got the blade, he wasn't sure how to stop her from eventually killing him short of him killing her. “You know, if you're real nice to me and I get the blade, I could make it quick.”
As far as he could see, all he could do was stall. “I'd almost prefer you take your time.”

“You think your people are actually going to save you? You think that they’ll magically swoop in because you're special and everything just comes your way. You think that you're so righteous. That they'll come for you, because they love you.” Lilith’s voice squeezed the mention of love in some sort of vocal attempt to strangle it. She paced next to the clear barrier between them like a predator stalking its prey. “Because that's what's right, isn't it? Love conquers all or whatever trite shit—but you know that it doesn't. Not when you're alone and helpless. Love’s your weakness now. It hurts more knowing you’ll never see them again. You can't do a thing to stop this and your pathetic helplessness will lead to their deaths.”

Sam moved to one of the far corners and fully turned away from her, trying to push her voice out of his head. He had no idea how he was supposed to get out of there. Fear of Lucifer’s escape mixed with the thought that he might not see his family again and Lilith’s incessant heckling. His hands gripped his hair, then dropped down in front of him. In his moment of desperation he lifted his hands and prayed. He didn't ask God for help. He didn't believe that he could be so fortunate. Instead he prayed to anyone who would listen.

“Cas, tell me there's a way of searching for angels,” Ruby implored.

“It depends on the protections that have been established. It's reasonable to assume that wherever —” Castiel stopped talking and stared straight ahead for several seconds.

“What's wrong?” Dean asked, stepping forward to make sure Castiel was alright.

“It's Sam, he's praying,” Castiel said quietly, only half paying attention to them. Everyone aside from Dylaniel looked up at the news.

“What?!” You can talk to him?” Ruby pressed.

“That's not how prayer works. I can't communicate with him, but I can hear him.”

“Is he trying to give us a message?”

“No, it's a generalized prayer. He's requesting help from any angels that will listen.” Castiel’s brow furrowed. “It's unusual; his prayer has been picked up and is being rebroadcast on three frequencies.”

“Seven,” Dylaniel amended, then he tilted his head at something the others couldn't perceive. “All twelve of the major public angelic frequencies. They keep cutting out one at a time, but the broadcasts are being restored within a few seconds.”

“Heaven’s trying to cut the mic?” Kay speculated.

“‘Trying’ being the operative word.”

“What's he saying?” Ruby moved to stand in front of Castiel and watched his face for any sort of insight she could glean.

“Heaven did take him. He doesn't know where he is. There's a prison cell.” Castiel scowled subtly. “Lilith is also being held prisoner there.”

Dean turned to lean his forehead against a bookcase and covered his face with his hands in exasperation. Ruby rocked Kaylee anxiously, but didn't take her eyes off Castiel. It wasn't wholly
unexpected news, but having the threat verified was a blow all the same. The sixty-sixth seal breaking was a very real possibility and the added danger was, if it did break, whether Sam would survive it.

“He says they're going to make them fight each other to the death, once the seals are primed,” Castiel confirmed their fears.

“We’ve gotta find him,” Ruby said. “How do we find him?”

“I don't know. He isn't providing any useful information on that,” Castiel explained.

“There has to be a way to find him. We’re just not seeing it.”

“He doesn't know where he is.” Dylianiel corroborated Castiel's inability to provide more helpful information.

“Well, what's he saying?”

“Please, I'm begging you. I'm not perfect, but I'm not evil or your enemy.” Castiel relayed the prayer for the others. “I just want to live with my family in peace. I fell in love with an incredible woman—my best friend. She might be a demon, but she's done more good in the world than any human I know. I have two kids that are counting on me. My two-week-old daughter, who Heaven’s deemed an abomination, and a six-year-old boy, who was just orphaned by Heaven. I wish Heaven didn't hate my family. I wish it for so many reasons.

“I used to pray everyday. I used to trust in God, despite everything. I had faith in you when I didn't have faith in myself. I used to think that there was some objective good, that it was pure and un tarnished, beyond the flaws of normal people. But I was wrong. Good is within the reach of all of us—human, demon, angel. It's in the everyday acts of compassion and love. It's in the courage to do what is right even if you're scared.

“I know you're scared. I'm scared too. We're on the brink of war and it feels like everything is spinning out of control. We're just individual people caught in this huge thing, and if you're like me you feel helpless. But you aren't. A single person can change everything with a single act of courage. I'm asking you to be brave.

“I'm begging you, any angel out there, please don't let this happen. Please don't turn your back on love. Please don't give in to fear. Please don't let me die knowing that when faced with the end of the world, the good never stood a chance. Don't let me die knowing that everyone I love will suffer, trapped in a losing battle. I'm begging you, not for my life, but for my fam—” Castiel stopped talking and looked around the room. “It cut out on all frequencies.”

Ruby didn't say anything. She chewed her lower lip, turned and walked out of the room. Everyone exchanged looks, wordlessly seeing who would talk to her, but the shock of Sam's message was still leaving them all dazed.

“I can—” Kay had barely volunteered before her cell phone rang and she had to take a call from Hell.

“I'll call Adriel back and see what their team is doing with this news,” Dylianiel informed the others as he stepped out of the library to make a call.

Dean's knees felt weak, so he slowly slid down the bookcase next to Castiel until he was sitting on the floor. He watched as Jody spoke quietly with Bobby, probably in an attempt to check on the old hunter and console him if needed. Personally, Dean suspected that he was going through some
minor shock himself. It all had a surreal and larger-than-life feeling. The stakes were so high. It reminded him of 2039.

His mind felt thick with static with emotions being stirred up by hearing his brother’s plea. He couldn’t do anything to help his brother. He felt like he couldn’t even grasp the situation now that it’d hit him—it’d hit them all so hard.

Dean felt lost and he tried to find something easier to wrap his mind around. Some simple thoughts to help clear the fog. His birthday was January 24th. His favorite band was Led Zeppelin. He moved on to some more complicated thoughts. He was a brother and an uncle. He’d been facing a lot of personal conflicts lately, but his family was being supportive. He was learning—

“I did not expect to see her this upset,” Castiel said about Ruby, drawing Dean out of his own thoughts. “Why do people allow themselves to love each other like that?”

“I think….” Dean considered the question. “It’s not something you choose to do. It just happens.”

“Do I make you uncomfortable?”

His emotions flared again, but he tried to keep himself focused. His instinct was to panic, to hide, to move further away from the angel and his strangely invasive questions—but he knew that that fear had been crippling him over the last days, weeks, months, maybe years. If he was going to stand a chance at saving Sam, he couldn’t let himself get shaken so easily. He needed to get a little more courage and stability before he could rise to the occasion, figuratively and literally. His legs were still trembling.

Part of him didn’t mind discussing things between him and Castiel. He had been dwelling on just this sort of conversation for days, but at the moment everything was very raw. Though he supposed maybe the emotional nature of the moment could’ve been an additional lesson to Castiel in love, fear, courage, or any number of things.

“I don’t know,” Dean replied.

“You make me uncomfortable,” Castiel commented after a moment.

Dean looked up at Castiel, studying him for a second. “You didn’t get exposed to that love virus over at Anael’s, did you?”

“No,” Castiel assured him. “I’ve just been contemplating our friendship and seeing this… it poses questions.”

“Can you do me a favor?” Dean asked. “If you think you’re falling in love with me, tell me.”

“I will,” Castiel answered without looking down at Dean. “If you develop a romantic or physical attraction to me, tell me.”

“Or you’ll throw me into a wall again?”

“I might,” Castiel conceded.

After a few seconds of silence Dean admitted, “You look good.”

Castiel’s brow furrowed. “Are you propositioning me?”

“No, I just don’t want you beating me up for withholding information.” Dean massaged his legs a
bit, testing to see their strength, then added, “Okay, maybe you make me uncomfortable too.”

Dean felt a small weight lifted. Compared to everything else it was negligible, but the realization that even a tiny measure of progress was progress. His legs were steady and his heart, while pained, was beating calmer. He took a deep breath, then stood up. He knew what he had to do first, even if the thought of it intimidated him. He patted Castiel's arm as a parting gesture, then started to leave the library.

“What are you going to work on?” Castiel asked him.

“What Sam would want me to.”

Ruby sat at the desk in Sam's room holding Kaylee. The nearly-two-week-old reached up at her. She could see Sam's nose and smile in their daughter's face. The resemblance made the many competing emotions burn in her, but pain, pity, and fear rose far above the rest. She let Kaylee grab one of her fingers, then pulled the tiny hand up and kissed it.

“It's gonna be okay. We’ll find your dad,” Ruby whispered to Kaylee. “He’s tough and smart. He’ll find a way to….”

She couldn't finish. She didn't know what to say because she couldn't imagine how things could be resolved in any way she'd want. They didn't know where to find him and his presumably one chance at communicating hadn't contained the kind of information that could help them. And in all probability they had less than a day to save him.

Ruby picked up the soft, little toy that Tom had created for Kaylee and handed it to her. Kaylee clutched the doll, then started nodding off. Ruby stared at the toy. Tom would be expecting at least a call from Sam before bedtime. They'd made that a small custom over the last few days apart, something that she suspected helped both Tom and Sam sleep a bit easier. She didn't know how to tell the boy that he was missing.

She wasn't prepared to be alone again. That's what it felt like, imagining living without Sam. He was her best friend, her lover, and the bright spot in many lifetimes worth of pain. He was the father of her child—the vulnerable bundle of wonder and responsibility that meant the world to him. Ruby held Kaylee a little closer.

“Ruby,” Dean said as he peeked in through the open door. “Can I come in?”

“What happened?” A dozen terrible scenarios started crossing her mind.

“Nothing new,” he assured her while walking in, then he leaned against the desk. “I just… I want to help. We all want to help.”

“If you want to help, then—” She almost told him to find Sam, but stopped herself. There was no doubt that he was also devastated by his brother's disappearance and was doing everything he could too. Even against Dean such a low blow seemed cruel. She shook her head. “I'm fine.”

“I'm not fine,” he confessed. “I don't know what to do and I'm completely terrified… and if I'm feeling like that, then I can't imagine what you're going through.”

She stared up at him. He was acknowledging that she must really care about Sam. As far as she could remember, it was the first time that Dean had treated her feelings, with relation to Sam, or almost anything, with respect. In some ways it made her uncomfortable, she didn't want that level of intimacy with someone right then, especially just after being confronted with loss—especially
with him…. But Sam had asked her not to hurt Dean if he tried to open up to her. The elder Winchester wasn't talking to her about Hell, but the sentiment of Sam's request held true.

“It's a Winchester family trait or something; when you guys are scared you try to help people,” Ruby speculated. “Sam used to do it all the time when we were hunting.”

“He's been like that since he was a kid.” Dean smiled sadly. “I'm not sure that's been my thing, but I'll take the comparison. It means I'm doing something right.”

Kaylee stretched and let out a tiny huff as she resettled. They both watched the infant for a long while, unsure how to interact with each other.

“She looks like Sam,” Dean observed quietly, then corrected, “I guess she actually looks like Kay.”

“She does look like Sam.” Ruby agreed with little more than a whisper.

“I'm sorry.”

She couldn't tell if he was apologizing for talking about Sam or maybe incidentally contributing to Sam being taken. As much as it'd be easier for her to blame him for Sam's disappearance, she didn't really. She knew just as well as anyone that things go wrong in the field all the time. Sam had been taken prisoner while with her. They each almost died countless times because that was just the nature of hunting and warfare.

“I hate this,” Ruby eventually sighed, unsure where to start with describing the feelings tearing her apart. “Did Sam tell you that he got shot?”

“Yeah, some hunters?”

She nodded. “I took him to the coven to get us some warding. I hadn't been to visit the coven in like twenty years. A lot of the time I was stuck downstairs or up on a work pass, but even when I was free… I'd stopped visiting as much. It seemed like every time I was there I knew fewer and fewer faces.” Her eyes didn't meet his. “My witches, I can feel them die. It makes you kinda wish you couldn't feel at all.”

“I've had a lot of people I care about die. I thought it'd get easier. Maybe if I didn't let them get close…. Sam was never like that. He's always been just putting his heart out there. I can't believe how many times I've seen him get burned for it, but he just…. He just cares.” Dean shook his head. “I wish I could be like that, not just when his ass is on the line, but in my whole life. I wish I could be that brave.”

She looked back up at Dean. “How crazy is it that it's actually worth this?”

“How crazy is it that what's actually worth what?”

“This pain. It's like I sold my soul again and I did it for him.”

“It's not exactly the same feeling—”

“Shut up.” Ruby stopped Dean from taking the metaphor too literally. “I mean, it's gotta be worth it though. Because I honestly don't regret the last two years and… I need to save him.”

“We'll find him.” Dean smiled with weak reassurance at her, then extended his arms. “Let me watch Kaylee for a bit. Go take a shower or whatever you need to do to recharge. You need to take
care of yourself.”

Ruby’s brow furrowed. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Being nice to me.”

Dean stared at her, completely floored to be experiencing almost the reverse of the conversation that he’d had with the other Ruby in 2039. The truth was that he’d grown to really appreciate the other Ruby. He’d seen the friendship that she’d shared with Dee and he wanted that. He wanted to be friends with his family and Ruby was his family. He chuckled a little at the thought.

“I asked the other you that same question.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “In the other timeline, the two of us were friends, like close friends. I saw them together, joking around and helping each other. I guess for a second there I forgot that we aren’t like them.”

“I don’t get how.” Ruby stared at him skeptically. “I mean, I don’t play nice with most people and you’re an asshole.”

“Well, when you put it like that—no, I’m kidding.” Dean rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable with the candidness of the conversation. “I don’t want to see you hurt. You’re my family and I guess we’ll see if we can be friends.”

“What happened to you?”

“I realized I don’t need to fight you for Sam,” Dean confessed.

She nearly smiled at the epiphany, but settled for nodding in appreciation. “I think it’s gonna take all of us to fight for Sam.”

Sam woke up on the floor of his cell. The back of his head hurt, but he suspected that it hadn’t been from a strike. As far as he could remember he’d just been touched by the guard, though it was possible that his head had hit the ground after he was unconscious. He cautiously touched his scalp to see if there was any sign of injury.

“Don’t worry. The damage is only on the inside wall of your skull. Your brain is fine. We just thought it’d be better if you couldn’t make any more outgoing calls.” Sam turned to see the angel from his vision, the one that had kill a subordinate. The angel was leaning against the wall near the door. “Hi, Sam. I’m Zachariah. Can I call you Sam?”

“No.”

“Fair enough.” Zachariah shrugged, then started looking through the tub of Sam’s belongings. He picked up an angel blade and examined it. “You weren’t carrying Lucifer’s blade. I’m a little surprised. You know a lot of very smart people would do a lot of very dangerous things for a weapon like that.”

Zachariah glanced past him. Sam turned to see Lilith listening to the conversation, clearly riveted by the mention of Lucifer. She was the archdemon of the caste that existed to worship Lucifer. He supposed it made sense that she would be enticed by anything to do with the archangel. Lucifer’s blade had been held and wielded by her god. To her it was surely a holy relic. Meanwhile Sam didn’t want to be in the same room as it.
“I don’t use it.” Sam rejected the idea, adding, “It’s not mine.”

“You’re a sharp one. I like that.” Zachariah put the blade down on the table before blinking into the cell with Sam. “You seem like a reasonable guy, which is great because I can’t stand all the run around that comes with idiots. So I’m going to cut to the point, you have some information that we’d like— Now before you get excited: we don't need it. You aren't about to hold anything over our heads on this. I'm just saying that maybe a little cooperation would be in your interest.”

“No.”

“You haven't even heard my offers. That's not very reasonable.” Zachariah’s tone made it clear that the evaluation was a threat.

“I don't have anything to say to you.”

“You might be surprised about that. Where's your brother?” When Sam didn't say anything Zachariah knelt down to be at eye level with him, then smiled warmly in an attempt at being disarming. “We don't want to hurt Dean. He's the one we want to survive.”

“Yeah, Raphael used a lot of restraint.”

“The way I hear it Dean probably only had a concussion—oh.” Zachariah’s eyes widened and he leaned back a bit at a thought. “You mean the half-breed? Did you liked him? Was he a friend of yours?”

Sam stopped himself from responding. Based on the fact that Zachariah was using the past tense, Heaven probably thought Dylaniel had died. If they had located and presumably killed or captured Dylaniel, it seemed the sort of thing they'd hold over his head. The thought gave him a little comfort. He might be trapped in a cage, but he wasn't about to mess up whatever advantage the others had over Heaven.

“Sorry about him, but he was never in the cards,” Zachariah continued. “We can't have Michael walking around in a vessel like that. The way it'd look…. The half-breed was expendable, but Dean isn't. He's a perfect vessel—”

“He’ll never say yes to Michael.”

“He's a perfect vessel for Michael,” Zachariah restarted his statement with a much harsher tone. “And the sooner he realizes that the better it'll be for him. If you help us find him we can make sure he's safe.”

Sam thought about the fact that Dean was missing… or at least he had been missing. If Heaven was still looking for him, then at least that was one scenario off the very long list of fears.

“No.”

“Fine. You don't want to talk about Dean. We’ve heard about the new Queen of Hell. She's your daughter or something, right?” The angel spoke with a strange combination of indifference and loathing. He didn't seem to care about the answer as long as the setup hooked Sam. “Imagine the demon army she's mobilizing on the world to find you right now. All those demons, not in Hell, leaving their realm undefended. Angels, we can kill hundreds of them for one of ours. How long do you think it would take for us to seize their capital? Do you think she'd die fighting or could we bring her back up here in one piece? Most of us are rooting for you to be Lucifer's vessel. I could just toss her unconscious body to Lilith. How about that?”
He had no idea how viable the threat was. In a way it was worse than the thought of Heaven going after Dean. At least Dean was relatively well hidden. Kay had been spending a considerable amount of her time in Hell. If the angels really could hit Hell’s capital, she might be down there. He wasn’t sure what she was doing now that he was captured, but if it was anything—

“Stop. Keep your guard up. Don't let him in,” the voice in Sam's head whispered. “He's trying to read your mind.”

Sam looked up at Zachariah with new alarm. It hadn't occurred to him that he might be that vulnerable. Zachariah’s eyes narrowed knowingly.

“The prison walls must be crumbling around the edges,” Zachariah said, but Sam got the terrifying feeling that he was talking to someone else. “I see you in there watching me, brother.”

Sam’s brain hiccuped. “What...?”

“He may be helping you for now, but Lucifer isn't your ally,” Zachariah warned. “He'll use you. He'll kill Dean.”

Sam’s stomach dropped. His heart was pounding so hard that he felt a little lightheaded. Somehow he knew it was true with every fiber of his being. Some deep dark part of him recognized the voice as Lucifer. For some reason the archangel could communicate with him. It had to be a precursor to seal sixty-six. The walls really were crumbling.

“I'll protect your daughter,” he voice—Lucifer whispered.

“Leave me alone,” Sam said to both angels.

Zachariah continued his pitch. “I'm trying to give us all a win.”

“He wants us to die,” Lucifer countered.

“Leave me alone!” Sam yelled. He curled up and clutched his head, desperately trying to keep both angels out of it.

“I'm going to let you think for a little while. When I get back we'll try some less courteous techniques, so you might want to seriously think about how much you have to gain from cooperation.” Zachariah stood up, teleported out of the cell, started walking towards the door, paused, then picked up the angel blade from the table. “I'm guessing you'll be in too much pain to even consider your options after about ten minutes of what I have planned for you, so you might want to start thinking in advance.”

“I won't help you.”

“We'll see—oh, before I go, do you need a water or anything?” Zachariah offered with a hollow lightheartedness, but Sam stared at him silently. Zachariah turned to the guards. “I'll be back for our guest in a bit. In the meantime, make him comfy.”

Sam was alone, without the ability to communicate, surrounded by people that wanted to use him, and then destroy him. He didn't know how long he had before they'd start torturing him, but he couldn't imagine his circumstances improving at all after that. Yet he wasn't sure what he could do short of lying there.

He looked at his hands and questioned his ability to do much of anything with the handcuffs on.
For a moment he tried to force them off, but they wouldn't budge. So much of his fighting skills in the recent months had been based around his powers. Now he was just a man, trapped and unarmed. There wasn't even anything in his cell to use. As he studied the metallic cuffs, they caught his reflection and he looked at himself for several seconds.

“You saw me where I never was and where I could not be. And yet within that very place, my face you often see.”

His words drew the attention of the two guards, but when they saw he was just talking to himself they went back to ignoring him.

Sam thought of his conversation with Dylaniel about puzzles. He was in a puzzle. Trapped in a cell with nothing to help him escape. Even if he could somehow get his hands on a guard, it wasn’t like he could use his powers or even strangle one to death. Dylaniel had talked about improvising weapons as being its own sort of puzzle. But he had no idea how to solve a puzzle with no pieces.

He watched the guards, then looked at the ancient signs on the walls. One of the signs was badly faded, but he could see the distinctive black Xs inside boxes that often marked elevators on a building map and a large pink dot that had probably read ‘You are here’ several decades earlier. Significant sections of the map were too difficult to make out, but he’d take whatever he could get. He dragged his finger along the floor drawing different routes based on the map, trying to piece together what might be the missing sections and ingraining the floorplan in both his visual and kinesthetic memory.

After a bit he started to worry that someone would notice him eyeing the map, so he kept looking around the room with casual interest, trying to find anything else that might help him. There was a fire extinguisher mounted to the wall, but based on the thick layer of dust it probably wasn’t in working order—not that he’d know what to do with it. There was his pile of clothes. It was hard to imagine fighting anyone with a shirt or a shoe—

“Can I have my necklace?” Sam asked the guards, hoping that Zachariah’s instruction to treat him like a guest wasn't sarcastic.

“What?” the blonde angel asked in confusion.

“It has a piece of scripture on it. If I'm going to die, at least let me get ready.” He stole the page from Ruby's playbook.

The angel grabbed the chain and lifted it up to examine the pendant. He discussed it in Enochian with the other angel, who eventually nodded in agreement. After a quick second glance at the pendant, he tossed it into Sam's cell.

Sam looked down at the necklace that Kay had lent to him, the tribute to her brother Alex. Aside from where the horns stuck out slightly on the sides, it was an inverted teardrop, about two inches long and tapered to a fine point. He repositioned his legs to obscure his hands. He began whispering a fake prayer to cover the sound of him dragging the edge of the tapered section along the rough concrete floor. The end result might not be the largest or sharpest knife he’d ever used, but at least it would be made from an angel blade.
For over four hours they heard nothing and had no substantive leads. There were no further communications from Sam. Efforts to track the presence of angels on Earth proved to be underwhelming. To the extent that angels were able to be detected, they were largely scattered and unorganized, hardly the telltale signs of a presumably fortified prison. But rationally everyone knew that there wasn’t much hope of locating the angels that were holding him since the cloaking magics that Heaven was using was sufficient to hide Sam.

Through Hell’s contacts in the law enforcement community, Sam's picture had been released to the media as a person of interest. In order to get the most exposure he was linked to one of the recent massacres that was actually one of the seals Lilith’s people had broken. Everyone who knew Sam and what was going on found the entire thing distasteful, but no one was about to argue with the plan’s effectiveness. Within minutes tips had started coming in, but none of them had turned out to be him.

After the painfully long wait Castiel received word from Anael that a recently fallen angel had come to her claiming to know where Sam was. The news was generally welcome, but there was some hesitation.

“I’m gonna say it,” Dean muttered as he processed the scenario. “What're the odds that this is a trap?”

“A trap for what?” Ruby asked. “They've already got what they need to start the apocalypse.”

“But not to end it,” Dylaniel reminded her. “They only achieve their objective if Michael kills Lucifer and they still need a vessel for Michael. It's something they're likely working on even if it is arguably less urgent than freeing Lucifer.”

“How is ending this shitshow a lower priority?” Dean asked. “Last time it took all of five minutes for the world to literally catch fire after Lucifer got out. Heaven’s gonna lose half their angels the second he shows up. They should be flipping over rocks looking for us if they know what's good for them.”

“They don't know what's good for them,” Ruby replied while readjust Kaylee as she finished nursing. “That's pretty fucking obvious.”

“So this could be a trap,” Bobby acknowledged the point, then continued, “but it’s also our only lead and at a certain point we're gonna have to take a chance.”

“If it is a trap, maybe Dean and Dyl shouldn't—” Jody started to suggest they don’t go, but she was cut off by Dean.

“Asking Dyl and me to sit out a rescue mission….” He mused over his conflicted feelings. “I don't know how I can do that.”

“Let's at least talk to her and feel it out,” Ruby suggested.

“We're never going to know for certain that it isn't a trap until we attempt it.” Dylaniel pointed out the inability to prove a negative. “There's no way to have pure confidence in our mission.”

“Is that supposed to be encouraging or comforting?” Jody asked.
“With so little time left, I'm gonna take that as pragmatism.” Kay shrugged. “Any sort of positive feelings is up to you.”

Castiel offer his vote of confidence in his sister. “I trust her.”

Kay turned back to Castiel after realizing that he hadn't specified the informant while briefing them. “Who is it?”

“Hael, of the virtue choir.”

The name sounded familiar to Dean, but he couldn't place it. In the last two weeks he'd met dozens of angels and heard reference to countless others. But the look on Dylaniel's face wasn't just familiarity. It was something more personal than that. In the nephilim’s own reserved way, he looked shocked.

“I'm going to meet with her,” Dylaniel stated matter-of-factly.

“Aren't you one of the people a possible trap might be targeting?” Ruby asked.

“She wouldn't.” Dylaniel pursed his lips. “In our time she was one of the first angels to fall for the emotion of love. Compassion was part of her nature then, I have to believe it is now.”

“Dyl….” Kay looked at her cousin with a subtle sympathy. “Okay, yeah. I say we go.”

“It's the only lead on Sam. You couldn't stop me from going,” Ruby agreed. She looked down at Kaylee, then to Bobby and Jody. “I hate to ask—”

“Give her here.” Bobby reached out to take the baby. “Anyway, I hadn't finished telling her about the ‘94 ghoul road trip with Rufus.”

Rather than meeting at another semi-public location, Anael invited them to the safety of her apartment. It was only a few blocks from both previous locations and Castiel confirmed that over a hundred fallen angels were being housed in empty units in the same building or being cared for by members of the community. As they approached the apartment complex, it became obvious that they were in the heart of Little Tokyo.

Dean stopped for a moment to do a double take at a mural on the side of Anael’s apartment building. It was several families of Japanese descent surrounded by barbed wire. Above the image were the words ‘Never forget the price of fear.’ He stared, wondering just how imbedded in the community Anael was. Fallen angels had faced their own sort of persecution, though he wasn't sure what punishment it normally called for. There had been talk of Castiel being rehabilitated before he'd crossed the line. Anael's potential sentence was another matter. She met them at the entrance to the four-story building, then guided them in.

“We have the entire block fortified and look outs a quarter mile in each direction,” she assured them as they walked down a narrow hallway with faded and peeling wallpaper. “If anything out of the ordinary occurs we’ll leave in an instant and cover your retreat.”

“Thank you,” Dylaniel replied.

“It's the least we can do.” Anael stopped at a door, then glanced back at Dylaniel and Dean. “We don't take lightly the protection of the Sword of Heaven.”

They entered a small one-bedroom apartment that had last been renovated at least three decades
earlier. There were three men and four women standing around the living room, watching over a fifth female angel, who was lying on the couch. The woman on the couch was trembling with pale, clammy skin. She was huddled under a blanket, but glanced over to see who the newcomers were. Dyaniel froze when he saw Hael.

“What happened to her?” Dean asked Anael.

“She broke several covenants when she fell. Each one harmed her,” Anael explained. “It's amazing she's doing this well. She had a covenant of secrecy on her. We've peeled off most of the dangerous restrictions on her, anything that wasn't organically breaking down, but she's having a difficult time.”

“I can help,” Dyaniel said as he stepped forward and knelt beside the couch. When he went to touch Hael’s forehead, she pulled away slightly, causing him to stop.

“You're… nephilim?” Hael whispered weakly.

“Yes, and I want to help you if you’ll let me.” He spoke in a particularly soft tone. “If you don't want me to, that's your choice. You're free to make choices like that now.”

“Please.” She could barely keep her eyes open, allowing Dyaniel to touch her forehead. “Please, help.”

Despite the concern for his brother, Dean became distracted by trying to place the name Hael. After a few seconds of staring at Dyaniel and her, he noticed a slight resemblance between the two. Dyaniel had mentioned her a few nights earlier, Cas’s friend, who’d lent—her vessel had been Dyaniel’s biological mom. Rationally, he knew that Hael wasn't Dyaniel's mom, but seeing them together and with Dyaniel's visible concern for her, it was hard not to think that way.

“I need some holy water, myrrh, and the blood of a dove,” Dyaniel instructed the others. One of the angels blinked away to go fetch the ingredients. “Hael, I can feel the damage from your broken covenants, but I think there's more at work that’s making you feel this way. Tell me what happened. Tell me about your fall.”

“I made a delivery… to the facility.”

“What did you bring them?” Ruby asked.

“I don't know the human name—divine favor.” Hael frowned, unsure how to explain.

“Think of it as medical supplies, usually preventative,” Anael translated for the non-angels. “Are the angels at the facility ill or injured? What were they using it for?”

“One thing at a time.” Dyaniel shot down the line of questioning. “Right now we need to address her fall or she’ll become worse. You were bringing supplies to the facility, then what happened?”

“I saw him…. It seemed wrong, but worse somehow.” Her brow furrowed in a tellingly human gesture. “It made me hurt. I didn't know what to do… I returned to Heaven. When he prayed, the pain became so much worse. It was wrong. Everything was wrong.”

Hael had started speaking faster caught up in emotions. Tears began running down her face, but she didn't have the impulse to wipe them away.

“Keep going,” Dyaniel encouraged.
“I couldn't stay. I fled. They were sealing the gates, but I made it out—”

“Heaven? Why were they sealing the gates?” Castiel asked, looking to Anael in alarm, but Hael was too busy sobbing to answer.

“You're experiencing very powerful negative emotions. This is normal,” Dylaniel assured Hael. “You're feeling pity, fear, grief, helplessness—”

“Make it stop,” she begged, grabbing feebly at the sleeve of his jacket.

“Sit up,” Dylaniel instructed, then carefully helped her into a sitting position. He leaned forward and hugged her in a move that made Dean and Kay exchange a surprised glance. After a moment's hesitation, she embraced him back and began crying into his shoulder. “Keep talking. It’ll help with the pain.”

“I failed. I couldn't help. I couldn't save them.” Hael’s face was buried in Dylaniel's neck, otherwise she might have noticed Dean having to hold Ruby back from refining the ambiguous statements through violence. “Marut was fleeing with me, but zie wanted to wait for Jemiel. I was—I was scared, so I kept going. They didn't make it out of Heaven. I didn't help them.”

“You couldn't have saved them.” Dylaniel spoke in a gentle, forgiving voice. “You would've been trapped too. But you got out and now you can help make things right. You have family on Earth, and we care about you.”

“My siblings—so many are fallen. That's why they closed the gates. Sam's prayer, it hurt so many of us. I’d felt the sickness days ago, but I didn't want to tell anyone. I thought they'd confine me. I thought I was alone, but the prayer made the sickness grow in hundreds of us,” Hael explained. “The pain was too great.”

“The pain… do you feel guilt associated with Sam?” Castiel asked.

“Yes. I didn't try to save him when I was there. I hurt him,” she responded after considering the question for several seconds. “And Earth, and the humans… and I may have hurt our siblings.”

“When did you hurt your siblings?” Dylaniel asked while looking to Anael for any indication of whether Hael was a known opponent to fallen angels.

“While I was fleeing I helped Draessel gain access to the core holding facilities in Heaven.” Hael's voice still carried fear and remorse, but there was also a hint of excitement in recalling the act of rebellion. “Zie had nearly eighty supporters. They were going to free the prisoners.”

“How many fallen have been taken prisoner in the last few hours?” Dean asked.

“854 as of the time of my fall,” she answered, causing everyone to look at each other for their reactions to the high number of potential allies, but Hael continued, “you don't understand. They're freeing all of the fallen.”

“What does that mean?” Ruby asked.


“How many is that?”

“Including the 854, almost 2,000,” he replied. “If I had to guess.”
“Two thousand angels are about to hit Earth?” Dean could hardly understand the magnitude of two thousand angels.

“No, you don't understand, I can still hear them,” Hael continued trying to explain the situation. “They're trying to stay.”

“What do you mean stay?”

“There's fighting inside Heaven.”

Sam was trying his best to ignore Lilith’s teasing and Lucifer’s sales pitch when the door to the room opened. A woman in a grey suit of a similar design to the other angels of Heaven entered. Her eyes lingered on Sam for a bit longer than normal and he felt uncomfortable enough by her intense interest that he broke their gaze. There was something strange in her expression.

“Watch her,” Lucifer whispered. “Ryvenel is distressed. Something is wrong.”

Sam didn’t like the idea of essentially taking an order from Lucifer, but at that point he was desperate for any insight he could get regardless of where it came from. He tried to casually glanced back at her, observing her without looking as though he was trying to interact.

“Do you need something?” the black-haired and presumably more senior of the two guards asked.

“I've been instructed to relieve you,” she answered. “Tagas is on his way to assist me.”

“No one notified us of a change in assignments.”

“If you'd like to speak to Zachariah, he is in his office on the third floor.” Ryvenel moved more than the other angels and Sam couldn't tell why… until he realized that she was trying to skirt the guards. “They're reinforcing the exterior defenses since the lockdown. Your skills would be better served in the frontline.”

“Why you?” The blonde, lower ranking guard stepped towards her. “Tagas has proven himself in combat several times, but you're still new to the field.”

“I've trained in a broad range of combat, just ask Tagas. Here he comes.” Ryvenel pointed toward the door, causing both guards to look.

Sam didn't need to have superhuman senses to know that no one was at the door. He was watching Ryvenel. She summoned her angel blade, then stabbed the blonde guard in the chest, killing him. The other guard dodged as she swung at him. He drew his blade and parried another attack. Two other angels teleported into the room, surrounding her. All four angels hesitated for a moment, then she lunged at the one between her and Sam’s cell. The two angels behind her grabbed her arms. She struggled against them, but it was clear that she couldn't break their grip. She looked at Sam with a mixture of regret and hope.

“We heard you,” Ryvenel said before one of the angels touched her forehead making her go limp.

“Take her to the block until access is reestablished,” the guard ordered one of the two reinforcements, then knelt down next to the body of the dead angel.

Sam recoiled from the bars and tried to make himself look as small as possible. He wasn't sure how much little psychological tricks worked on angels, but the last thing he wanted was to appear emboldened by the failed rescue attempt. She'd tried to free him and it sounded like there were
others who might be similarly minded. Yet he couldn't rely on anyone's help, particularly in that moment.

“You have a way of inspiring loyalty,” Lucifer happily observed aloud. “I can help you utilize that.”

“Please stop. I don't want any trouble,” Sam whispered. He wasn't sure if he was speaking to the guard or Lucifer, but neither seemed particularly convinced.

The guard look up at him with unmistakable anger all over his face. “You caused this!”

“I didn't want anyone to die,” Sam told him.

The black-haired angel teleported into his cell and made to attack him. For a split second Sam considered fighting him, but any serious attempt to defend himself would risk revealing the pendant as a weapon. With another angel in the room and beyond his reach, that would be too much of a loss. He quickly slipped the necklace into his pocket as he scrambled across the floor trying to evade the angel.

“Tabbris, don't hurt him,” the remaining angelic reinforcement warned, but the enraged angel kicked Sam in the chest, then in the face.

Blood began pouring out Sam's nose and he was pretty sure his jaw was shattered. He curled up into the fetal position, attempting to protect himself.

“If you kill him you've ruin our work!”

“He wanted that to happen!” Tabbris yelled, but the other angel teleported into the cell and pulled him off Sam.

“Brother, your emotions are getting the better of you,” the calmer angel said as she teleported herself and Tabbris back outside of the cell, outside of Sam’s reach—not that he felt physically capable of fighting two armed angels at that point. He could still barely figure out which way was up with all the throbbing in his head.

“Tabbris should be returned to Heaven for evaluation,” Lucifer noted, completely unfazed by Sam’s injuries. “Something's very wrong if he isn't being reassigned.”

“What?” Sam communicated without speaking—a development that alarmed him more than the small puddle of blood he was creating on the floor.

“That kind of outburst is traditionally grounds for discipline or rehabilitation. The fact that he isn't being replaced means that something is out of the ordinary,” Lucifer explained. “It's unlikely that they're understaffed, though they probably are only assigning high choirs to your protection.”

“Placing guards around me isn't the same as protecting me,” Sam thought pointedly as he gingerly wiped some of the blood from his face.

“I would expect that their duties include protecting you for the moment,” Lucifer speculated. “Ryvenel may have been ideologically on your side, but she still may have intended on killing you before letting the sixty-sixth seal be broken.”

“Allies might be trying to kill me.” The thought was so startling that he wasn't sure if he'd accidentally communicated it to Lucifer.
“Allies don't want to murder each other,” Lucifer replied in an almost reassuring tone. “Anyone who wants to kill you, they’re our enemy.”

Ruby and Dean both hovered anxiously as Dylaniel prepared an elixir for Hael using the ingredients that had been fetched. He carefully fed it to her. At first she struggled to keep the mixture down, but after a few minutes she'd stopped trembling. Once Hael was slightly more under control, Ruby nudged Dylaniel suggesting that he reinitiate the questioning.

“We need to find Sam.” Dylaniel's voice was gentle, but focused. “We need you to tell us where he is and any information you have on the defenses around him.”

“He's in an inoperational thermal power plant in Buchanan, New York,” Hael answered, causing Kay to immediately start researching the location on her smartphone.

“Hold on a sec,” Ruby interrupted. “When you say thermal power plant, what kind of thermal source are you talking about?”

“Fission.”

“What the does inoperational mean exactly?” Ruby asked while pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Wait. Fission, like nuclear?” Dean added, looking around hoping that someone would correct him, but no one did.

“The facility appeared to have been unoccupied by humans for some time,” Hael speculated in response to Ruby's question.

“Okay, but is there any fuel on site?” Ruby pressed the point that Hael seemed to not appreciate.

“Any radiation sickness could be healed if you're worried—”

“Indian Point One reactor, the decommissioning process started in 2004, fuel is still onsite,” Kay read off her phone.

“You can't be serious,” Dean groaned.

“Here's another kicker,” Kay said unenthusiastically. “It's just up the Hudson River from New York City.”

“You think that's the potential source of mass casualties?” Ruby mused aloud.

“I wouldn't bet against it.”

Anael raised an eyebrow at the sudden, new possible complication. “Mass casualties?”

“My reaper friend told us there might be something big coming down in—” Dean checked his watch. “—twelve hours.”

“Does this really change anything?” Ruby asked everyone. “It's not like we're about to leave him there. We're not leaving him.”

“We aren’t saying that,” Kay assured her. “We've just got to be careful.”

“I'm sorry. I'm still trying to process the idea of attacking a nuclear power plant.” Dean rubbed his face. “We're just some fighters—even if we could get in there, how insanely dangerous is it to be
messing around near that stuff? That sounds like delicate work. Last I checked, we aren't delicate people.”

“Attacking the facility might trigger a destructive episode, but if Lucifer is released that will be an infinitely worse event,” Dylaniel countered. “In the larger sense, the risk is small.”

“As long as we aren't digging up or blowing up fuel stores, then this whole nuclear plant thing only counts for structural issues,” Kay commented. “It's any other industrial complex and assault. The big difference is that they have a hostage.”

“Sam isn't a hostage. They don't want to trade him for anything,” Ruby corrected. “The only thing we have going for us is that they don't want him to die until the time is right. They'll keep him safe, so we go in hard and fast with everything we can. Cut off their escape and take him back.”

“There probably won't be a delicate way to handle this,” Kay agreed, then looked to Hael. “We need the details on the building if we're gonna stand a chance at this.”

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” Hael assured them. “There's a large building in the center of the complex. When I entered it I passed by a security checkpoint with security monitors. I saw him on two of the screens. That's how I knew he was there.”

“They're using human security systems?” Dean asked, surprised that Heaven’s defensive measures might include the mundane.

“They're using every kind of security method available,” Hael explained. “There was even a locked door that was opened with a metal key. Cordell was complaining about it. He said that the redundant systems have proven a frustration to many of our siblings that are unfamiliar with human technology.”

“They don't just bypass the measures?” Castiel asked.

“The facility's defenses were designed to frustrate efforts to access the cell in order to prevent intruders from reaching him.”

“And they've inadvertently made it a slight pain in their own ass too,” Kay speculated.

“Cordell said it was uncommon for anyone to make the effort to see him aside from the guards assigned to the immediate vicinity,” Hael confirmed. “I did not get deep enough into the building to see all of the barriers, but I did see several.”

“Those defenses are why you think he was in that building? You said there was a whole complex still in place.” Ruby pressed for a better picture of the facility.

“The other buildings are holding defenses, spells or some mechanism of that nature. They're guarded, but essentially empty. Cordell told me that three angels had suffered injuries from exposure while guarding them. That's why my delivery was required. He guided me into the complex on a very precise route to avoid the majority of the effects. There's a harmful aura surrounding the facility. It's possible for angels to fly above it, but the airspace is heavily patrolled.”

“Did you fly in?” Anael asked.

“No. There's a route into the complex on the ground. They use it for transporting equipment that can't be flown in and for angels who have trouble navigating the environmental effects.”
“The ambient radiation is disrupting lesser angels’ navigation and balance?” Dylaniel guessed.

“Yes, among other things,” Hael confirmed. “The path is completely exposed with toxic effects on either side.”

“Tell me you remember how to follow it?” Dean asked.

“Yes.” Hael nodded, visibly pleased with her foresight. “I committed it to memory in anticipation of making future deliveries.”

“Well, that's at least one possible in for most of us,” Kay commented.

“Is flight impaired throughout the facility or is it just restricted to the toxic aura outside?” Castiel inquired.

“Once you are beyond the outer perimeter the impairment to flight is minimal, even to the lesser choirs. Cordell suggested that flight could be restricted on short notice in the case of a security breach. He had to carry keys for specific areas for that potentiality.”

“So, assume we can't fly or teleport inside?” Kay speculated.

“It might be a conservative thought, but in order to get to the true interior of the building you have to fly,” Hael corrected.

“What?” Dean's heart sank at the idea that he was physically incapable of reaching Sam on his own… not that he felt particularly capable of performing a one-man assault on what was sounding more and more like a fortress.

“They sealed all the doors to the core of the main building. You have to teleport through to get inside,” Hael explained. “I did not go inside, but I expect that the barrier is six-inches-to-one-foot of concrete.”

“So we have to walk into a power plant holding stores of who-knows-how-much radioactive shit, avoid some sort of toxic aura, while fighting our way in past some sort of guard setup.” Dean started summing up the daunting task. “After that we have to get through locks, maybe some more anti-flight stuff, and other security measures. Then, if possible, teleport into the center of a building —”

“The interior of which we’ve never been to and know nothing about,” Kay added.

“Rescue Sam from undoubtedly more guards, hopefully kill Lilith, then get out.” Ruby underscored the main objective.

“All before the sixty-fifth seal breaks.” Dylaniel reminded everyone of the looming danger beyond their own lives.

“What're we at right now?” Dean asked.

“Sixty-three,” Anael said almost apologetically.

“With all these precautions you know there's gotta be something to keep away demons,” Ruby speculated. “They have to know Hell might throw an army at the place if he was discovered.”

“I believe there were protections against fiends,” Hael agreed. “None of my siblings were concerned about the arrival of Abyssal.”
“You sure they just weren't feeling overly confident?” Dean voiced his insincere wishful thinking.

“We’ve lost nearly fifty siblings to Abyssal,” Hael recounted as she stared at her lap, visibly distraught by angelic standard. “They’re no longer simply a nuisance.”

“If they do have anti-demon protections I don't know how we’re supposed to get you two in to help us,” Dean told Ruby and Kay. “But I guess we'll have to figure that out when we get there.”

“You guys can't wait around for us to figure out our way in. We’ll lose the element of surprise,” Ruby warned. “We can't let them move him or further entrench. You all need to press as hard and fast as you can. You have angels. They're worth more in a fight than demons anyway.”

“Ruby, you’re a great fighter—” Dean started to offer her some validation, but she held up her hand to silence him.

“I don't care about my feelings. I care about Sam getting out of there alive, so if you get a chance you better fucking take it, Kay and me on the sidelines or not.”

“Is there anything Hell can do?” Anael asked.

“We can't start poking around there until you all are ready to move. We're not risking having scouts spotted,” Kay explained. “I can't tell you what I can get approved by the Council and what we’ll actually be able to achieve despite the warding. But we’ll try to cover you however we can, whether that's with a lot of grunts or with fewer stronger units.”

Wigfrid looked skeptical. “Stronger units?”

“Knights of Hell are more or less the toughest fighters we have. I might be able to rally some of them even without the backing of the High Council.”

“Lucifer's oathsworn?” Anael raised an eyebrow. “Tora seemed agreeable, but you'd trust the rest of them in such a delicate situation?”

“They have varying ideas of what their oaths mean, but the ones I have the most capital with consider themselves servants of Hell before servants of an angel, their creator or not.”

Dean proposed a plan of attack. “So we’ll port in as close as we can and start our run on the facility. As needed, covering groups will engage Heaven’s attacks. Hell will work to provide support to whatever extent possible. In the meantime, Hael will lead us into the facility and we rescue Sam.”

“For those of you who haven't seen much combat it's worth remembering ‘No battle plan survives contact with the enemy,’” Dylaniel recited, mostly for the benefit of the angels in the room.

“Something is gonna go wrong,” Ruby synthesized. “The key is to not panic. Just stick to a few core objectives and try like hell.”

“Killing Lilith is an alternate priority to evacuating Sam,” Anael reminded everyone. “Killing her ends the threat of Lucifer's release.”

“If we find Sam, then we need to remove him from there immediately—same for Kay,” Dean refined the plan. “Depending on the circumstances maybe it'll make sense to have people remain to finish Lilith off while we can, but we need to get Sam and Kay clear. That'll eliminate the immediate threat. Everybody clear on that?”
Everyone nodded in understanding.

“Who’s guarding him?” Dylaniel pressed for more details.

“Zachariah is in charge of the site. There are dozens of angels there, but among them I saw Paschar, Manakel, Belan, Ariel—”

Dean’s ears perked up at mention of Ariel. He was a seraphim, who in 2039 was known for his combat and command skills, affectionately called ‘the Lion of Heaven.’ Including him in the list gave Dean better context of the caliber of their other opponents.

“—and Cordell said that Raphael was onsite periodically.”

“Raphael? The guy who laid out Dyl?” Ruby wasn't entirely surprised by the idea that an archangel might be assigned to guarding such a large prize as Sam, but it was still distressing to hear it. “How are we supposed to fight him?”

“What’re the odds that we even have to? With shit breaking loose in Heaven isn't that gonna be his main focus?” Dean speculated.

“Maybe, maybe not. If Lucifer was suddenly in play, what does that do to the fight in Heaven? Would Heaven generally unite against a common threat in order to satisfy a prophecy or would the majority of the fallen rally behind Lucifer? Raphael might very well see breaking the last seal as the best way of resolving the rebellion,” Dylaniel mused aloud, then added, “we should call in my reluctant healer.”

Anael and the other fallen angels in the room exchanged uncertain glances. No one had actually explained to them how Dylaniel had recovered from his fight with Raphael so quickly.

“He's not gonna be happy about you outing him,” Kay told her cousin under her breath.

“Considering the nature of our circumstances, I don't think anyone is entitled to be happy,” Dylaniel countered.

“Who are you talking about?” Anael asked, wary of exposing her siblings to strangers.

“Your brother, Gabriel.”

Kay and Ruby returned to the bunker to work on preparations while Dylaniel and Dean smoothed over the Gabriel issue. Ruby wanted to throw together a few last minute spells and tools as well as tackle a few personal matters. Kay had to go to Hell in order to seize whatever support she could muster, but she wanted to grab her long coat and take care of a few other things before too many balls were rolling.

Kay was walking through the halls when she spotted Ruby sitting thoughtfully at her workbench. Kaylee was bundled up, lying on her lap while Ruby tapped her finger absentmindedly on her cell phone—a gesture of telling inactivity. Ruby glanced over, saw Kay standing just outside the door and nodded for her to come into the room for a second.

“Did you know Pascoe growing up?” Ruby asked as she gestured to a chair, inviting her to sit down.

Kay perched on the chair, but didn't settle in for a long stay. “No. He didn't make it in our time.”
“He's a good guy, but he's young. I don't know how he'd lead the coven if something happens to us—to me.” Ruby sighed to herself. “I gave him the phone number for Morrison’s coven leader, just in case he needs to consolidate with a stronger coven and Maji.”

“How’d he take it?”

“Finding out Sam was gone or finding out about the suicide run?” Ruby spun the phone on the desk, then pushed the distraction out of arm's reach. “He wants to go with the group and I just can't let him. The coven’s lost almost everyone…. He's the only one there that's worth anything in a fight and he has responsibilities.”

“I would've thought you'd be pulling every asset into this fight.”

“I want to. I really do… but there needs to be a last line of defense on the things Sam loves. Even if I'm not gonna make his priorities my be-all-end-all, I'm not gonna ignore them.”

Kay nodded at Ruby's unspoken concern. “Does Tom know?”

“Not yet, I'm… I'm hoping it won't come to it.” Ruby smiled sadly. “Someday all this'll just be the delightful story of how I saved Sam's ass from the fire, and I'll bust it out every time I want to avoid changing a diaper.”

“That's good motivation,” Kay joked.

Ruby pushed a few of the books on her desk out of the way and picked up Lucifer's angel blade. She turned it over in her hands a few times, studying its simplicity and innate power.

“I want you to tell me about Lucifer,” Ruby instructed without taking her eyes off the weapon.

“He's smart, but cocky,” Kay answered. “It's strange. He’ll be almost hospitable to you if you intrigue him or he wants something from you, but the second you aren't an opportunity he’ll destroy you rather than endure your existence. Don't underestimate him. He’ll do anything in order to get what he wants.”

“What does he want?”

“In one word: control,” Kay replied as she pulled her arms to her torso in a slightly uncomfortable tell. “All three planes, his loyal siblings protected, everyone else dead—except his vessels and you.”

Ruby raised an eyebrow, then set the blade back down. “Why me?”

“He likes his vessels and, if he's in Sam….” Kay shrugged apologetically for what she was about to allude to. “You can give him vessels.”

“Lovely.”

“Yeah,” Kay acknowledged the unpleasant scenario. “Luci had an unusual relationship with my mom. At first he liked her. He didn't care about her, but he marveled at her.”

“He thought she was a toy,” Ruby speculated.

“Yeah,” Kay agreed with the assessment. “After a little bit though he didn't like her as much.”

“What happened?”
“He realized that she was one of the only people that could help my dad resist him. She made my dad want to live and fight.” Kay touched the winged and horned rose pendant that she wore around her neck. “If you ever meet Luci, you've gotta take advantage of that initial favoritism because once he understands what you're capable of he'll consider you a major threat. He won't kill you, but he'll more or less always be on guard around you.”

“What am I supposed to do if I get a shot at him?” Ruby couldn't picture herself killing Sam and she wasn't sure what she'd be willing to do if Kay was Lucifer's vessel.

“Immobilize him,” Kay suggested. “He's vulnerable to magic.”

“Yeah, all those angels are pretty bad at it.” Ruby twisted the silver ring on her finger. “I guess some of them have gotten better if they've got Sam so tightly locked down.”

“They're fast learners.”

“Hopefully, so are we,” Ruby commented as Kaylee stretched, shifting on her lap. “If Lucifer does get a vessel, he—or I guess you—he'll come after Kaylee won't he? If he wants his vessels.”

“Probably, at some point,” Kay replied. “In my time he didn't really need to keep track of us because there wasn't really anywhere to run. He might feel different with Kaylee. If Lucifer's in Sam, he’d probably look for her as one of his first acts. Lucifer tried to do things that were a common interest. They were more powerful when they had a common goal.”

“And after being held captive and who-knows-what, Sam probably wants to see her more than anything,” Ruby said solemnly. They both sat in silence for several seconds before Ruby grabbed a pen and a pad of paper. “Okay, Lucifer is worst case scenario, but Raphael is who I'm more worried about as a practical matter. You said he controls electricity?”

“He can wield lightning,” Kay corrected.

“What does that mean?”

“He can electrocute people. I heard it can be a single bolt or a spread,” Kay answered.

“Have you actually seen it?”

“Once, yeah.”

“Describe it to me in more detail,” Ruby instructed, as she started making notes. “Tell me everything you know about him and how he fights.”

Sam felt unnaturally fatigued and nauseous. Blood had been trickling down his throat for some unknown amount of time. Every once in awhile he'd try to spit it out, but the state of his jaw made any movement costly. He didn't care about the blood he was getting on his clothes. On some level he'd rather have it on the outside than inside.

“That looks like it hurts,” Lilith purred with a smile from the other side of the plexiglass barrier.

He looked over at her, but couldn't bring himself to reply so he just shook his head.

“You're a pathetic liar,” she replied.

A wave of particularly strong nausea hit him and he started gagging. The strain made his chest and head throb as hot pressure built at every wound. The blood flowed faster, making him spit out
more than two mouthfuls before curling up on the floor to keep himself from passing out.

“Shit.” Lilith stood up and moved from side to side to see if she could get a better vantage on him. She asked the guards, “You are gonna keep him alive, right?”

Sam huffed a painful laugh at the thought that his mortal enemy was expressing concern over his wellbeing. The entire situation was screwed up and he knew it, but the absurdity of it all was at least helping to keep him on his toes.

“At least heal his face,” the female angel who’d taken up the role of replacement guard told the one that had attacked him. “If he keeps bleeding he could become seriously ill.”

“He’ll live.”

“This reflects poorly on both of us,” she commented. When Tabbris didn't react right away she warned, “If you don't heal him, I'll report you.”

“Zachariah is just going to harm him anyway.”

“Then give Zachariah something to work with.” She gestured at Sam. “He can't even speak like this.”

Tabbris teleported into Sam's cell. Despite having suffered a beating by the angel, Sam wasn't particularly intimidated by him. Though when the angel moved to touch him, Sam still made a little show of fear and pacifism. He made a minimal effort to shield his face from another hit that he assumed wasn't even coming. Sure enough, Tabbris healed him. Sam coward to lend himself the appearance of weakness. The fact that the angel exposed his back to Sam while he was leaving the cell was reassurance that the minor deception was working. Unfortunately, with the female guard out of reach there wasn't much point in attacking short of vengeance, but he didn't have that luxury.

Sam sat quietly enduring Lilith's renewed insults while wondering what the effect his prayer had been. On some level he’d expected the prayer to fall on deaf ears or maybe even not reach anyone. He was supposed to be part demon after all. But his prayer had evidently been heard by someone, otherwise Ryvenel wouldn’t have given him the message and Zachariah wouldn't have felt it was necessary to do whatever it was that they'd done after knocking him out. He rubbed the back of his head, almost expecting to feel a small scar or other sign of the tampering.

But as intriguing as that entire avenue of thought was, he had a new concern to entertain him. Lucifer’s voice was much clearer than it’d been just a few hours ago. Sam felt like the connection was more solid. He couldn't tell if it was because of another seal breaking or maybe his own cooperation with Lucifer was exacerbating the situation. His defenses had dropped some time earlier and the archangel had gotten a better grip on him.

Lucifer's comments were also becoming increasingly unnerving. Not only was the clarity improving, but the archangel’s tone was becoming more protective and possessive of him. On some level Sam was certain that Lucifer was trying to help him and that instinct was disarming. The realization that he was inclined to lapse into an unguarded mental state scared him. He could see how unsuspecting vessels could be charmed into handing over control of their bodies to their angels. But he had the advantage of knowing what kind of person he was facing. He was one of the only defense against Lucifer and, ironically or not, he was also one of the only opportunities to Lucifer.

He was trying to be optimistic about the possibility that he’d managed to communicate with the
outside world, but he wasn’t sure whether enough help was coming. That uncertainty combined
with the realization that Lucifer might be getting closer made his stomach knot. Sam stared at his
hands in his lap. He could still see the scars from when he’d tried to kill himself a year and a half
earlier. His hand slipped into his pocket and he thumbed the edge of the angel blade pendant.

Rationally he knew that it probably didn’t make sense to try killing himself. If he did kill himself
the immediate threat of Lucifer being freed would be gone because Lilith wouldn't be the one to
kill him, but that wasn't as simple an option as it might otherwise appear. He didn't even know if
he'd be capable of dying before his captors could heal his wounds. And after a failed attempt they'd
likely just knock him unconscious or wholly immobilize him. Also, even if he did manage to die, it
didn't mean that the threat was gone. Heaven would just turn their sights to Kay and Kaylee. That's
why Heaven had wanted his daughter alive, so that she could be sacrificed to bring about the
apocalypse.

“You shouldn’t think about hurting yourself,” Lucifer told him in an entirely unwelcome move.
“You need to focus on surviving this.”

“Stop talking to me,” Sam replied, but he did let go of the blade.

“I want to help you.”

“You want to use me.”

“I can give you and your family protection unlike you've ever known. No one would dream of
hurting your children.”

“That's not true.” Sam remembered Kay talking about her brother Alex being murdered. She'd
said that she was ruler of Hell when it’d happened, so the world had known about the association
with Lucifer and it hadn't been enough to save him. It had even endangered him more.

“We can make it different this time,” Lucifer assured him. “If you let me help you, I'll rid you of
all your enemies. You can finally have the peace you’ve wanted your whole life.”

“I'm not going to let you destroy the world,” Sam told Lucifer firmly.

“You won't be able to deny me forever. You’ll see, in time you'll need me.”

“No,” Sam replied. “Now and always, the answer’s going to be no.”

“If you’re going to be so difficult, there are others. A child of yours or….” Sam waited anxiously
for the rest of Lucifer's offer or threat. “Kay, is it? Do you think that she’d say yes to me in order
to save your life?”

The thought of Lucifer going after Kay gave him pause. He couldn't even imagine what it must be
like for Kay to be confronted by Lucifer after all the devastation that the archangel had inflicted in
her timeline. Maybe she had more experience with him, but that also meant more trauma. She'd
been through too much.

“Don't talk to her.” Sam couldn't tell if he was demanding or begging.

“Then I'll need you to keep talking to me.”

Dean let Dylaniel handle the entire explanation of Gabriel's continued existence. He didn't know
the archangel very well, to the extent he did know him he didn't like him, and to be perfectly
honest he didn't want to become involved in the drama. It was a little surreal to watch Dyaniel try to navigate a conversation with a whole branch of a family tree consisting of a species that wasn't inclined to differentiate between persons of different timelines. To most of the angels Dyaniel was their nephew and Dean was grateful to escape the discussion by apparently being miscategorized as some tangential party like an in-law.

That minor protection didn't stop Dean from retreating to the relative isolation of the bedroom when tensions got a tad high. After seeing several other angels going in and out of it, he didn't get the feeling that he was invading Anael's personal space. Sure enough the bed looked as though it'd never been used as anything more than an improvised table. The news of Gabriel had cleared the bedroom, but there were several sketches of blueprints and printouts of the power plant being assembled on the desk. As he started reviewing them, a floorboard creaked beside him. Evidently the room wasn't empty as he'd expected—a frustrating risk of interacting with a species that could be invisible and incorporeal.

“You're really him,” Hael said as she stepped forward to Dean. She stood a little too close to him, betraying her lack of familiarity with human social customs. Her eyes beamed up at him with an energy that he hadn't seen in her earlier. It was an unbridled admiration that made him a bit uncomfortable.

“What?” he asked, unsure of what she wanted from him.

“You're the Sword of Heaven.” She placed her hand on the back of his.

“Dyl's the one—”

“I meant, you're the one that made these feelings.” Her hand slid up his arm and caressed his wrist as she leaned in, almost inviting a kiss. She gradually pulled his hand toward her. He wasn't sure if she meant for him to touch her waist or crotch. Hael was coming onto him at a dizzying pace.

If he had to be honest, for a split second he was tempted. His emotions were completely messed up, they were about to go into a fight unlike anything he'd faced, and there was a beautiful woman about two seconds from reaching for his zipper. Some desperate part of him wanted to take her to the privacy of the on-suite bathroom and frantically fuck her against a wall until his pre-combat nerves had settled, but god he knew how wrong that was.

She was caught up in emotions that she wasn't capable of understanding at that point and he was an easy target. His status as the Sword of Heaven and his association with the love virus that Dyaniel had unleashed made him some sort of object of desire to her. It was the sort of thing Kay had warned him about when he'd first arrived in 2039. Some of the angels might try to fuck him. It'd sounded a little weird then, but now it just felt completely inappropriate.

“Whoa. I'm sorry, but no. No thank you.” Dean gently pulled his hand back, then took a half step away from her in order to create a reasonable degree of personal space. “I'm not him. Whatever feelings you're having, it's not me.”

Her brow furrowed a bit. “But you're….”

“I haven't been through what Dyl's dad went through. I haven't had those feelings or figured it out. I'm just some guy and I don't want to do anything you might regret later,” Dean explained. “Does that make sense?”

“I… I think so.” Hael’s expression dimmed, but she didn’t seem offended. “I apologize.”
“Don’t, it’s fine.” Dean tried to smile reassuringly. “This whole thing is confusing, for everyone, not just angels. Just try to focus on one thing at a time. First we try to save the world, then you can have all the time you need to figure out this emotional stuff.”

“Okay.” She nodded, encouraged by the thought, then turned to return to her siblings.

Dean watched her with a morbid fascination. Dee hadn’t had sex with her, but he’d had sex with that vessel. A strange proxy déjà vu hit him as he imagined that versus the current situation. He hated all the characterization of time and fate that he’d heard recently, especially in moments like that. Maybe it was a reasonable reaction for Hael to have under the circumstances and it wasn’t indicative of anything—he’d turned down the proposition after all, but it still made him nervous. If he had fucked her the existential crisis might’ve completely ruined him going into the mission.

“That was noble of you.”

Dean turned around to see Anael standing a few feet behind him. He could feel his ears turn pink and only hoped that fallen angels adhered to the custom of not reading minds without permission, despite their apparent comfort with other forms of eavesdropping. The fact that she wasn’t in the process of punching him in the face probably meant that she hadn’t observed the lurid mental images of her sister that had just helplessly popped into his head.

“I’m not noble.” He dismissed the idea as he busied himself with a rough diagram of the power plant. “She’s upset. She didn't know what she was trying to get herself into. Hell, it's almost like she was high.”

“What do you think emotions like love do to people?” she commented while adding a few photographs to the pile of intel in front of him.

Dean huffed out a small laugh at the observation. “Point taken,” he acknowledged, then looked up at her, a bit less embarrassed. “I take it you don’t go in with those kind of emotions.”

“How else do you expect existence to be worth living?”

“You might be the most down to Earth angel I’ve ever met, so to speak.”

“I have more experience here than most. I might not have experience with romantic love, but my family means everything to me, and that sort of love is just as powerful.” Anael turned up to Dean with a disarming sincerity. “I’ll admit I was initially wary of your brother, but he seems like a good man. I look forward to us bringing him home.”

“Home.” Dean nodded to himself. “Yeah, he’s earned it.”

Once Dylaniel had finished briefly the core fallen angels on the situation with Gabriel and prayed to the archangel, he decided to address an unpleasant matter. Kay and Ruby had both left in order to do various tasks that he assumed were tactically useful, but Castiel and Dean were still lingering about. He found Anael and Dean discussing something in the bedroom. Assuming that Dean had the same tells as his alternate timeline self, then based on his posture Dean was slightly embarrassed… but the small smile peeking through looked almost like flirting.

“Excuse me,” Dylaniel interrupted, causing Dean to straighten up, adopting a more professional posture. Anael didn't appear particularly rattled by his sudden presence, so he assumed that whatever he'd walked in on was one-sided. “Dean, would you mind excusing us for a moment? I'd like to discuss an incident personally to Anael.”
“Oh, sure.” Dean nodded to her before heading towards the living room. “I'll go make sure I know which groups are doing what.”

Dyaniel waited until Dean had closed the door behind him before he gave Anael his full attention.

“What incident concerns you?” Anael asked.

“That was a lie,” Dyaniel confessed. “I need to speak with you about a delicate matter.”

“What is it?”

“I need to ask for a measure of loyalty from you.” Dyaniel watched her for a moment, thoughtful considering her resolve. “If we get in there and find that Sam has broken the last seal by killing Lilith, I need you and the other angels to buy me a minute alone with Sam. We can't be interrupted by Dean or anyone.”

“I don't understand,” Anael said quietly, stepping closer to the nephilim in a move that assured him that she understood the need for discretion.

“Depending on our losses going in, we might not have much time or ability to resolve this. If he's still wearing the warded cuffs, that might not intimidate Lucifer, but it might provide a brief period of vulnerability,” Dyaniel clarified.

“You'd kill him?”

He knew that killing Sam would alienate the others. They would be upset that there wasn't another attempt to contain Lucifer in the bunker, but that approach was its own trap. He knew what kind of hopeless future that would create and he would do everything in his power to prevent it. Sam's daughter wouldn't grow up with her father imprisoned and tormented, constantly carrying the burden of being one of his only sources of happiness. Dean wouldn't suffer the same way his dad had, helpless to save Sam yet unable to bring himself to end it. And the world wouldn't slowly decay waiting for an inevitable violent end.

“If it meant stopping Lucifer, then yes,” Dyaniel replied with as much cold composure as he could summon. “Sam understands what's at stake. If I'm there to end it quickly, he'll say yes to spare the rest.”

“I'll talk to those who are most loyal,” Anael agreed. “When we find him, we'll be ready to cover you in however you decide to proceed.”

“Provide cover, but no one hurts my family,” Dyaniel warned. “That includes Kay, and Ruby if she comes.”

“Ruby proved herself an… unusual and resilient foe.” She recalled the fight with Abaddon. “If she's in love with Sam, she might not allow us to restrain her unharmed.”

“Nothing happens to her.”

After a moment Anael nodded, then said, “Understood.”

“How'd they take it?” Kay asked Dyaniel as she uncapped a pen, flattened out a roll of parchment, then began scribbling out a few sentences in Abyssal.

“There were some understandably hurt feelings on the part of Anael and her angels, but they
seemed sympathetic enough to Gabriel's position that I doubt it will prove a problem," Dylaniel explained while looking around Kay’s underfurnished bedroom. “Gabriel was agitated when I summoned him, though after the initial discomfort I think he began to enjoy the company of his estranged siblings.”

“Did Kali show?”

“She’s addressing a major flood in her domain right now, but she’ll join the assault,” Dylaniel absentmindedly repositioned one of his dual knife holster to make them symmetrical. “Gabriel suggested that she might speak with Svaha to see if she can rally any support within her pantheon, but you know how difficult it can be to get cross-domain cooperation from deities.”

“I get the feeling the pantheons don't even talk in this time,” Kay muttered while proofreading her work. “Well, at least we might get Kali. She can actually fight worth a damn.”

“Gabriel will be good for morale and might help us earn defectors,” Dylaniel suggested. He leaned forward to watch her work even though he couldn't read her writing. They were seated on the floor of her bedroom with the door closed for some privacy. The lit candle between them flickered and he tried to ignore the afterimage of the flame’s heat. “Did your dad explain how to do this?”

“He mentioned the time he did it for your dad and I've done some similar stuff before,” Kay answered as she cut her thumb with a knife, then wrote her name in blood on the contract. “Do you remember anything about going through this last time?”

“I was too young when I had it done.”

“Honestly, I have no idea how you all got by the age-of-consent-to-contract issue.” She double-checked the wording one last time. “You know, the first pact is still written on your soul. It might still be effective even with the timeline jump.”

“I'd rather practice an abundance of caution,” Dylaniel replied. “Especially after suffering the injury to my soul and grace.”

Kay rolled up the piece of parchment containing the deal, then dipped its corner into the flame. They both silently watched it burn down to nothing. She carefully collected the ashes, placed them on her right palm, and held her hand out to him. Without hesitating, Dylaniel clasped her hand, shaking it.

“Alright. Your soul is officially the property of Hell.” Kay let go of his hand as quickly as possible for his comfort. “You didn't ask if it was revocable.”

“We'll cross that bridge if Heaven ever becomes an ally. In the meantime, we’ll make due with whatever happens.”

“You'd make a terrifying demon,” Kay commented.

“Or a terrible one.” Dylaniel took a cloth he used for cleaning blades and began wiping the spot of ash from his palm. “Can half a soul even become a demon?”

“I wouldn't put anything past you.”

“I appreciate the confidence you have in me.” Dylaniel pursed his lips almost imperceptibly. “I think you're a very capable leader and soldier.”

“I'm sensing a ‘but.”’ She raised a eyebrow at the potential follow ups.
“I don’t think you should go on this mission.”

“None of us should go,” Kay countered. “Ruby and Dean are emotionally wrecked. You’re still recovering—”

“You’re one more opportunity for Lilith to free Lucifer,” Dylaniel argued. “I know you want to save him, but there are risks.”

“You stayed to search for Dean when you heard that Heaven might be in the area.”

“That’s different. Heaven getting ahold of me wouldn’t unleash Lucifer or Michael.”

“I know the angels like to treat you like shit, but you don’t really believe that given the opportunity to take you alive…” Kay covered her face with her hand, then took a calming breath. “We’re both too valuable to risk and too valuable to leave on the bench. Hell, we’re the only two people in this entire timeline who have been training for the possibility of a war for more than a few months.”

“War isn’t a possibility anymore. It’s a reality.” Dylaniel offered the bleak interpretation. “In Hell and Heaven—it’s spilling onto Earth from both fronts. Do you really think that there’s any coming back from this?”

“No,” Kay admitted. “But if we can’t go back, maybe we can go through.”

“And what do you suggest is on the other side of the apocalypse?”

“I don’t know, but I plan on finding out.” Kay used her thumb and index finger to extinguish the candle. She hesitated to touch him and instead settled for looking at him with candid affection. “I wish I could make you feel hopeful. I’m sorry you’ve been burned so many times.”

“I’ve seen us fail. I can see that clear as day, but that’s not what worries me.” Dylaniel paused for a few seconds trying to compose his thoughts. “I have no idea what it means for us to succeed. I know it’s more important than anything else in our entire lives, but I don’t know what I’m supposed to do if we ever obtain it. I’m not like you. I don’t have a realm to run. Even if the human world survives… I don’t want to be in their settlements.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” Kay assured him.

“That’s not how it works.” He rejected the positivity. “You know that as well as anyone.”

She watched him thoughtfully for a long while. He could tell that she pitied him and he wasn’t sure why she felt like she was in any better a position. She was confined by circumstances. They all were. He was just more willing to recognize the confinement. It wasn’t fate. He didn’t believe in fate. But he did believe in duty above all else and there was always more work to be done. Kay just had more things in her life to distract her.

“Do you remember back before Sadie died?” she asked in a surprising detour.

“Some of it.”

“What made you happy back then?”

“Hearing stories.” He thought of playing with his younger cousin. “Helping people.”

“Did you want to be a soldier?”

“I wanted to be like my parents. I’ve always wanted to…” Dylaniel’s eyes evaded her. “I’d prefer
to not kill so many people. My dad and xe, they regretted having to teach me to kill.”

“I know.” Kay smiled sadly at him. “If we get through this, if we win this war, you won't have to be a soldier anymore if you don't want to. Maybe you can catch up on some stories? You've definitely earned it.”

“We'll see,” he replied. “I'm not sure what to think.”

“That's fine. You don't need to have all the answers,” she assured him. “But one thing I want you to know, no matter what happens or what you choose to do, your parents would be proud of you.”

“And yours would be proud of you.”

Dean came back to the bunker with Dylaniel to grab some weapons and see his niece one last time before the mission. Ruby hadn't even teased him when he asked to hold Kaylee or when he sang a few songs to the dozing newborn. They both knew that every little emotional boost was important in getting ready for the sort of endeavor they were about to attempt. He'd kissed Kaylee goodbye, handed her back to her mom, then turned to head back to his room for one last inventory of supplies.

“Hey, Dean,” Ruby said, stopping him before he could leave. “I've got something for you.”

She dug through a drawer in her desk, pulled out a taser gun and gave it to him.

“You're serious?” Dean turned it over in his hands. “Got any mace to go with it?”

“I think you'll like it.” Ruby pointed to the firing mechanism. “I've modified it—I assume you've been tasered a few times and know how this works.”

“Ha ha.” Dean feigned laughter. “Enlighten me.”

“It shoots two darts that have wires attached. When they tag a person it creates a circuit, then the shock travels along the wires to the target. Range is about twelve feet on this model.” Ruby showed him a pair of buttons on it. “I made it require two actions. Usually they're designed for speed and have it as a one-button action.”

“So you made it slower to use?”

“Dyl said that the reason he didn't use ranged weapons was friendly fire. This’ll hit the target with the leads, but if you get the wrong person you don't have to zap them,” Ruby explained. “I bumped up the power a bit, since I wasn't sure if otherwise nonlethal damage could be blessed enough to kill an angel.”

“I'm trying to picture the look on an angel’s face when I kill them with a fucking taser.” Dean smiled at the absurd thought.

“It’ll probably just be every muscle in their face spasming involuntarily.” Ruby nearly grinned a little, but stopped herself from getting too friendly with him. “Remember: we're fighting goodie-goodie tight-asses. Fight dirty or have a flattering eulogy.”

“Han shot first,” he acknowledged while making sure the safety was on, then tucked the taser into his pocket. “Thanks.”

“Good luck,” Ruby told him. “And watch your ass.”
Dean returned to his bedroom and leaned against his dresser to collect himself for a moment. He looked at his reflection in the mirror, then promised himself that when this was over, if he survived, he was gonna change. He would stop chasing dumb things like revenge. He wouldn't be ashamed of the things that made him happy; he would seek them out. He would start dating. He would be there for his family. He would be the man he wanted to be, not the one he was expected to be. He would be someone that he was proud of.

Dean looked down at the angel blade that was sitting on the dresser in front of him. It was a fine weapon as those things went, but it didn't feel familiar in his hand. In a weird way it felt like he was jumping too far ahead of himself when he held it. It was some unaccustomed tool that he'd used once or twice because that was what someone fighting angels used. But Dylaniel didn't use an angel blade. Dylaniel used weapons that were his own, a piece of his comfort zone.

He reached past the angel blade and picked up a machete. That was a weapon that felt right in his hands. He'd used one on dozens or hundreds of hunts over the years. The fact that it'd have to be blessed in order to kill angels only frustrated him for a moment. He'd done it once before when he'd killed Alastair. Dylaniel had described the act of blessing a weapon as harnessing conviction and faith in oneself. It had taken a long time, but he finally felt that he deserved to live in this world. He deserved to be happy and loved. His family loved and supported him, flaws and all. He could be whoever he was without shame.

Promise be damned. He wasn't going to wait until the mission was over. He was going to be the kind of man he'd be proud of now. He gripped the machete with a conviction he'd never known and knew in his soul that he was ready to face whatever was in store for them. He was ready to fight for Sam and for himself. A small smile spread across his lips at the faint tingling sensation. He'd managed to bless the weapon.

There was a soft knock on his bedroom door, then Kay asked, “Can we talk for a sec?”

“Sure.”

She let herself in as he carefully placed the machete back down on the dresser, then looked to her. She was carrying a partially consumed candle, a scroll of parchment, and a pen.

“I just got done helping Dyl figure out his arrangements if…."

“If he dies?”

“Yeah,” Kay answered.

Dean nodded to himself, he could see where the conversation was headed. “Last I heard Shola worked it so that Hell wouldn't get my soul.” He sighed and rubbed his neck. “I should go back, shouldn't I?”

“If your soul gets to Heaven it's all over,” she said apologetically.

“I'm guessing they won't ask me nicely to say yes.”

She didn't respond right away to his accurate prediction.

“Michael might not hate you the way he hated my uncle, but they aren't gonna take no for an answer.”
He recalled the fear that had existed in 2039 when it came to Heaven. Hell may have been the long-time villain, but Heaven was easily a larger menace. Michael would torture him far worse than Alastair had. Michael was more motivated.

“How do we keep me out of Heaven?”

“I can make a deal with you to rebuy your soul, but there's no guarantee that it'll undo the waiver,” Kay explained. “We’ve never tried to reclaim an abandoned soul and Heaven will be fighting for it. There's a chance you'll go either place or neither. We just don't know.”

“Neither?” He raised an eyebrow. “Like somewhere else or nowhere?”

She shrugged. “Souls get destroyed and soulless creatures die.”

“I remember doing more than a few of both of those.” Dean tilted his head. “I guess that'd be karma for me to go out the same way.”

“You might go out like Ruby or it could be something else,” Kay said as a reminder of the alternative. “My uncle had the same arrangement.”

“He went to Heaven,” Dean recalled.

“He wasn't killed,” Kay corrected. “They took him alive.”

Dean reflexively imagined Dee being taken to Heaven as a prisoner. He’d been number one on Michael’s list, the object of Michael’s obsession and ire for decades. In hindsight, it was amazing they’d had so much time after the attack on the bunker, that Dee had held out for that long. Dean wasn't sure how long he could last under torture—for a while, but was the risk of him breaking worth any hope that he might be saved?

“Let's say I do this pact and maybe my soul survives maybe not: do you think I should kill myself before I let them take me alive?” Dean asked in all seriousness. “I know Dee was under lock and key, but with Heaven in a civil war there might be a chance I'd get let out, like the angel prisoners…. I'm not sure what makes sense.”

“I don't know if this is comforting or not, but I doubt you'll get to make that decision,” she replied, causing Dean to huff a laugh.

“Does Hell sell those cyanide capsule fake teeth from the spy movies? I'm kidding. Knowing my luck I'd crack it on a corn nut or something.” Dean gestured at the scroll that'd shortly contain a new contract. “Is it permanent? Selling my soul again.”

“I can release the contract on your soul if it looks like Heaven is stable and friendly, but there's gonna be a reasonable amount of wear on it just from all the tampering over the years.”

“I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that it has a few scratches on it from the last time I was downstairs.”

“I've seen a lot cleaner souls, but some people like that weathered quality,” she joked.

“Great. My soul is like colonial farmhouse furniture,” Dean groaned. “I'm ready to make the deal.”

They sat down on the floor and performed the same ritual she'd executed for Dylaniel, with a few minor changes. When she held out her hand for him to shake, Dean took a deep breath and stared
at her. Last time he'd sold his soul it had been to save Sam, but it'd also been a self-interested move. This time around he wasn't trying to avoid his own pain. His main priority was sparing everyone else. With that small measure of comfort, he took her hand.

“One last thing,” Kay broached as she cleaned up her supplies. “If I don't make it, but you get Sam out… I want to know where you stand on Hell.”

Dean guessed at her concern. “You want to know if I'll stop him from taking Hell’s throne?”

“Hell needs a leader,” she said in a slightly evasive confirmation.

“And the archdemons won't cut it?”

“Someone needs to hold them together and he's the only other person that stands a chance at commanding their respect,” Kay explained the hard truth.

Dean paced the room for a moment, picked up the machete, then turned it over in his hands thoughtfully.

“I used to think simple was better, like, it was clarity or confidence or something. Black and white was best. All the shades of grey made the picture muddy, but that's where all the meaning is. Life is complicated.” Dean nodded to himself. “I'll support Sam, whatever he decides.”

After briefing Ruby on Raphael, Kay called an emergency meeting of the High Council and traveled to the Citadel. News of Sam's abduction had already spread through some of the inner circles of Hell. He wasn't a member of Hell’s hierarchy nor had he ever actively involved himself with Hell’s politics, but ever since he'd defied Azazel’s plan he’d been a topic of gossip among many of the demons in the know. The entire issue of him being a vessel to Lucifer and part of the final seal was not as well known. Looking around the onyx conference table, Kay could feel the mild-to-moderate tension of a partially-informed audience. A more knowledgeable audience would be far more unnerved.

She decided to cut to the chase and backfill the justification so that her request had time to lose its sting. “I need your support to immediately mobilize a larger force on Earth.”

“Having any more of a presence on Earth could be catastrophic for our people,” Opeth warned. “It was my understanding that we're dangerously close to being exposed to the humans.”

“We already are,” Weller corrected. “The monuth is wreaking havoc for us politically.”

“I appreciate your concerns, but right now we can't dwell on our image or lack thereof. If we don't take drastic action we’ll be condemning ourselves.” Kay tried to gently guide them to her point. “We—”

“If we take drastic action, we’ll expose ourselves to the world,” Halphas interrupted.

Kay scowled at the sleight, but decided not to make an example of the archdemon lest she alienate the others when she needed them the most.

“Right now we still have deniability. As long as we stay small and unofficial the humans won't get confirmation that we exist,” Weller added. “Discretion is a pillar of our realm. Just look at what happened to the Crossroads and the Maji when that angel video went out. That was nothing compared to being fully exposed. We’ve always had restrictions on travel to Earth for a reason.”
“If we fail to act now, we'll still be exposed and we'll all die,” Kay stated with an air of authority that silenced the room. “We're talking about the release of Lucifer upon Earth. That is a point beyond which there is no return. He is more powerful than you can even comprehend and he will spend every moment of his immortality trying to take or destroy everything.”

“He may be powerful, but he's one angel—”

“He’s an archangel. He created our realm. Do you have any idea how much political momentum he could control?” Kay gestured upward, indicating Earth and Heaven. “There is a war being waged in Heaven as we speak and I don't know who will win. But I do know that he has followers up there.”

“You can't be serious.” Opeth shudder below his shell, but tried not to show it. “Heaven would never accept him back to their hierarchy. He fell.”

“Thousands of angels are falling. They've never been through anything like this,” Kay pointed out. “They don't have meritoriously structured castes. They don't have elections, visdemons, or archdemons. They were each born to a rank and only ever changed status when one of their choir died. Do you have any idea how much of a wildcard their revolution is?”

“Meanwhile, Lucifer blazed the trail millennia ago,” Crowley mused aloud on the potential sales pitch. “He’s a visionary leader, ahead of his time.”

“He’s a powerful leader to a people who love the chain of command even more than us,” Kay agreed. “We can't sit this fight out. Hell needs to take a stand.”

“What exactly are you proposing?”

“Sam and Lilith are being held captive by angels. Once the last seal is primed they're going to be forced to fight to the death. Sam doesn't want to kill her, but she absolutely wants to kill him,” Kay explained. “We need to save him before that can happen.”

“You're talking about an assault on a stronghold of angels,” Opeth said with clear hesitation in his voice. “We might be able to defend against angels, but actively attacking them is a completely different matter.”

“This is also taking a direct stand against our creator. My caste will split over that. I can't risk half of them running to Lilith,” Halphas complained. “I understand what you're saying, but this civil war has weakened our castes. I can't support any action that might divide my people.”

“I believe what my colleague is saying is that we would have an easier time mobilizing troops if there was a more tangible and immediate interest at stake—something that grasps the hearts and minds of all our people,” Crowley said pointedly. He was asking her to reframe the threat in a more unifying way.

Kay purses her lips. Morrison was staring at her with knowing anticipation. She didn't want to sell Sam, to speak of him in simple terms, but the fact of the matter was that she had to think of messaging. She needed a unifying interest of all of Hell. They could deal with the consequences later.

“Sam's the only person to have successfully bred with a demon. I know for a fact that he's capable of having more demon children, and it's not clear if I can have any,” Kay stated. “Heaven is holding Hell’s best shot at breeding.”

The High Council looked around at each other for a moment, though there wasn't any discussion.
Ruby gathered reagents and a few prototype spells she'd been working on. As she worked, she held her sleeping daughter close, rocking her gently. When there was nothing left to prepare, she slung her bag of supplies over her shoulder, then went in search of either Jody or Bobby.

She found Jody in the library, sitting at one of the workstations, but the laptop was closed. She was a few pages into an old hardback book, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*. Ruby could hardly blame her for wanting to look at something other than bleak news. She and Bobby had both been pulling incredibly long hours over the last week trying to give the team some intel and perspective. Now that everyone's eyes were fixed on a power plant in New York state, the AWOL sheriff was somewhat without immediate direction.

“Good book?” Ruby asked, drawing Jody out of her thrall.

“I haven't read it since I was a kid. I found it while looking for that book on metallurgy.” Jody sniffed the aging pages. “There's something comforting about old books.”

“I know the feeling,” Ruby agreed, then stepped forward to be right next to her. “Can you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

“What do you need?” Bobby asked as he entered the library with two fresh mugs of coffee.

“I'm going with them. Can you watch Kaylee….” Ruby hesitated to ask the greater favor. “And if we don't come back before tomorrow night, can you two take her to my coven? They'll take care of you and get you somewhere safe. She should be with her family.”

“Of course.”

“If Lucifer does get out, he's gonna try to find her. Pascoe can get you in touch with my archdemon, Morrison. I know you don't like demons—”

“We'll do whatever we have to to keep her safe,” Bobby promised, earning a grateful nod.

“I warded her bassinet.” Ruby absentmindedly rocked Kaylee as she spoke. “That should keep her hidden until you reach the camp. There's some formula in the pantry, but you might need to get some more. If she starts crying—”

“She'll be fine,” Jody assured her. “We'll be here when you get back.”

“Be good,” Ruby told Kaylee as she touched the infant’s soft cheek. “Be like your dad.”

Ruby carefully handed Kaylee to Jody, then watched her daughter for a few more seconds. There was so much that she wanted to say and do, but she worried that if she didn't leave then that she might reconsider. Ruby turned to leave the library, but when she started to pass by Bobby he put the coffee down and stopped her. He gently grabbed her upper arms in a gesture just short of a hug.

“You brought him back whole before. I know you can do it again.”

She nodded, unsure of what to say in response. Instead she met his eyes with sincere gratitude. Neither of them attempted a hug, but he gave her arm a soft squeeze as he let her go. Ruby walked out of the library without looking back. She hardly got one turn down the hallways before she saw
Kay, whose eyes lit up as if she'd been searching for her. Kay reached into her jacket, pulled out an angel blade and handed it to Ruby.

“It’s Lucifer’s blade,” Kay explained.

“You should use it,” Ruby suggested.

“I’ve got another one I can use and my powers,” Kay countered. “Just think of it as delivering Sam his blade.”

“He’ll love that,” Ruby muttered as she slipped the blade in her bag. “You ready?”

“Yeah.” Kay nodded. “It’s time for Hell to crash the party.”

“You could probably convince them to spare your family if you gave them Dean,” Lucifer speculated.

“Dean’s part of my family,” Sam silently replied.

“But it’s different now and you know it. If you had to choose between your daughter and him—” Lucifer and Sam both turned their attention to the female guard, who shifted and furrowed her brow.

“’You saw me where I never was and where I could not be. And yet within that very place, my face you often see,’” she muttered to herself in contemplation. “How does a face appear where it is not? That’s an illusion, but is there a distinction between optics and magical deceptions?”

“Are you also on about that?” Tabbris groaned. “It’s a trick; leave it alone.”

“It’s magic then?”

“No, just stop—”

There was the sound of a far away alarm blaring. Both of the guards straightened up and exchanged a glance. The black-haired angel nodded at his partner acknowledging some unspoken agreement. They both drew their blades, then the female angel disappeared. Tabbris paced the room with growing tension. He kept turning to check the door. Sam clutched the sharpened pendant in his hand.

“Don’t do it,” Lucifer warned.

“You want me trapped in here,” Sam countered.

“If you fail, he might kill you,” Lucifer cautioned as Sam casually stood up and moved towards the bars closest to the guard.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked aloud when the guard started to turn back to check on him.

The guard watched Sam lean casually against the bars, then checked the door once more, before saying, “It’s not your concern.”

When the guard turned his back to him, Sam reached through the bars. His left hand grabbed the back of the angel’s shirt, pulling him backward. Sam’s right hand forced the sharpened pendant into the gap between the angel’s neck and skull, severing the spinal cord. Sam continued to pull the angel towards himself as the body fell to the ground.
He scrambled to pick up the dropped angel blade before it rolled out of reach, then he stabbed the angel in the heart. There was a flash of light and the ash wings hit him, but he was in too much of a hurry to notice.

He reached through a different gap in the bars and pulled a set of keys off the body. After a few frantic seconds of trying he realized that none of the keys fit his handcuffs. Next he tried the lock on his cell. As he worked, Lilith began shouting and waving her arms at the security cameras mounted in two of the ceiling corners.

The gate to the cell clicked open on the third key. For a split second Sam thought about taking the blade and going after Lilith, killing her before the sixty-fifth seal was broken. He could let himself into her cell. She was unarmed… but if he’d misjudged the timing then he’d be condemning them all. The cuffs were stopping all his other powers. What was to say that he hadn't missed some vital vision?

Unsure what else to do, he ran for it.
Dean, Dyaniel, Castiel, Hael, Anael, and nearly a hundred fallen angels teleported to roughly fifty feet from the edge of the magical protections surrounding the power plant. Gabriel arrived with Kali a moment later, drawing more than a few whispers. There wasn't much need for reviewing the plan beyond checking to make sure there weren't any obvious surprises.

The facility looked exactly as expected on the outside. It had many auxiliary buildings on all sides of the actual plant and the main building in the center was between two and six stories tall depending on the section, a mass of concrete with exceptionally few windows. From several hundred yards off, Dean could have easily mistaken it for the prison it was.

“We'll move up and over this to give you some cover against aerial attacks,” Kali said once they got a look at the scene.

“If you beat us there maybe try damaging the exterior buildings,” Dean suggested. “They're supposed to have some of the defensive spells in them.”

“Just be mindful of radioactive fuel stores,” Dyaniel added.

“Come on, sweetie.” Gabriel took Kali’s hand. “Let's go break some stuff.”

The couple disappeared. Dean wasn't thrilled to have them out of sight. It had been comforting to have two incredibly powerful creatures right there, but he reminded himself of the scale of their endeavor. They had over a hundred fallen angels and hopefully Kay could get a decent group of demons versus…. Hael had said that there had been a few dozen angels defending Sam, but it was hard to tell how much that'd change once the battle started. Heaven was on lockdown now, though a single call for reinforcements could possibly end that.

“This way,” Hael instructed, then began running along an almost serpentine, invisible path. “Don't stray too far. I don't know how severe the effects——”

“Incoming!” Dyaniel shouted as his eyes flashed with blue light. “Thirty—fifty!”

The wind picked up as dark clouds rolled across the sky with ominous speed. Lightning cracked in the distance and illuminated the silhouettes of winged creatures in the sky coming towards them.

“Here they come!” Anael warned. “Groups One, Two, and Three, help Gabriel with cover!”

Forty-five of the fallen angels that had been running behind and alongside them disappeared in a blur towards the sky. Dean barely had a chance to look up he was too busy trying to follow Hael’s lead across the magical minefield.

“Tell me the storm isn't Raphael,” Dean yelled to the others.

“If Raphael was here, we'd know it,” Dyaniel assured him. “I don't sense that sort of power yet.”

“What the fuck it going on up——” Dean started to ask, but a woman's body fell from the sky, crashing into the ground only a few feet from him. He stumbled, then got to his feet and stared at the corpse. She'd been stabbed with an angel blade. In the few seconds that he was staring, a dark blistering began to creep up her flesh from the point of contact with the ground.

“Keep moving!” Dyaniel said as he grabbed Dean's arm and pulled him along until Dean had
recovered from the shock enough to remember what they were doing.

Every couple seconds there was the dull thwack of another body hitting the ground, but Dean forced himself not to look at the horrific spectacles. He only hoped that they were lucky enough to not be hit by falling corpses.

“Nova: 11 o'clock!” Dylnaeli warned the others as a male angel landed in front of them, blocking their way, and started focusing his destructive power. “Hael, the path—”

Before Dylnaeli could finish asking how to reach the target, one of their support angels flew forward colliding with the nova. The two angels were knocked back several yards and grappled as they rolled through the dirt, which charred their skin. Dylnaeli assessed the situation with a glance then shoved Dean back in the direction they had just come from.

“Back, back!” Ana'al agreed.

There was a loud cracking sound and the smell of ozone tickled Dean's nose, but he wasn't hurt. When he looked around he saw that the three angels in their party closest to the nova were dead along with the nova and the angel who’d forced him away from their group.

They continued running along the invisible path for another dozen yards. “We’re past the first protection. Be careful,” Hael told everyone as they reached the end of the toxic no man’s land. Now that they were out of the bottleneck of the narrow route inside, there was room for their enemies to directly engage them.

“More incoming!” Dylnaeli shouted to everyone after they had only progressed a few more yards. “Four blockers. Five aces.”

Dean gripped his machete and took a deep breath. He tried to focus on his purpose rather than the danger or his insecurities. Sam was in there somewhere and he needed help. They were trying to rescue him. They were trying to stop Lucifer, the pain, and the destruction. He had noble intentions and people who believed in him. He wasn't about to give this anything but his best.

As soon as the second group of angels touched down the world became a strange sort of chaos. Dozens of people collided around him, launching into melee. He'd only ever seen a large scale fight at the temple in India, but he'd witnessed that from afar. Now he was in the middle of one and he could barely tell which way was up.

Unlike the battle at the temple, there was thankfully more ability to distinguish between the fallen angels and Heaven’s angels. With the exception of Castiel, the fallen angels had all assumed diverse clothing while the ones under the command structure of Heaven appeared to be wearing suits in varying shades of grey and black.

“Nova: my two o'clock, female, light—” Dylnaeli was tackled to the ground, interrupting his call out.

Dean quickly glanced between Dylnaeli and the direction of the threat. Based on the incomplete description, he wasn't sure which angel was the nova. There were three different female angels in that generally area who might fit the bill; two of them with light grey suits and the other with bleached hair. Dean moved to help Dylnaeli, but the nephilim pushed the dead attacker off of him and continued the call out.

“—Long, dark hair.”

Dean dodged an attack and didn't bother attempting a counterattack. There was only one thing on
his mind. He bumped into a pair of angels who were fighting each other, but ignored the collision. The smell of ozone started to permeate the area. He swung his machete, slicing off the nova’s head. Her eyes shone white and charcoal wings hit the angels behind her.

“Dean!” Anael grabbed his wrist and led him through the dizzying skirmish toward the main building. Hael was waiting for them with Gabriel, who was telekinetically throwing away any attackers who made to follow them.

“Kali, time to see who’s home,” Gabriel called to out. Dean didn't spot her against the darkening sky until a ribbon of fire forty feet long whipped through the air high above them creating two lesser flashes of white light. Two more bodies hit the ground nearby as Kali appeared next to Gabriel.

“Where's Dyl?”

Dean barely finished asking the question before a sword blade cut through two angels, who collapsed into six pieces. Dyaniel's light grey armor was beginning to restain with fresh blood, but he hardly seemed to notice. The nephilim moved with reassuring speed and composure, but Dean spotted Dyaniel breathing through his mouth for a few seconds, trying to catch his breath.

“You're hurt,” Castiel told Dean.

Before Dean could reject the assessment he looked down and saw that his chest had been cut somewhere in the fray. Castiel gently touched the area around the wound, silently healing it.

He didn't remember getting cut, though he supposed that sometimes happened in the shock of combat, especially around incredibly sharp blades. Luckily, it was a relatively minor reminder that he’d need to be careful—not careful about avoiding injury, that was already on his mind—He needed to pay attention to himself between bursts of action, so that he didn't overlook some more serious injury that might prove too much of a disadvantage going into the next fight.

He wasn't used to this kind of combat, some large scale conflict spread out over who-knew-how-many smaller fights. This was his first taste of war as one of the players, not just a witness, and it was deeply unsettling in a way that he hadn't even considered. Like the cut that hadn't hurt, the reality of this new combat scenario, the experience of a real battle in potentially a real war, it had snuck up on him. He took a deep breath trying to shake off his own shock. There was too much at stake.

Sam ran down the corridor. The first two doors he passed had light shining out below them indicating that they were either currently or had recently been in use. The third door was dark and if he recalled the evacuation map on the wall, it was rather small and hopefully unimportant. He tried the door, which was unlocked, then stepped inside. When the door was closed behind him, he turned on the light.

The room was a combination large closet and improvised break room. It looked as though it was mostly untouched since whenever the building had been in use. Sam hastily looked over the posters and bulletin board on the wall trying to find any insight into his location. There were several informational safety posters regarding notifying superiors. One of them listed various federally mandated rights, including several handwritten phone numbers for emergency services. Written below the other numbers was the contact information for the local chapter of the Utilities Workers Union of America. Taking in that and the bizarre collection of safety advisories, he could only assume that he was in some sort of potentially hazardous power facility.
There were a few supply lockers on the far wall. For the most part they didn't contain anything particularly useful: some liquid solvents that he couldn't identify, an incomplete hazmat suit, a first aid kit that lacked tools of any kind. In the last locker he did find a few hand tools. He took a minute or so to experiment with a dremel tool to see if he could cut off the handcuffs, but the bit shattered before even scuffing the magical restraints. After giving up on the dremel tool, he grabbed a pry bar, a screwdriver, and a hammer, then looked around for a way to carry them along with the angel blade he'd taken from the guard.

Sam spotted a small duffel bag that had been set just inside the door. When he opened it he found a notebook containing what looked like a list written in a language that he didn't recognize. Many of the items on the list appeared crossed off and annotated. He wasn't sure what he was looking at, but he knew someone who might.

“Can you read this?” Sam asked Lucifer.

“It's Enochian.” Lucifer decided to cooperate. “It appears to be a list of duty rotations.”

“I need you to tell me what I'm facing out there.”

“You're forgetting that I don't want you to escape.”

“Do you want me to get killed? Because with or without your help I'm going out there and I'm going to fight angels—with my hands bound. So you better decide fast,” Sam threatened.

He decided to keep searching the duffel in order to give Lucifer some time to change his mind. At the bottom of the bag he found a pistol, three grenades, and another set of warded handcuffs, but there wasn't an accompanying key. Even without the key, he tucked them back into the duffel in the hopes that he could at least experiment on them instead of the ones attached to his body.

“I'm not going to help you beyond a minimal effort to prevent your death,” Lucifer finally said begrudgingly when Sam finished packing the duffel and moved toward the hallway door.

“Fine. Tell me what I'm looking at.”

“The majority of the entries are categorized as ‘exterior’ with no more than ten categorized as ‘interior.’ There were a large number of seraphim. Wait, look at the list again,” Lucifer instructed. Sam pulled out the notebook and began turning the pages at Lucifer’s direction. “They've restructured the units, including the seraphim.”

“What's that mean for me?” Sam waited for Lucifer to respond, but the archangel didn't. The obvious withholding of information made Sam scowl. “What will you tell me?”

“Excluding the angels that we know have been killed, there are seven that have recently been categorized as ‘interior.’”

“And I’m in the interior?”

“It appears so,” Lucifer speculated. “Of the seven angels, three are seraphim.”

“Any ideas on how to avoid th—” Sam was cut off by what sounded like an explosion in the distance.

It seemed likely that someone was trying to force their way into the building. He considered staying where he was. If the cavalry was coming the best thing might be to hide rather than risking being found by Heaven and transported to a more secure location. But at the same time, he was so
close to his cell that as soon as Heaven realized he was missing, it'd only be a short while before they'd find him. He needed to get further out of the prison and with a little luck connect with his rescuers.

“Hiding would be safer,” Lucifer suggested.

“I'm not going to hide.”

“There aren't that many of my siblings patrolling in the area, you may go undetected for some time.”

“Just stop, you aren't going to change my mind.”

“Fine.” Lucifer sounded nearly dejected. “I'm curious to see how you perform on your own.”

Sam rolled his eyes at the archangel suddenly cutting him off. He cautiously peeked out the door, then continued down the hall. According to the map he’d studied from his cell, there was a door around the next bend, but when he got there there was no door. He stopped for a moment to picture the map again, desperate to figure out his mistake. Then he noticed the texture of the wall in front of him. It was rough concrete compared to the otherwise smooth surface. The exit had been sealed.

That changed everything. He ducked into a nearby utility alcove in an attempt to hide. His escape route would no longer work. He started drawing out the map with his finger on the wall, trying to settle on another way out. Unfortunately, every route he could think of was equally obvious because they'd been based on such a simplified map of the building.

The doors were such a blatant vulnerability for Heaven to fortify. He was a human. He was a creature of primitive needs, like corporeal travel. The angels probably found some strange novelty in the disparity… but, he realized, the lack of familiarity might also create an area of oversight on their part.

He tried to think of things that angels didn't need. The bathrooms would almost certainly be fully interior rooms with nothing of benefit there, unless he could find a way to utilize the building’s plumbing. He wasn't sure where the kitchen was, if the building had a kitchen at all. It seemed a bit unlikely that anyone would want to cook complex meals inside a power plant. He leaned his head back against the wall. Feeling out of options and ideas, he took a deep breath, letting out a long sigh. His eyes widened at a sudden thought, then he started looking through the electrical panels in front of him.

It only took a few minutes for Dean and his group to reach the security checkpoint. After killing the guards, they checked the neglected bank of twelve security monitors in the back of the station. Three of the screens were static. One monitor showed a barred cell with a large clear barrier down the middle. There was a blonde woman, presumably Lilith, waving her arms at the camera on one side, but the other side was empty and the cell door was ajar.

“He was there earlier,” Hael said in her defense, pointing to the empty half of the cell.

“No fucking way,” Dean muttered as he gestured toward the bottom left monitor.

Sam was visible, wedged in a maintenance alcove studying the contents of an electrical panel. Based another monitor, an angel was walking down the hallway toward him. Sam paused, then drew an angel blade from his pocket. As the angel passed the opening to the alcove, he pulled the angel in. There was some movement that was hard to discern, then a flash of white light, and part
of an ash wing marked the hallway wall across from the alcove.

“Do you know where that is?” Dyaniel asked Hael.

“One moment,” she replied as she studied the various monitors.

They watch Sam stuff the body into the back of the alcove as much as possible, then resume whatever he’d been working on. After consulting a set of papers that were mounted to the inside of an electrical cabinet door, Sam began systematically flipping switches. After each switch he’d wait for a second for some reaction, then undid it.

Anael voiced everyone's thoughts. “What's he doing?”

She had barely asked the question when two of the security monitors went dark. Luckily neither was featuring Sam, but it still was unnerving to see their limited source of intel further reduced.

“Is he messing with the security system?” Dean asked, unsure whether that sort of thing was possible with a simple electrical panel.

“There's nothing wrong with the cameras,” Dyaniel commented, then pointed at one of the almost black screens. When he blocked the screen from the ambient glare, several small emergency lights were visible on it. After a moment the lights in those sections flickered back on, but the hallways featured in another two monitors went dark. “He's working his way down the circuit breaker.”

“Circuit breaker?” Hael asked, unfamiliar with the human technology.

“He's temporarily cutting power to different areas or systems one at a time.”

“Come on, Sammy,” Dean muttered. “Tell us what the fuck you're doing.”

“He could be trying to reboot something,” Anael suggested.

“He can't stay there,” Castiel observed aloud. “He is too exposed for him to be in that location for much longer.”

Dean looked to their two most powerful people for whatever help they might be able to offer.

“Kali, Gabe—we could use some of that super-powerful mojo right now.”

“I believe he’s that way.” Kali pointed in a direction. “But I don't know how to get there short of breaking through the walls in a straight line.”

“At this point.” Dean gestured to the concrete wall in invitation.

Kali approached the far wall, then placed her hands to it. She dragged her hands in an “X” pattern along the wall, leaving what looked like faint scorch marks behind. Her palms rested on the intersection for a second while she repositioned her feet further apart for stability. She pulled back her hands, then hit the center of the X, cracking the wall along the pattern. A second hit made the whole section of the concrete wall start to crumble, creating a hole slightly smaller than a doorway.

“So hot,” Gabriel commented quietly, then spoke to Kali. “Sweetie, be careful about the load bearing walls.”

“The building can be short-lived from here forward,” Kali replied with a bit too much indifference.

“Just be careful that our mortals here don't end up short lived.”
Dean turned away from the spectacle to check the monitors again. Sam was still working at the circuit breaker box. Another angel came down the hallway, but stopped short of the alcove when she saw the partial wing print on the wall. She drew her blade and approached cautiously. When she was nearly there, the lights around her and Sam turned off. A couple flashing emergency lights were the only illumination in the dark hallway.

“Can angels see in the dark?” Dean asked with a sinking feeling.

Dean watched the screens anxiously as the scene played out in flashes of the emergency lighting. The angel looked around herself, apparently startled by the loss of power. She took a few steps while staring up at the inactive primary lights. Her footsteps must’ve made some noise because Sam suddenly faced her direction. He pulled the angel blade back out of his pocket, pressed himself against the wall just around the corner from the angel, and crouched down in alcove.

The angel stepped in front of the alcove and turned to check it. Sam lunged forward, but instead of simply tackling her, he stopped his body short. He swung his arms around to hit the back of the angel’s knees and shins from behind. The angel’s feet were knocked out from under her and she fell backwards. Sam used the momentum of the upswing, bringing the angel blade he was holding down, stabbing her in the chest. The flash of white light in the darkness stunned Sam for a moment, but after a few seconds he retrieved the blade and gingerly made his way back to the breaker cabinet. After a few more flips of switches all the security monitors switched to a screen informing them that the signal had been lost.

“Caution. Primary containment systems failure,” an alarm announced. “Venting procedure activated. Please evacuate the building and proceed to a safe distance.”

“Is that toxic?” Dean asked, suddenly having a new set of concerns.

“The fuel shouldn't be located in the reactor at this point. There shouldn't be much danger,” Anael speculated.

“This alarm isn't helping him, the doors are all sealed and it's just bringing more attention to him.”

“Maybe he doesn't know the doors are sealed?” Hael guessed.

“Why pull something crazy like this without even checking the door?” Dean pointed out. “Sam’s too smart to not have a reason for doing this.”

“What does ‘venting procedure’ mean?” Dylaniel asked, silencing everyone else’s speculation.

Dean ran his fingers through his hair. “Sammy, you can't be serious.”

“Does this change our plan?” Castiel asked while watching for more attackers.

“Hey, we're still trying to work our way in unless you know where he's going,” Dean answered as he paced a bit—until the scene outside a nearby window caught his attention. He approached the window in a slight daze, then looked back and forth between the others and the exterior of the building. “Uh, guys. You need to see this.”

The large mass of black clouds had overtaken the entire area… and they weren’t storm clouds. Several monstrous tendrils of black smoke surrounded the complex, but didn't encroach inside of the protective barrier. The mass was so large that Dean couldn't see the top of it through the window. It crackled with electricity that illuminated the cloud in flashes of purple. Between the gaps in the outer complex buildings he could see a large sea of people doing something just beyond the protective magic barrier. Two sudden bursts of fire shot up from the mob of people.
“What is it?” Hael asked.

“That's Hell,” Dean replied.

“That’s our backup,” Dylaniel corrected. “Once they find a way to breach.”

When Ruby and Kay arrived there were already thousands of people surrounding the power plant. Ruby blinked her eyes black and realized that they were all demons. A massive black cloud of bodiless demons hovered in the air above them looking for a weak point in the angels’ defenses. A path cleared before Kay as the two of them made their way to the interior edge of the gathering. Ruby recognized several dozen high-ranking Maji standing at the brink of the anti-demon warding. They were trying to bring down the barrier.

“Has anyone come or gone?” Kay asked one of the commanders.

“The allied angels and their companions just entered. Some of Heaven’s forces arrived moments later and engaged allied angels over the tainted ground,” he informed Kay. “Heaven tried to ignore us, but the clouds grounded half of them as they entered. We're picking them out of the sky as best we can before they enter the anti-demon warding.”

“Are the prisoners being prepped?”

“We’re almost ready.”

“Prepped?” Ruby asked with a mixture of professional curiosity and concern. The commander guided them a few hundred yards through the crowd to a clearing. One of the angel prisoners was unconscious on the ground. A few demons were preparing to sacrifice it— She recognized the ritual. “You're making more of those things.”

“Monuth are guardians of suffering souls. I think we qualify,” Kay observed aloud. “And angels don't have souls. By the time we get the birds in the air, Cas, Anael—all the angels you know should be deep enough into the complex to be safe from them.”

“And our angel grunts?” Ruby asked, though she didn't even need to wait for an answer from Kay. She knew that the fallen angels were almost certainly so outmatched that they’d soon be slaughtered even without the addition of friendly fire. “And the grunts are grunts.”

“There’s gonna be a lot of death before this is done,” Kay replied.

Ruby briefly considered the complete lack of subtlety surrounding her. “What happened to political damage control?”

“At this point do you care?”

“No.” Ruby looked over at the building where Sam was being held. “Not even a little.”

Ruby watched as fourteen pillars of fire shot up from different parts of the crowd. A monuth rose from the flames immediately before them. In the distance several of the beasts shrieked and took flight circling the area. The monuth in front of them stared at Kay, who cautiously moved closer to the giant bird after a moment’s hesitation. The beast pulled its body back slightly at her approach, but it didn't attack or flee.

“Do you remember what you are?” Kay spoke softly to the monuth in Abyssal while carefully approaching the creature. “Do you remember your creator?”
Kay slowly pulled off her jacket, so as not to startle it. She manifested her wings, which made the monuth take a step back and tilt its head. Her wings gradually illuminated with a brilliant light.

Ruby had to avert her gaze, and when she looked up she saw the other monuth circling, observing Kay’s demonstration of the First Light. The birds weren’t just circling, they were flying over the anti-demon warding. Ruby pushed past a few people to get another look at Heaven’s defensive magic. There was an entire layer of warding that was specific to Abyssal, but the underlying mechanism was just a basic anti-magic ward. A demon couldn’t float by as a cloud or drag a meatsuit through it, but a creature capable of non-magical motion like the monuth could cross it despite being Abyssal. Kay could cross it and so could Sam.

She hurried back to find that Kay had reverted her wings to black and was actually petting the crown of the monuth.

“Kay, the birds can cross the barrier. I think you can too. It’s just fucking with magical flight and animation of corpses,” Ruby explained.

Kay glanced at the stretch of toxic land between them and the power plant, then looked back to Ruby. “If I can get you across, will you be functional?”

“I think… maybe, probably.” She shrugged. “I’m willing to find out.”

“Find a way of getting our people across,” Kay instructed a visdemon that was nearby, then she turned her attention back to Ruby. “How do you feel about flying?”

“I told you I can’t smoke or blink across—”

“That’s not what I had in mind.”

Sam made his way through the interior section of the building. The area was largely empty, which had initially surprised him until a series of explosions in the distance made him realize whatever was happening outside was probably a major distraction. Anyway, as far as he could tell, all the doors out were sealed. At first glance it appeared that he didn’t have a way of escaping unless someone managed to get in to him. Making sure that outsiders didn’t get in was undoubtedly a much higher priority than making sure he was in the smaller of his two enclosures.

He’d killed two other angels by sneaking up on them, but generally he felt like Zachariah must’ve been underestimating the situation…. Well, that or maybe he was underestimating whatever was happening outside. Either way, he had a few uninterrupted minutes to search the area. When he saw a heavy metal door with a pressure seal on it he smiled for the first time since he’d been captured. After taking a breath to calm his nerves a bit he tried the door. The door opened, the chamber inside wasn’t pressurized. He rammed the steel pry bar into part of the door’s edge, hoping that it would prevent the chamber from accidentally sealing once he was inside.

“This seems patently dangerous,” Lucifer observed inside Sam’s head.

“If you can’t say something nice…” he replied while testing the stability of the pry bar.

“Is there an end to your statement?”

Sam nearly rolled his eyes before explaining, “It’s part of a phrase.”

“Ah. We won’t be able to access each other’s trivia memory until I’ve possessed you—”
“Just shut up.” Sam cringed at the thought that he was slipping back into being almost conversational with the genocidal creature that wanted to possess him.

“You seem agitated,” Lucifer said proddingly. “It might be best if you stop what you're doing before you get hurt.”

“You're the one agitating me.” He nearly hissed the thought. “If you want me focused, by all means, stop distracting me.”

Sam stepped into the ten-foot-diameter cylindrical chamber, then looked up at the venting mechanism above him. It was an elaborate fan that was too high up and lacked any way of scaling the chamber like a ladder—not that he was very confident in his ability to climb a ladder with his wrists bound together. Going out through the exhaust system was no longer in the cards, but he wasn't prepared to completely disregard the ventilation system. Since angels didn't have to breathe, he hoped that whatever defenses they may have put in place skipped over the entire system.

There was the sound of two explosions in rapid succession. It sounded a ways off, but he could feel the tremors from the blasts. The assault was getting closer. Despite the temptation to give up on his current plan and head toward the signs of battle he wasn't sure that was the right choice. Not only was there always the risk that Heaven was fighting Lilith’s rescuers, there was also a very real danger that the closer he got the more likely it became that he would be caught by Heaven. As far as he knew, he was still behind enemy lines and, all things being equal, the raging battle was where the majority of Heaven's troops would be heading. Unable to safely turn back, he had to continue forward, but his original plan hadn't panned out. He couldn't go up, but that didn't necessarily mean that he couldn't use that route to his advantage.

Sam took one of the grenades and pulled the pin. He started counting the seconds, threw it down the hall back from where he'd come from, then hid around the doorway. After four seconds it exploded. He took a second grenade, pulled the pin, then counted to three. With less than a second to go, he threw the grenade up towards the fan blades before diving back into the hallway. There was an explosion and several of the large metal blades fell down into the cylindrical chamber. Without missing a beat he dropped the extra pair of handcuffs on the floor by the broken fan blades, then hurried to the other side of the small chamber.

Dean had stopped keeping track of how many angels they'd killed as they made their way deeper into the building. It didn't hurt that Kali was taking a no-nonsense approach to moving with purpose: if something was in her path she would simply pummel the obstacle until it was no longer in her path. After dropping another four angels, Dean noticed Dylaniel dip two fingers into the blood of one of the dead angels, then walked over to the wall. The nephilim drew two parallel lines that curved slightly as they descended forward.

“Ward?” Dean asked.

“No. Leaving a series of arrows behind us is too obvious,” Dylaniel explained.

“I think the trail of corpses might be sufficiently telling,” Anael countered.

“Yes, but hopefully we'll eventually run out of those and this way I can indicate directions,” Dylaniel replied before elaborating. “It's a guide marker system we used in the AFE. More than one parallel curved lines with the lowest end pointing the way. A hook on the end indicates a sharp turn ahead.”

“If we survive this, you're gonna have to show me all your AFE tricks,” Dean commented.
“That would require years of training.”

“I'm not getting any older,” Anael said to indicate her own interest.

“What's an AFE?” Hael asked, unfamiliar with any of the details of the alternate timeline.

Before Dylaniel or Dean could start to formulate a concise answer another group of angelic defenders arrived. The conversation was abandoned entirely when a second skirmish interrupted them. After dropping the last enemy without slowing her stride, Kali abruptly stopped walking, then touched Gabriel's arm. Everyone else froze, waiting for another attack. Dean checked to see if Dylaniel’s eyes had flashed with blue light, but Dylaniel seemed equally at a loss.

“The humans are almost here,” Kali said as she tilted her head to indicate a particular direction. The rest of the group looked at each other, then her in confusion.

“Humans?” Dylaniel asked.

Dean didn't know whether he or Kali looked more unsettled by the development. He wasn't sure why humans were suddenly a concern when they were fighting their way through an angelic stronghold.

“Yes, at least ten for now,” Kali replied and turned to Gabriel, who seemed willing to humor her despite also not fully appreciating the situation. “We need to stop them.”

Eager to understand the issue, Dean asked, “We're facing seraphim and you're worried about ten humans strolling—“

“They're flying.” Kali cut him off. “And some of them are armed with nuclear weapons.”

“Oh, that's….” Gabriel’s words faded, unable to think of a joke. He looked to Dean and Anael as he took Kali's hand. “We’ll be back in a few. Try not to be incinerated without us.”

Dean watched their two most powerful people disappear while the implications of the new wildcard began racing through his mind. The U.S. Air Force was on the verge of bombing them. After seeing the chaos surrounding the plant he couldn't even blame them. A few days ago a Hell beast had flown through Seattle. Now there was some unholy swarm attacking a nuclear power plant. No wonder they wanted to shoot first and ask questions later.

“They wouldn't actually nuke the place, right?” Dean asked with growing concern, while the group continued moving through the complex. “I mean this place already has fuel on site.”

“Does that make it more dangerous?” Hael asked.

“I don't know. Does anyone know anything about this stuff?” Dean looked to the others, who didn't answer. “Jesus Christ. We don't have any nerds with us.”

“They might think the demons are trying to seize the fuel,” Castiel speculated, ignoring Dean's bemoaning. “It might be preferable to destroy an overwhelming threat in a known location with more damage than let the threat escape with a slightly lesser arsenal.”

“But the demons aren't pursuing the fuel caches,” Hael observed aloud with some confusion.

“Humans are generally slow to learn and quick to react,” Anael explained for her sister’s benefit.

“Kali's a god. She can stop some planes, right?” Dean asked Dylaniel as they started jogging down
the hallway with even more urgency than before.

“She and Gabriel are the best qualified to handle that situation,” Dylaniel commented.

“That wasn't a yes.”

“Depending on how many there are, I don't know if she can stop them all.”

“Sometimes it's okay to lie to me,” Dean told him.

“How about this: can you fly?” Dylaniel asked in a move that seemed too obvious to be anything other than snark. “Then keep running.”

“Get on.”

Kay gestured at the monuth, presenting what in Ruby's opinion had to be the least desirable mode of transportation in history.

“This is the worst idea I've ever been a part of,” Ruby complained. “It's a giant untrained bird.”

“There's a little bit of precedent for Abyssal mounts.” Kay gently pushed down on the monuth’s back, eventually encouraging it to lower into a more accessible posture. Despite the minor display of control or at least cooperation, Ruby stood with her arms firmly crossed.

“When?”

“My brother rode a hellhound occasionally,” Kay replied, earning an unenthusiastic half-nod of mere acknowledgement.

“This is completely not that scenario,” Ruby countered. “You've never even seen one of these in real life before.”

Kay’s voice lost some volume and confidence as she spoke for Ruby’s ears only. “Listen, I know how insane this is, but I don't have a better idea and we're losing time. In lieu of suggestions, I'll take positivity because right now I'll take anything I can get.”

Ruby let out a sigh, then halfheartedly said, “The fact that it's a predator hopefully means it can carry some extra weight.” She knew that they were low on options and the longer they waited the more likely they were to be too late. Every minute they hesitated, Dean and Dylaniel’s group pressed further into the complex without backup. More importantly, every second that passed moved Sam closer to possibly being killed in order to break the final seal. “Let's go have the most badass deaths of this entire ridiculous battle.”

“You climb on first.” Kay started miming her idea for the positioning. “That way I can help hold you on when you lose control of your meatsuit.”

“And fall to my destruction, taking you with me,” Ruby muttered while petting the monuth.

“I'll be fine, and if we get some altitude before we cross the anti-magic threshold we'll both be fine.”

“How exactly do you plan on steering a giant bird?”

“The same way a bird steers a bird.” Kay extended her wings, then tilted them from side to side as if she was turning midair.
“Awesome.” Ruby took a second to summon her courage before starting to test the boundaries of the monuth’s comfort with her.

While Ruby and Kay were gingerly figuring out how to climb onto the monuth, Joseba made his way through the crowd. When Kay looked over at him he was smiling with a combination of amusement and admiration. She straightened up to appear a bit more confident at the realization that he was part of her audience.

The corner of his mouth curled into a subtle smile as he told her, “You really do bring the Second Season.”

“It’s a whole new world,” Kay replied after looking around at the unprecedented demonic presence.

“And this is the first battle of its first war,” Joseba added.

“Let’s go make it the last.”

“Ma’am.” Joseba pointed to the horizon behind her. Another cloudfront of black moved in quickly from the South.

“Reinforcements?” Ruby asked as she blinked her eyes black along with everyone around her.

“Yeah, but not ours.” Kay turned to one of the nearby commanders. “Lilith’s forces don't get through.”

“Understood,” he acknowledged before disappearing.

“I want as many heavyweights over there as possible,” Kay ordered Joseba. “Abaddon is in that force somewhere and she's gotta be packing every Knight she has in her arsenal. I need you to find a way in there and cover me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Joseba smiled more candidly at her before turning to shout a few commands to the demons around him and disappearing into the crowd.

With the new threat of Lilith's forces quickly approaching, Kay and Ruby stopped contemplating the risks involved in riding the monuth and instead focused on getting moving. The beast jostled slightly when Ruby climbed onto it, but it didn't buck or screech. Once Ruby had stabilized herself, Kay climbed on behind her.

“Do I hold onto feathers or grab its neck?” Ruby asked.

“I’d say arms on the neck. It sucks having feather yanked out,” Kay muttered while reaching on either side of Ruby to hold the base of the monuth’s wings. “Ready?”

“Close enough.”

Kay tugged gently on the monuth’s wings while tapping on its hind and shouting whatever words of encouragement she could think of in Abyssal. The monuth reared up, making them hold tight, then it took off. Ruby initially slipped back a bit, but Kay used telekinesis to help get them through the worst of it. Luckily, once they were sufficiently off the ground the monuth’s body became somewhat more horizontal. They circled a few times to gather some altitude. Kay held her wings tight to her body while pressed Ruby and herself as close to the bird as possible to reduce drag. After gaining some height the other monuth fell into a loose flock formation.

Below and around them Lilith's army began engaging with Hell's. Meanwhile, Heaven’s forces
were lashing out at anyone it could. There were physical battles on the ground surrounding the anti-magic no-man’s-land between embodied demons. Angels clashed in the air high above the power plant, occasionally flashing upon death before plummeting to the earth. Giant tendrils of dueling smoke clouds swirled, colliding in flashes of lightning. An inhuman, hissing howl emanated from the grappling masses. The dead demons burned away, littering the air with ash and brimstone. The whole thing reminded Ruby of two kraken battling over a damaged ship.

“So much for subtlety,” Ruby commented, watching the fight between the two demon armies.

Several tendrils of smoke slammed into the invisible barrier. A few much smaller wisps of smoke managed to breach the exterior of the warded area, but fizzled out part way in. The ground cracked near the edge of the the warding, but didn't penetrate inward.

“Well, that's…” Kay commented at the sight of a truck full of demons driving across the field. Unfortunately, without control of their meatsuits, the vehicle was only able to drive in a straight line. It only got about halfway before the the toxic effect of the ground blew out the tires. The truck swerved, rolled, then caught fire with the immobilized demons inside.

When they reached a reasonable height and were aimed toward the plant, Kay opened her wings and tilted in order to direct them the right way. The monuth took a second to realize that it was being pulled in two directions, but corrected without causing much trouble. The flock adjusted to the change in course. To Kay and Ruby’s surprise, when the flock took aim at the general territory of the battling angels many of the monuth began screeching. A pair of the giant birds sped passed them, dive bombing two groups of angels and began tearing their vessels apart.

“Here we go!” Kay shouted into Ruby's ear. When they crossed the threshold, Ruby’s body immediately became limp. The monuth shifted from the dead weight that failed to correct with it. Kay tried to counter with her own wings to keep the giant bird on course, but she couldn't quite get the angle right. Without the ability to properly steer and with the sudden risk of Ruby being tossed in the erratic movement, she decided to adjust the plan. Kay wrapped her arms around Ruby's torso, just below her armpits and held her tight. “Sorry about this!”

Kay loosened her hold on the monuth with her legs, then tilted her wings upward to create as much air resistance as possible. The bird flew forward, out from under them. Kay locked her legs around one of Ruby's legs in order to hold her more securely as she readjusted her wings to take them back on course, straight through the warded region.

Unfortunately, Kay’s wings were carrying roughly twice her weight. She gritted her teeth and groaned as the muscles in her back strained under the burden. They started descending a bit too fast. Kay struggled with balancing the necessary angle for gliding and creating enough air resistance to slow their fall.

“Talk as soon as you can!” Kay yelled. Her body was shaking from the adrenaline and physical exertion. “I need to know when I can use my powers.”

“Now!” Ruby shouted two painfully long seconds later. Her body tensed waiting for the impact, but they abruptly slowed down. Less than ten feet from the ground, Kay dropped Ruby and dismissed her wings. They had decelerated enough to hit the ground with only enough force to send them each rolling a few feet. When Ruby sat up she saw Kay lying on her back checking her nose for blood. “Telekinesis?”

“Without it I can't land for shit,” Kay admitted as she dabbed a few red drops from her nose.

“Remind me to never fly with you again.”
Ruby dug through her bag to see if any of her potions or equipment had broken. After throwing away a few damaged charms, she stood up and walked over to Kay, who was experimenting with moving her upper body. Ruby extended a hand to help her up, which Kay accepted, then grimaced at the movement.

“You okay?”

“I think I just pulled about a hundred muscles I never knew existed, but I'll live.” Kay stretched a bit, though her expression was considerably more fatigued that before the flight.

“How about your powers?” Ruby pointed to the blood. “The nosebleed is always a bad sign for Sam.”

“I've still got a lot of juice. I'll be fine,” Kay assured her. “Anyway, my powers are stronger when my adrenaline's up.”

“I'm guessing adrenaline isn't gonna be in short supply.”

“Any suggestions for where to start looking for the others?” Kay asked as she finished wiping the last of the blood from her face.

“I have an idea.” Ruby pointed towards one of the main building’s doors about fifty feet away that was propped open with a dead body.

Kay and Ruby didn't wait for backup before heading into the building. Until the rest of the demons could find their own method through, the two of them would have to do as reinforcements. They moved through the building fairly quickly since the others had cleared a path as they went. Occasionally they would have to stop for a moment if there was a suspicious sound or the like, but overall they were making good time. They were climbing through the third hole in a wall that Kay insisted had been made by Kali when two explosions could be heard somewhere nearby.

“That can't fucking go wrong,” Ruby groaned. “I know it's chaotic, but no matter who's blowing shit up you think they’d realized they’re gonna get friendly fire.”

“If our side was smart they'd just start hurling bombs at us too,” Kay speculated. “We're the only team that still technically wins if everyone gets crushed to death by rocks.”

“Please tell me you've inspired sufficient loyalty in them.”

“I inspired self-interest.” Kay hesitated, then added, “That reminds me, if we live through this, you, Sam, and I need to have a little talk about the future of the Abyssal.”

“Fucking hell.” Ruby looked over her shoulder at Kay. She could suddenly understand how Kay had mobilized so many demons in such as short time. Sam's reproductive future had been used as a bargaining chip. It wasn't clear what that meant for him individually or them as a couple. She supposed it was something of a moot point depending on who all survived the next few minutes or hours, but it was still a bit unsettling to think that her and Sam’s sex life could’ve been part of the motivation of an entire army. “Let me go back to thinking about multiple tons of concrete falling on us.”

“At least it'll be quick,” Kay said with false optimism.

“Says you,” Ruby complained. “Even if I dump my meatsuit, I can't get out of this bell jar with the warding up.”
After several corridors they stopped seeing doorway-sized holes in the walls and the ability to
discern the route the others had taken became noticeably harder. It wasn't too hard to follow when
they found the occasional collection of bodies and open doors, but when they reached a four way
intersection in the hallway with no obvious destination they had to stop for a second. Choosing the
wrong way would not only delay them, but also risked sending them into territory that hadn't been
at least somewhat cleared of enemies.

“They're probably headed into the center of the building,” Ruby mused aloud while trying to recall
all the turns they'd previously made in order to determine which direction they were facing.

“We could just try each direction for a short while to see if—”

“That's weird.” Ruby pointed to a smudge of blood on the wall along the right hall. There wasn't a
body in the immediate area. “I'm guessing angels don't get weak from injuries and end up dragging
along walls.

“They can, but it's not common,” Kay corrected as she went to examine the smudge. It was three
parallel curved streaks of blood that descended deeper into the complex. “I think this is a
breadcrumb.”

“Well, follow that blood.” Ruby gestured for Kay to lead on.

They passed a hallway that extended off to the right of where they were headed. When they
reached the three way intersection, six angels suddenly appeared in the corridor in front of them,
but their arrival wasn't particularly elegant. Only four of the angels landed on their feet, while the
other two stumbled. The angels quickly recovered, straightening and readying their weapons.

“I guess flight’s down,” Ruby commented as she drew the angel blade from her bag. Her eyes
flicked to the side hall, watching for either a flanking party or an avenue of retreat.

Several of the angels eyed the blade nervously, but that didn't stop them from charging. The
angels ran toward them in a move that Ruby would've expected Kay to find more worrying than
her unimpressed face conveyed. When the angels were about ten feet away, Kay raised her hands
to them. With one hand she slowed the group and with the other hand she burned everything in
front of her with the First Light. When Ruby was able to look back all she saw was six charred
corpses. The angels’ ash wings were indistinguishable from the blackened floor, walls, and ceiling.

Ruby reflexively held her breath as the stench of burning flesh crept into her nose.

“Never attack someone who does directional AOE damage through a bottleneck,” Kay critiqued
while continuing down the hall, snapping a few bones under her boots in the process.

“Why don't you use that more often?” Ruby kicked one of the corpses as she passed, curious to see
the extent of the damage.

“Friendly fire.” Kay reached up and subtly checked her nose for blood. “I can't see what I'm
shooting at, so the practicality isn't there most of the time.”

“You okay energy-wise?”

“Cost benefit, it was worth it. We're no good if we don't survive long enough to find them.”

“No complaints from me about not having to fight six angels, but if you start running out of
energy, I need to know,” Ruby warned. “I might have a bag of tricks, but none of them let me read
minds. If you need help, you gotta tell me. This isn't the time to be a hero— Well, you know what
I mean.”
Dean watched as Anael tried the handle of the metal door, found that it was locked, then kicked at it. Instead of breaking the door, she rebounded off it, stumbling backwards. She stared at the obstacle in mild disbelief before scowling.

“Something’s wrong,” she said disapprovingly.

“I can't teleport past it,” Castiel informed the others. “Flight has been impaired at various times throughout the process, but this does feel different.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Different how?”

“I think…” Hael reached out at the empty space in front of the door. “I think our abilities won't work.”

“This may be the door meant to be opened with the key,” Castiel suggested.

“I'm not sure where to locate a key,” Hael said apologetically. “We could go back and search for —”

“Everyone calm down,” Dean reassured the visibly distressed angels. He knelt down in front of the door, pulled the lock picking tools from his pocket, and got to work. “Surrounded by people who can punch through a tank and I'm getting the door.”

“Shouldn't you be concentrating?” Anael criticized.

“Contrary to popular belief, nine out of ten locks don't require any brains or skill. For a cylinder lock like this you literally just apply gentle pressure and tickle the inside a few times until the pins —” The cylinder of the lock clicked and rotated a few degrees to the left. Dean carefully rotated it a bit more, then turned the handle. “Powers really have made you angels lazy.”

“Let me go first,” Anael instructed, placing her hand on Dean's shoulder and directing him towards the back of the group. When he opened his mouth to voice some complaint about being coddled she cut him off. “You and Dyaniel aren't expendable.”

The group continued through the labyrinth of halls with Hael navigating as best she could. Per Anael’s insistence, Dean and Dyaniel stayed in the middle of the group with Anael and Hael in the front and Castiel in the back. Dean nearly bumped into Hael when everyone else in the group suddenly stopped moving and looked around in confusion.

Castiel tilted his head. “What's that?”

“What's what?” Dean asked, then looked around for anything out of the ordinary.

“There's an unusual sound.”

Dean furrowed his brow at his limited senses, but within a second he could start to hear a high pitch whining noise that was getting louder and louder. It seemed familiar, something he'd seen in a movie.

“I don’t—”

“Get down! The corner! Now!” Dyaniel shouted at the group. They barely managed to press themselves into the corner of the concrete hallway before there was a crashing sound. An explosion blew away the door leading to the segment of hallway that they'd just been in. Dyaniel
let out a sigh before explaining. “That was the sound of a small, high-speed aircraft descending too sharply.”

The corridor behind them was filling with oily smoke. A massive hole had been smashed through both sides of the hallway. At least a ton of rubble and pieces of glowing hot metal littered the impact path. Burning fuel spread out around the wreckage.

“Jesus fuck,” Dean muttered at the sight of the damage. “When Kali said she would try to stop the planes I didn't expect—”

Dean started coughing and his eyes began watering from the smoke. He staggered back a few feet before Hael took his arm, pulling him further away from the hazardous spectacle. When he turned away from the crash site, he saw that Dylaniel was covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve.

“Come on. You two shouldn't be breathing that.” Anael warned them. “We need to keep moving.”

“How’re Kay and Ruby supposed to get through that?” Dean managed to ask once they were further away and Hael had healed his respiratory system.

“They might have to find a way around,” Castiel suggested.

“They're resourceful,” Dylaniel assured him, voice wheezing slightly. Castiel touched the nephilim’s chest, then Dylaniel thanked him in his normal voice.

After rounding one last corner they reached a wall containing a concrete sealed doorway. Without Kali’s physical strength, they decided to merely teleport through during one of the lapses in the anti-flight aura, rather than spend several minutes breaking it down. If everyone capable of teleporting was going to end up dying in the next while, then Sam and Dean would have bigger concerns than getting through a single wall.

They were barely inside the building’s interior section when a pair of angels saw them. One of the angels was a seraphim, who stepped forward to fight them with confidence. Dylaniel sprinted forward, engaging the seraphim in melee combat that Dean recognized as being something of a routine for the nephilim.

The other angel didn't attack, instead he glanced at Dean and Dylaniel, then took half a step back at the realization of who they were. Castiel ran and leapt at him. They disappeared as soon as Castiel made contact, but reappeared slamming into the ceiling ten feet further down the hall. The pair fell to the ground while grappling and Castiel ended up on top. He stabbed downward, impaling the angel of Heaven at the same time that Dylaniel sliced the seraphim in half at the waist.

“We need to be vigilant of runners,” Castiel observed. When he stood up he touched his black pants only to discover that his palm had blood on it. He stared at the blood in surprise, then wobbled slightly. Hael and Dean hurried over to him, each taking one of his arms to steady him.

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“Where's the hit?” Dean asked as he started pushing away the trench coat and suit jacket. There was a several inch deep stab wound in Castiel's right side. It hadn't hit the right areas to be lethal to an angel, even with the weapon having been an angel blade, but there was a considerable amount of blood loss. “Can we heal it?”

“The attacker was a choir beyond us,” Hael said apologetically. “Gabriel could heal it.”

“One moment.” Anael closed her eyes in concentration. “He said that they're almost done with the humans for now and then they'll try to find us.”
“We need to keep moving,” Castiel insisted.

“I have an idea.” Dylaniel disappeared, then reappeared a few seconds later. He’d taken off his leather jacket and wrapped it around his right hand. The jacket was acting as only-somewhat-effective insulation for a large jagged piece of metal that Dylaniel was holding. The narrower end of the shrapnel was red hot.

“You can't be seri—” Dean began, but Dylaniel had already shoved the hot metal into Castiel's wound, earning a loud grunt of pain. The smell of burning flesh made Dean want to vomit or faint, but he was too busy trying to hold Castiel upright to succumb to either.

“You shouldn't have as much blood loss with the wound cauterized,” Dylaniel explained to Castiel. “Would you prefer that I take out the shard or leave it in?”

“Out,” Castiel groaned.

He slumped a bit as Dylaniel pulled the metal from him and tossed it aside. He tried to lift himself up to his full height, but the pain and the physical shock was still a bit too much. Dean repositioned to get a better grip on the injured angel.

“I got you,” Dean assured.

“We should keep moving. I'll survive this injury,” Castiel said as he cautiously attempted to stand up under his own power. He exhaled slowly in a worrying display of discomfort, but didn't complain.

“Are you sure—” Dean started while reluctantly letting go of him.

“It's more important that we be armed and ready for an ambush,” Castiel argued. “Come on.”

In hardly any time they found the body of an angel lying on the ground. Further down one of the main corridors there appeared to be some minor damage from an explosion in a three way intersection. A quick glance down the smaller branch of the intersection revealing a heavy, metal pressure sealing door that had been kept open with some sort of small crowbar.

They carefully opened the door to find a large cylindrical chamber that appeared to be part of a exhaust system. The massive fan mechanism above them was more than a third missing, having been destroyed somehow and fallen to the bottom of the chamber. Beyond the fan there were at least four sizable exhaust ducts, three of which had been broken open from the blast. On the ground, amidst the broken fan blades and other debris was a pair of magical handcuffs. The five of them all stared at the handcuffs, then looked up.

“I've heard rumors that he can use telekinesis, is that correct?” Hael asked, still staring at the hole above them, leading towards a path presumably out of the building.

“Sam can't fly.” Dean rejected the idea.

“Flying isn't particularly difficult,” Anael corrected.

“Says the angel. He's not that good with telekinesis.” Dean shook his head. “Maybe he could levitate a book, but he can't do anything like—”

“There aren't any keys,” Dylaniel said, drawing everyone's attention. He pointed at the pair of handcuffs that were on the floor. “There aren't any keys dropped with the cuffs and these aren't damaged. They aren't the ones he was wearing.”
“It’s a fake out. Where the fuck is he?” Dean muttered as he looked around the room, then his eyes landed on the grate covering a large intake vent on the opposite side of the chamber.

He walked over to it and knelt down. Upon close inspection he could see that the screws were loose. He touched the frame of the grate and it fell to the ground. Normally he would’ve assumed that vents would be too small for someone as large as Sam to climb through, but this particular ventilation system was designed to displace a huge amount of air as quickly as possible. The ducts leading into it were surprisingly large.

“You think he’s in there?” Dylaniel asked.

Dean looked to Hael. “Did the angels seal the ventilation system?”

“As far as I know it was just the doors.”

“I don’t believe this,” Dean groaned as he started crawling into the duct. “He’s gonna have escaped before we even get to him.”

Kay and Ruby reached a metal door at the end of a hallway. When Kay tried the handle it didn't open. She tried to knock the door down, then to blink to the other side, but neither worked. Placing her hand over the locking mechanism, she tried to melt the lock with the First Light.

“Do you have lock picking tools in that bag of goodies?” Kay asked as she pointed at a few small scratches that had probably been made by a previous attempt.

Ruby pulled out a set of metal picks, every single one of which had been broken in the earlier fall. “Don’t worry. We don’t need them,” she replied as she tossed them aside, then dug through her bag. “The door must be on an evacuation route; it swings towards us.”

“Go on.” Kay stepped a few feet back, inviting Ruby to do whatever she was getting at.

“The hinges are on this side.” Ruby pulled Lucifer’s angel blade out of her bag. She put the narrow tip of the blade to the bottom of the first hinge and hit the butt of the weapon. The pin section of the hinge was pushed upward, she gripped it with her offhand, pulled it out, then started on the other three hinges. “Don’t let the lock fool you. This door isn’t exactly Fort Knox quality.”

“You’re using Lucifer’s blade as a pick?”

“It’s working, isn’t it?” Ruby countered without bothering to look up from her work.

“It’s just… I don’t know, unceremonious.”

“It’s a tool, at least now it’s multifunctional.” Ruby grinned at the thought.

“If you see Lilith, tell her you used it to open a door. She might just die of a heart attack.” Kay’s joke made Ruby glance at her with a raised eyebrow.

“You think she’d care that much about it?”

“I know she would.” Kay rolled her eyes at some annoying memory. “The Luxia temples are all about holy relics and none of those relics compare to the blade of Lucifer.”

“It really is too bad Sam can’t kill her.” Ruby knocked out the last pin, then smiled fleetingly at the blade. “Imagine having your nemesis stab you with your own damn holy relic. The look on her face…”
“Priceless,” Kay agreed, then added, “and too high a price.”

“Oh, believe me, I get it.” Ruby tugged at the door and it fell out of the doorframe. She gestured for Kay to go ahead. “After you.”

“If we get through this and Lilith is our prisoner, if you really want—” Kay stopped walking, looked around, then grinned. “Come on. We’ve got a few of our knights around here somewhere.”

“Knights?” Ruby asked while hurrying to follow Kay as she ran down a narrower auxiliary corridor. “How do you know?”

“I can sense demons if they’re within a hundred meters or so.”

“Can you sense Sam?” Rationally she knew that Kay would’ve brought it up if she could, but Ruby asked anyway. It was just distressing to not know where in the complex he was—if he was even still there.

“No. He must have some sort of warding or cloaking spell,” Kay replied apologetically. “Assuming he’s still here.”

They turned a corner to find three men in flight suits. Ruby raised Lucifer’s blade in preparation for a fight, but Kay didn’t move to fight them.

“Who are you wearing?” Kay asked the tallest of the men.

“More convenient rides, ma’am.” Ruby recognized the smooth tone of the man’s voice as probably being Joseba. The man that was looking around them with nearly fluid movements was almost certainly Tora. She didn't recognize the third knight, who stood at silent attention. “I watched you two jump off the monuth and it seemed like as good an approach as any.”

Kay's tone turned skeptical. “Where did you get those bodies?”

“Did you know that the humans have planes with individually packaged meatsuits just flying around?” Joseba smiled at her.

She could picture it now, demons hijacking pilots’ bodies, then blinking out of their jets once they were past the anti-magic aura. It wasn't a terrible idea, except for the suddenly pilotless jets carrying who knew what munitions inevitably crashing somewhere. Hell, depending on how high off the ground the demons started and their forward momentum, in theory the demons didn't even need a monuth or jet to ride. The concept reminded her of something Dylaniel had called a HALO jump. Once he had talked at length about the infiltration technique after she'd failed to appreciate one of the angelic flight patrol’s most beloved jokes.

Sure enough, not a minute later did they reached a corridor full of some sort of flaming wreckage that had crashed through the building at high speed. She resisted the temptation to ask which knight had been responsible, this was one of those teachable moments that wasn't worth the time to explain the lesson. The group silently looked the scene over from afar in order to verify that none of the first group had been killed in the crash, though they couldn't get particularly close to the impact site while there was still smoke and fire everywhere.

“Maybe they backtracked and took another route?” Ruby mused aloud. “Or the crash could've been after they crossed?”

“They have angels. They could've just blinked or healed on the other side.”
Ruby hesitated at the idea of blinking across the fiery scene. As long as they'd been inside of the warding the ability to fly had been incredibly spotty. She expected that with all the angels in the area fighting, bringing in reinforcements, and blocking the arrival of new foes, it seemed like the supernatural ability would be unreliable at best. And the last thing any of them needed was to be knocked out of flight right above a small inferno.

“I don't know how they did it, but I'm not blinking over it if we can find another way.” Ruby pursed her lips. “Finding a way around might be safer.”

Kay and Ruby’s circumstances had improved somewhat, but despite the increased offensive ability, they still didn't have the benefit of a healer. There were multiple reasons why they'd attempted to move in the other group’s wake, not the least of which was limiting their own exposure to combat. The most important fight was still ahead of them and they weren't guaranteed a chance to repair any damage incurred along the way. Going off course could expose them to greater risks, unvetted by the first group.

“Allow me,” Tora said, then draped herself against Joseba. “Keep my meatsuit in one piece.”

Tora’s smoke cloud poured out of the body, then flowed into the burning hallway. She slowly rolled over the flames, smothering them. On three occasions she recoiled from an exposed piece of iron rebar, but in about twenty seconds the hallway was largely extinguished. She returned to her body, then started climbing through the still hot rubble and debris.

“If I may.” Joseba extended his hands toward Kay offering some sort of assistance.

“Help Ruby—” Kay started to reject the offer.

“No way, that's your actual body,” Ruby pointed out while following Tora and the silent knight. “I can survive my hunk of meat getting burnt and cut up.”

“Fine.” Kay acknowledged the point as Joseba scooped her up. To help stabilize herself, she wrapped her arms around his neck. It all felt very cliche, but she didn't complain. She could sense his genuinely protective and dutiful nature, but there was also a hint of infatuation.

“Hold your breath.”

Kay held her breath, closed her eyes, and pressed her face to his chest. She could feel the heat radiating off the wreckage and hear the hiss of something burning or melting. Joseba was carrying her down a straight hallway, but for a moment she felt dizzy from a point of reference moving suddenly. Lilith had been ahead of them and to their right as they moved closer. Now she was almost 90° to the left. As soon as Joseba put her down on the other side Kay began straining her senses trying to get a better read on what was happening with Lilith.

“Lilith just moved from there to over there.” Kay gestured for the others’ benefit.

“She's supposed to be near Sam, right?” Ruby looked in the general direction of where Kay had been point. “Any idea if he went with her?”

“I can't tell. Maybe if we—” Kay's eyes widened. “Joseba, Mir, I want every door that can be broken off its hinges and out of our way. Tora, slip through any openings you can. We're getting over there now.”

“If I get too far ahead we might split up,” Tora cautioned.

“It's worth the risk. We'll be right behind you,” Kay said while rushing ahead. “I don't care if we
have to make blind jumps; we find Sam now.”

“What's wrong?” Ruby ran after the group, led by Mir, who had already crashed through the next door.

“These guys aren't the only demons that breached the warding.”

After some very slow progress crawling through the ventilation ducts, Sam found a grate that overlooked what appeared to be a loading bay. On the far side of the room was a set of freight doors, which he hoped led outside. He gripped the grate from the inside, but couldn't force it off. With a little effort he backtracked until he reached a T-shaped intersection, then redid his approach to the grate feet-first. He didn't have much room to move, but he lifted his right knee the few inches he could, then stomped at a corner of the grate. After a few well-placed kicks, the grate fell off.

He rolled onto his stomach and started pushing himself out the opening. He nearly got stuck, trying to get his shoulders through. Stabbing the angel blade into the duct for some leverage, he shook himself enough to offset his shoulders. Once unstuck, his weight pulled him down suddenly. He managed to dislodge the blade, bringing it with him, but he cut his hand on the blade in the process.

Despite his intention to roll upon impact, the landing on the concrete floor was hard, though it didn't feel like any bones were fractured. The flesh along the left side of his chest and on the inside of his left arm stung. When he checked for damage he found that the skin was badly scraped and occasionally broken. He checked to make sure it hadn't damaged his anti-possession or healing tattoos—

He reached behind himself, then dragged the angel blade across his anti-detection tattoo. It wasn't clear how much value that move would give him with so little time left, regardless of the effect of the warded cuffs, but it was hard to imagine how the situation could get much worse. Anyway, the warding on his back was designed to work against humans and demons. In that moment he was most concerned about being caught by angels, whereas he wanted to be rescued by Ruby, Dean, Kay, or Dylaniel, all people that could hypothetically be hindered by the tattoo on his back.

He quietly made his way about halfway through the loading bay when eighteen angels appeared in front of him, blocking the exits. He held the angel blade out in front of him. They all knew how hopeless a more-than-dozen-to-one fight would be regardless of the fact that they were angels and he couldn't use his powers, but that didn't mean he was about to just give up.

“Drop the weapon and we won't hurt you,” Zachariah offered.

“If you fight them, they’ll just sacrifice you to Lilith,” Lucifer whispered. “Don't do it. Cooperation is your only chance at survival.”

“No. Survival isn't good enough.” Sam told both Zachariah and Lucifer. He turned the blade around and placed the tip to his chest. “Stay back.”

“Don’t do anything dumb. You can't escape like this, stuck in a standoff with us. So how about you stop that and—” Zachariah gestured around them to indicate the exterior of the complex. “—we’ll stop killing your friends.”

Sam gripped the blade a little tighter. The fighting was his rescuers, not Lilith's. That changed things. His priority was to try running out the clock waiting for support. But that also meant
staying somewhere that he stood a chance of being found. Cooperating with Zachariah might keep him alive for a little while longer, but there was no doubt in his mind that it also meant being taken to a new, more secure prison and probably being knocked unconscious. Another explosion shook the building.

Zachariah started voicing a possible resolution. “We’ll take you back to the safety of your cell—“

“You aren't taking me anywhere,” Sam countered.

“Fine.” Zachariah glared at him. “We can do this here.”

“They won't let you hold yourself hostage,” Lucifer warned him. “Sephrad, the one second from the right, zie prefers to ambush enemies from behind. Zie will likely make such an attempt if you continue this—”

“They're gonna fight me?” Sam asked Lucifer. He was having a hard time picturing attacking someone who was threatening to kill himself, but this whole situation was unusual. “Please, tell me anything you can.”

“If you insist on this reckless action, then I'll help you. Just try not to let yourself be killed or knocked unconscious,” Lucifer told him in an annoyed tone. “The one to Zachariah's right is Coniel. Zie favors zir right side. Borthiel is on your far left. Zie is loyal and will protect you if zie knows I've chosen you.”

Sam tried to stop himself from looking at Borthiel. The idea that some of the angels might be inclined to help Lucifer was a little alarming. He suddenly felt outnumbered and surrounded in an entirely new metric.

“You can talk all you want, but I'm not listening,” Sam said aloud.

“I think you’ll find it a lot less painful to work with us,” Zachariah replied. “But I honestly don’t care if we have to break every bone in your body—”

“I wasn't talking to you. Your brother won't shut up,” Sam told Zachariah before silently assuring Lucifer that he was still listening for advice.

Borthiel and another one of the angel’s posture changed subtly at the mention of Lucifer. They started looking at the others, sizing up the situation and their potential competition. There was a chance that they’d try to help him—well, help Lucifer, whatever that might entail. They probably would try to prevent him from being sacrificed to Lilith, but beyond that their interests were pretty well aligned with Heaven’s.

“Lucifer could always be—” Zachariah began replying, but Lucifer yelled inside Sam's mind.

“Behind you!”

Sam barely had time to process the warning before he was reacting. Two of Zachariah's angels had disappeared including Sephrad, the one who liked to attack from behind. Sam spun around while turning the angel blade he was holding away from his heart. He swung the blade, stabbing Sephrad in the chest as the angel materialized behind him. Another angel came at him, but Sam knocked Sephrad’s body back onto the comparatively smaller angel.

He ran through a few stacks of crates and ducked between two large pieces of equipment. He wasn't about to assume that there was anything wrong with the angel's ability to fly, but all things being equal he'd prefer if he wasn't in their line of sight. The sound of wings flapping told him that
either more angels had showed up or some of them had moved to flank him. Sam threw his upper body at a tall stack of crates, causing them to fall towards the angels, then he kept running for what he hoped was another exit.

As he passed by an aisle between large pieces of machinery, one of the angels jumped out and punched him in the face, breaking his nose. Sam dodged a second hit, tried to counterattack with the blade, but he was held frozen in mid-swing by telekinesis. He was dragged out of the stacks for Zachariah and the others to see. The angel who had immobilized him grabbed Sam's ring and pinky fingers, bent them backwards breaking them, then pried the blade away from him.

“You really don't understand your place in all this,” Zachariah said as he walked up to Sam, looking him over, before turning to a subordinate. “Bring her here. It's time to finish this.”

Sam’s heart started pounding faster. They were getting Lilith which meant that the sixty-fifth seal had probably been broken. He couldn't run. He couldn't fight. He was completely at their whim, and he had wasn't sure if there was any other way to stall. For all he knew they'd grown tired of him and would just have Lilith unceremoniously stab him.

Two angels returned with Lilith. She was still handcuffed and being held by her upper arms. At first she appeared almost concerned by being relocated, but when she saw Sam she became visibly relieved. Without a better idea of how to stop the situation, Sam started reciting the exoticism incantation as fast as he could, but Lilith, smiled at him.

“I'm branded in,” she cooed. “Nice try.”

Zachariah held up the angel blade that had been taken from Sam and began slowly walking it towards an overjoyed Lilith. Just before the blade was in arm's reach of Lilith, Zachariah vanished. He reappeared right in front of Sam, punching him hard in the stomach. As soon as the hit was landed, the telekinesis holding Sam upright stopped, letting him collapse to the floor.

“Let me spell this out for you. You can kill her or you can die. It's not that complicated.”

Zachariah grabbed Sam’s hair, yanking it so that Sam was forced to look at him. “Don’t play games with me because I'm losing my patience.”

“Do it,” Lucifer pleaded with Sam. “Think about your daughter.”

“Just allow Lilith to kill him and let's be done with this,” a female angel interjected before Sam could answer.

“He’s a favored vessel. Lucifer is already speaking to him,” Borthiel argued. “He’s even acting in defiance of Heaven as Lucifer did. We shouldn't disregard this providence.”

“If he's defying us now, think about when he's aligned with Lucifer. We don't want Lucifer to be as powerful as possible.”

“You should watch your tone. Someone might think you lack conviction,” Zachariah warned her.

“I'm not questioning….” The female angel paused, choosing her words carefully. “I just don't see why we can't make this easier on ourselves.”

“You’d chose to interfere with the clear will of God in order to benefit yourself.” Borthiel took another jab at her in an attempt to win more favor for Sam.

Sam tried using the argument as a distraction and slowly began dragging himself along the floor towards the loading bay doors. He made it a few feet before one of the angels telekinetically
grabbed his legs, pulling him back without missing a beat.

The female angel began backtracking. “I didn't say that—”

“You’d prefer that the first demon win?” the other Lucifer loyalist asked, joining in the attack on the female angel.

“All of our brother’s vessels are demons. Who cares which one wins? They’ll all die by Michael's hand. I don't see why we sh—”

“Stop bickering right now!” Zachariah shouted, silencing the room. “We have a chain of command for a reason and if you don't shut up I'll kill you both here and now. We follow divine will. There's no room for your feelings—”

Another group of approximately a dozen angels appeared in the room. The demeanor of the new group was cold anger and power, that seemed to worry the others. They assessed the situation for a moment in silence before their leader stepped forward.

“Who is that?” Sam asked Lucifer.

“Raphael,” Lucifer replied. “You have to act now.”

Sam could feel his heart pounding in fear and anticipation of whatever force Raphael had been brought in to apply. This was Heaven's number one enforcer, the most powerful in terms of authority and combat abilities. He’d nearly killed Dylaniel and brushed Dean off like he was nothing. The prospect of being face-to-face with him was intimidating enough without the active discussion being whether or not Sam should be killed.

“Why isn't it done?” Raphael asked as he approached Sam. The archangel crouched down and looked him over thoughtfully, like a man studying an insect.

“We've just had a small delay,” Zachariah explained. “He won't kill her.”

“Do it,” Raphael said to Sam, almost as an order, but Sam didn't take orders from anyone, least of all him.

“No.”

“Do it or else when you're dead I'll personally see to it that your infant daughter is found.” Raphael leaned in to look Sam in the eyes, only a few inches apart. The archangel spoke with such intensity that Sam couldn't even bring himself to blink. “And I'll snap her neck while your lover watches.”

Sam could feel everyone's eyes on him, waiting with bated breath to see what he would do. He wasn't sure what more he could. There were no distractions, no chain of command to be consulted for insights. The only thing left was his answer. He stared back at Raphael with as much calm, unwavering conviction as he could muster. The two of them had an audience after all.

“I'm not going to help you destroy the world. I won't help you kill—” Sam started, but Raphael kicked him.

The archangel raised his fist to hit Sam again, but stopped at the sound of someone running through the loading bay.

Dean turned the corner around a stack of wooden crates. He was alone and armed only with a
machete, but when he saw Sam he straightened with determination. The more than two dozen angels all turned to stare at him in what he assumed was disbelief at the absurd sight. After all, their secondary priority was finding him and he had just shown up on their front door, apparently poorly-armed.

“You,” Raphael said while standing up. The archangel took a step toward the unexpected prize of Michael’s vessel.

“I found him,” Dean commented, making several angels look at each other, confused by the statement.

Realizing what was happening, Zachariah shouted at three of the angels, “Lockdown—” But before the blockers could prevent travel, a group of roughly twenty fallen angels managed to teleport into the room, centered around Dean.

The angels loyal to Heaven drew their blades, as everyone assessed the match up. Despite the relatively even numbers, in general Heaven had higher choir angels. The two angels holding Lilith looked to Zachariah and Raphael for instruction, who gestured for them to guard her. Sam was still hunched over on the ground from the assault, but seeing the distraction he began quietly inching backward, putting whatever distance he could between himself and Lilith.

“Raphael.” Dylaniel stepped forward from the group of fallen angels as he drew his sword.

“You're dead?” Zachariah muttered in legitimate confusion.

“You're mistaken,” Dylaniel corrected.

More than a few of the Heaven aligned angels in the room looked to Raphael uncertainly. They had been misinformed or maybe even lied to.

“This doesn't change anything. We all know our duty,” Raphael argued to his subordinates. “Kill them.”

Rather than being drawn into the fight, Raphael turned his attention back to Sam. Dylaniel tried to blink between Raphael and Sam, but the Heavenly blockers had securely locked down flight.

“Clear the blockers!” Dylaniel yelled to his side as he started running towards the archangel, leading the charge of the fallen angels.

There was a dizzying clash of bodies and blades. With flight locked down there were no teleportation ambushes, just two forces colliding. Heaven worked to hold back those who would help Sam or kill Lilith, while the limited number of rebel angels tried to break through the line.

“Tie down the edges,” Zachariah ordered the blockers.

“Stop them!” Anael shouted to several of her angels, but before she’d finished talking two of Heaven’s blockers had slipped away. Heaven was not only preventing potentially sneak attacks and the prompt arrival of fallen reinforcements, it was cutting off their retreat. “Check the perimeter, they're hiding blockers!”

Despite being the lone human in the battle, Dean ran straight into the fight with everyone else. He didn't know to what extent his status as Michael's preferred vessel would protect him, but he didn't take his safety for granted. Whether or not Heaven thought killing him was a viable form of capture, he was committed to not being taken prisoner, whatever that meant. He entered the fight with a strange clarity for such a chaotic experience. After hours of fearing the worst, he'd seen Sam
with his own two eyes. Now he just needed to get to him in time.

Dylaniel sliced one of the weaker Heavenly angels in half with little difficulty, but the closer he got to Sam and Raphael the more powerful the angels were that stood in his way. Within seconds the choir disparity between the two forces was becoming obvious. To him fighting a seraphim wasn't a particularly dangerous endeavor, but almost no one else on his side had ever done that—and Heaven's forces included thirteen seraphim. When faced with three seraphim standing between him and his objectives, Dylaniel took a quick calming breath before systematically laying into them.

Raphael telekinetically grabbed Sam and dragged him into arm's reach. When Raphael turned to call over the angels holding Lilith, he spotted Dylaniel out of the corner of his eyes. The nephilim had just finished cutting through a second seraphim, though he was staring intently at Raphael. They were separated by about thirty feet and a dozen of Heaven's angels, but there wasn't any doubt about Dylaniel's intentions. Raphael pursed his lips, then turned to face Dylaniel across the fray.

Sam saw Raphael raise his hand toward the already engaged Dylaniel. He leapt up from the ground and threw his arms over the archangel’s head, then yanked backward, slamming his handcuffs into Raphael’s neck. Raphael’s superior physical strength stopped him from having his head pulled too far back, but Raphael did widen his eyes in surprise at the reckless move and redirected his attention back to Sam. Sam knew he didn't stand a chance at knocking Raphael over or strangling him, but he might be able to at least inconvenience him. Sam reached up, grabbed the sides of Raphael’s head, and pressed his thumbs into the archangel’s eyes as hard as he could.

Raphael yelled in anger as he pulled Sam off of him. When Raphael turned around to face him, Sam tried kneeing him to almost no effect. Raphael healed his bleeding eyes, then stepped towards Sam. Sam took hold of Raphael as best he could, then fell backwards, using the archangel’s forward momentum to throw him off balance. It wasn't exactly as gracefully as a judo takedown, but Raphael was on the ground tussling with someone he didn't want to kill rather than taking cheap shots at the others.

Dean quickly discovered that it was nearly impossible to move forward through the fight in a straight line. The battle became a maze of melee combat. Arms reached out, trying to grab him, forcing him to duck to a side or hack off an enemy's limb. He cut through one angel, then dodged an attack, but when he stepped backward he stumbled over a dead body on the floor. He fell to the ground, hitting the concrete floor with his lower back, sending a bolt of pain shooting down his legs. The rest of his fall was cushioned by several largely intact corpses. He tried to push himself upright, but the bodies jostled as he attempted to prop himself up and his hand slipped in a puddle of blood on the floor.

Castiel rushed to fend off an angel that went after Dean in his vulnerable state. He dropped the angel, then offered Dean a hand up. Immediately after getting Dean to his feet, another angel moved to attack him, but Castiel lunged to intercept the hit, deflecting it with his blade. A third angel stabbed at Dean, but Castiel reached out and grabbed the blade, stopping it just short of hitting Dean. Dean turned, saw the stopped blade, maneuvered around the third angel, stabbing her while Castiel held her blade. Castiel stabbed the second angel in sync with Dean cutting her head off, then Dean glanced at Castiel’s severely injured offhand.

“I’m fine,” Castiel assured him. “Behind—”

Dean reflexively ducked and turned to see what was coming. Dylaniel and three fallen angels had been telekinetically thrown backwards by a pair of seraphim. Dean missed being hit by them as
they were thrown, but Anael was knocked over along with Hael. Castiel fell back a few feet to
check on the group. Two of the angels that had been thrown were dead and the third was having
trouble recovering from a very deep slice across her torso. Dylaniel opened his mouth for an
ominously labored gasp, revealing blood coated teeth that hinted at some unacknowledged injury,
but he staggered back to his feet.

With so many of his side's angels dying in the mismatched battle and several of the others forced
behind him, Dean suddenly found himself deeper into the field than he'd expected without backup.
They'd just lost all their ground at the cost of more than half their people. They were losing the
fight. He glanced at the scene trying to figure out whether it was best to continue forward in a hail
Mary move or fall back and try to regroup with the others. Before he could even consider what
made the most sense, a seraphim grabbed his arm. He tried to break free, but his other arm was
seized by another angel. He struggled against them, but their angelic strength was too much.

Dylaniel didn't even shout out ‘incoming’ when his eyes flashed blue. Heaven had managed to get
twenty additional angels past Hell’s forces and they were arriving through millisecond breaks in
their blockers’ lockdown. The remnants of the fallen angels, were outnumbered four-to-one.
Seeing the the turn in the battle, Castiel and Anael took up defensive positions around Dylaniel.
Two of the five other remaining fallen angels were allowed to fall back while three were
physically held by the angels of Heaven. Castiel clutched his side with his bleeding offhand, but
held his blade steady. He watched Dean with visible concern, trying to think of anything else that
could be done. Anael took a quick step, testing to see if she could run by the angels that moved to
surround them, but her path was blocked before she could really try.

Satisfied that they wouldn't have any interruptions, Raphael gripped the front of Sam's bloody shirt
and lifted his torso up off the ground by it. Several forming bruises and a split lip memorialized
the effort Raphael had put into getting out of the grapple with Sam. Despite the injuries, Sam tried
to keep his composure staring down the archangel once again. They still had their audience.

“Look around you. Your saviors failed. You’ve lost. You were always going to lose.” Raphael
gloat ed to both Sam and his would-be rescuers. “No one can escape fate.”

“This isn’t about fate. This is about choice and taking responsibility for yourself.” Sam shot back
at Raphael. “You’re the one who should look around. Look at your family! They’re suffering and
you have the power to stop it. All you have to do is kill one person and Lucifer will be stopped.
Instead, you’re helping him—”

“I’m not helping that monster!” Raphael shook Sam slightly as he argued, betraying his anger.
“You know nothing about our family.”

“I know you think they’re expendable,” Sam said, making a few of Heaven’s angels look over their
shoulders to watch the argument.

“Our family, each of us is a soldier—” Raphael started explaining.

“Welcome to the club! But it’s not my place to sacrifice their lives. No more of your siblings have
to die.” Sam tilted his head toward Lilith. “Just kill her and end it all!”

The whole room was silently watching Raphael for his reaction. The archangel’s eyes quickly
flicked between several of the angels watching him. As the moment stretched, a few of Heaven’s
angels loosened their grip on their prisoners. Sam watched Raphael struggle with some idea—
maybe whether he could really stop this or maybe whether he wanted to—Sam couldn’t tell.
Raphael’s lips thinned. He stomped on Sam’s left leg, producing a loud snap as the femur broke,
then threw him to Lilith's feet. With a wave of his hand, Raphael loosened his subordinate’s hold on Lilith, releasing her.

Sam rolled across the floor and ended up lying on his back. Lilith grabbed an angel blade from one of her guards, then moved to attack him, but he kicked her hard in the chest with his good leg. He tried to scoot away from her with his right leg, but on his back and his arms bound, Sam couldn't use his upper body at all for leverage. Lilith dodged a second kick from him, then swung the angel blade down at him. One of the angels that had been holding Dean released him, and gestured at Sam, shoving him away from Lilith with telekinesis.

With one arm freed, Dean hastily took the machete in his offhand, then swung at the remaining angel that was holding onto him. He didn't wait to see the head fall off the angel before yanking free from the corpse’s grip and running through the renewed brawl.

“You'd let us die!” one of the angels that had previously followed Raphael shouted while charging at the archangel.

Raphael deflected the attack, then gripped the lesser angel’s throats and lifted her into the air. “I do what our father requires,” he said before smiting the angel and dropping her corpse to the ground.

“Someone separate them!” Castiel yelled, pointing at Lilith who was heading for Sam once more.

“Someone kill Lilith!” Anael added, as the group of fallen angels pushed forward again with the help of a handful of defectors. One of the defectors moved to attack Lilith, but was intercepted. The two wrestling angels knocked Lilith to the ground, sending the angel blade she’d been holding sliding across the floor.

Dean was only about ten feet from Sam when Raphael lunged in front of him. Dean evaded a punch, swung his machete and sliced several inches into the side of Raphael's chest. The machete’s blade stopped abruptly before shattering. The archangel glared at him with pure loathing, then threw him across the room. Dean hit the metal arm rail around a raised entrance, breaking his left arm and a few ribs before he hit the ground. He was in such a hurry to get back to the fight that he didn't notice the figure standing in the darkened doorway a couple yards behind him. Dean got to his feet, when he felt a hand settle on his shoulder at the same moment that something very sharp pressed into his back.

“Stop this madness!” Ariel shouted. He held Lilith by the back of her neck with his offhand and pointed his angel blade down at Sam. All the angels in the room turned their attention to the seraphim, who was threatening both of the crucial pieces to the last seal.

“Let her go!” Everyone looked from Ariel to the platform across the room where the second shout had come from. Abaddon was holding Dean with a knife to his throat. A group of a dozen Knights of Hell entered through the door behind her, descended a few stairs to the loading bay floor, then started cautiously approaching the fight, ready to jump in and assist Lilith should negotiations fall through. “Let my mistress go or I'll kill him!”

“Go ahead.” Raphael encouraged her. “Go ahead and give him right to Michael.”

“It's a cursed blade. I'll shred his soul so small, Michael won't have a single gram left to work with.” Abaddon pressed the blade harder to Dean’s neck, drawing some blood.

“Wait!” Zachariah said while raising his hands and stepping forward for the first time since the
fighting had started. “We all want the same thing.”

“Speak for yourself,” Dean muttered.

“Let him go and we’ll release Lilith,” Zachariah offered, then turned to Ariel. “If we lose the Michaelsword, we’ll be decades behind. You know it.”

Ariel looked around the room uncertainly. He loosened his grip on Lilith, then nodded to Abaddon.

“Don't do this,” Sam begged Ariel from his position on the ground.

“Give her the blade.” Abaddon gestured ever so slightly with her own knife.

While Abaddon was distracted watching to see if Ariel would hand Lilith the weapon, Dean tried to duck out of her grip, but she turned her knife down at him, cutting a long gash through his right eyebrow and up his forehead. She raised her knife to make another stab at him.

“Hey, bitch!” Ruby threw a fist-sized, blue ball at Abaddon while entering through the doorway behind the Knight Captain. When the ball hit Abaddon it broke, spilling a thick liquid over her. Abaddon started convulsing, then teleported around the room sporadically, safely removing her from Dean.

Joseba and Mir both ran in behind Ruby, hurled themselves over the metal railing separating them from the battle, and charged the closest opponents they could find. Joseba headbutted his target in the face while grabbing the disoriented angel’s blade out of her hand. Mir didn't settle for grabbing his target’s weapon and instead tackled a confused knight and seamlessly began using him as a shield while charging straight into an assortment of equally surprised angels. Tora slipped in the door behind the distractions of Mir and Joseba, ambushing two of Lilith's knights. Kay brought up the rear, using a telekinetic blast to clear part of the way to Sam and Lilith.

Dean climbed over the railing, scooped up a knife that had been dropped by one of Lilith’s knights, then ran to help, but he was hit with some telekinesis and thrown into a stack of crates. The knife was knocked out of his hand on impact. Zachariah used telekinesis to draw the weapon to himself, out of Dean's reach. The smooth-talking angel strolled towards Dean, holding out his hand, telekinetically squeezing his chest painfully.

“You insolent little monkey. You don't just screw around during negotiations like that,” Zachariah said as he watched Dean writhe on the ground. When the angel was about six feet from him, Dean pulled the taser from his jacket pocket and aimed it at Zachariah. “Is that a tas—”

Dean shot him with it. As soon as the leads hit their target, he pulled the trigger. Zachariah seized for a moment before his mouth and eyes burst with white light. Dean dropped the spent taser gun, then collected the knife that Zachariah had just taken from him and ran back into the fight.

When it became clear to Kay that she couldn't reach Sam before Lilith, Kay stopped running and used her powers to grab Lilith. She focused, careful not to use enough force to risk seriously injuring the archdemon. Kay started dragging Lilith away from Sam. Within a few seconds, two of Lilith's knights saw what she was doing and charged at her. Kay tried dividing her attention in order to hold back the incredibly powerful demons, but she could feel herself struggling to strike the necessary balance between exerting a lot of force against the knights while being gentle with Lilith.

An angel made to attack Kay in her vulnerable state, forcing Kay to break her concentration and
defend herself. By the time she got done killing the angel with the First Light, the two knights were not only next to her, they were flanking her. She tried holding them both in place in preparation for burning them with the First Light, but combined they were strong enough to begin resisting her telekinesis. They both pressed against her power. Blood began trickling down her face as a sharp pain started to grow behind her eyes. Just when she thought she might buckle, Dylaniel stabbed one of the knights, freeing her to unleash her lethal force on the other.

Ruby tried to skirt around the edge of the fighting in order to get to Sam, but two angels blocked her path. She dodged an attack, then dove between them. One of the angels grabbed her ankle before she could get past them, tripping her. The second angel made to stab her, but before he could a blade pierced through his chest. Instead of finding Dean or Dylaniel standing behind the dead angel, when the body fell she saw her rescuer was Abaddon.

“She’s mine,” Abaddon told the other angel as she punched him so hard that numerous bones broke audibly as the angel was thrown backwards.

The Knight Captain put her boot on Ruby’s back, then pressed until she heard a few snaps as she repositioned her knife to stab down at Ruby. Ruby tried frantically to reach Lucifer’s blade or some other offensive tool from her bag, but she was pinned face down on the ground. Just when Abaddon swung at Ruby, Tora sprung forward, deflecting the hit. Tora didn’t attempt to push the physically stronger Abaddon off of Ruby, and instead opted to make several rapid attacks from different angles. In order to defend herself, Abaddon was forced to give up her footing on Ruby. Ruby didn’t even look up to check on the fight between the two knights, she began scrambling towards Sam.

There was a loud bang sound from the roof above part of the fight. Almost everyone at least glanced up to see what was happening, though a few grapples continued uninterrupted. A large X-shaped crack appeared in the concrete ceiling.

Recognizing the familiar shape of the damage, Dean yelled, “Look out!” at the assortment of people below it.

With another loud bang nearly a quarter of the roof collapsed in. The rubble fell, but most of the larger pieces stopped in mid air. Gabriel stood on the edge of the roof next to the hole, hand raised, visibly working to hold the large load with telekinesis. Below the hovering layer of concrete, several angels belonging to both factions helped to hold the larger slabs of concrete and carefully redirected them away from the fighting. One of Abaddon’s knights took advantage of the distraction and slit the throat of an angel helping with the debris. A sizable slab fell crushing two angels and a demon.

When the wreckage was settled with minimal casualties, Gabriel dropped down into the center of the room. It looked as though in the few minutes since the others had seen him, Gabriel had taken a considerable amount of abuse. One of his arms had some sort of burn on it that smelled slightly of brimstone. There were several sizable bullet holes across his torso and one of his thighs. He stood with determination, but the fact that he was ever so slightly hunched forward betrayed some of his fatigue.

“You!” Raphael snarled. “You deserted us!”

“Yeah, I did,” Gabriel admitted. “I didn’t want to be a soldier then. I don’t want to be one now. I don’t want to fight you.”

“Then you came to the wrong place,” Raphael said as he took a step toward his brother.
Gabriel looked at Raphael with profound disappointment, then snapped his fingers. The master of illusion was gone, but there were suddenly three identical versions of every other person in the room. Everyone looked around including the mirror images. Each set of three were positioned so that their backs would result in a triangle. When Raphael stepped forward, the other two Raphaels mirrored the motion. The scene was too disorienting for almost anyone to move with confidence—but Raphael knew what Gabriel was after if it wasn't a fight.

Raphael threw a telekinetic blast at the space above Sam. There was a loud thwack of a body hitting a nearby concrete wall. The duplicates disappeared as Gabriel reappeared, with a good amount of blood trickling from his mouth, the gunshot wounds, and down the wall where his head had collided. Raphael charged at Gabriel and started pummeling him.

“I didn't come to fight—” Gabriel choked through the beating.

Without warning Raphael was hit hard in the side and flew thirty feet across the loading bay, knocking over bystanders of all affiliations.

“—I did,” Kali said as she rested her brass club against her shoulder and offered her boyfriend a hand up. “Go save lives.”

“Go take some.” Gabriel kissed the back of her hand, then disappeared.

A group of Lilith’s knights moved to circle her and Sam, preventing anyone from interfering. Several of the Heaven aligned angels disappeared for a split second, then reappeared as a dog pile on Gabriel, who'd been attempting to get to Sam. Gabriel shoved several of the angels off of himself, then telekinetically threw Lilith back into several of her knights including Abaddon as she dropped Tora’s body. Anael and one of the defector seraphim helped pull the severely injured Gabriel from the mess. Just as they got him back to slightly safer territory a knight ran up and stabbed Anael through the chest. Gabriel weakly caught Anael while smiting the knight, then healed her before passing out.

“False idol,” Raphael called out to Kali as he got back on his feet.

“Sniveling child,” Kali replied as she ran at Raphael.

Kali swung her club at him twice, but he dodged both times. After the second dodge, he gripped her arm with his offhand, then held onto her while repeatedly punching her in the face. On the fourth punch she caught his fist and engulfed her hands in holy fire. He swept her legs out from under her, slamming her into the floor so hard that the concrete cracked below her. Rather than push him off of her, she wrapped her legs around Raphael so that he couldn’t get away, then she dug her flaming fingers into the flesh at the base of his neck. Kali gripped his left clavicle and tore it out of him. Realizing that he was potentially outmatched in hand-to-hand combat, Raphael used all the telekinetic strength he could muster to force himself off of her. He staggered back and healed the massive wound in his chest as Kali began hurling storage crates at him. Raphael destroyed the crates in midair before the hit him, sending pieces of wood and metal flying into the battle around him.

There was a loud, haunting howl from outside the building. Its source circled above the battle as it got louder. Through the hole in the ceiling a massive tendril of black smoke poured into part of the sky directly above them. The anti-demon barrier was collapsing.

“Kali, those aren't ours!” Kay called out to the goddess known for having previously destroyed an army of demons.
Kali glanced at Raphael, clearly wanting to continue fighting the person who had severely injured Gabriel, but instead she looked to Kay, Dylaniel, and Dean. “Don’t let him run away,” she warned, then disappeared.

The implication that she expected Raphael to attempt to flee wasn’t lost on anyone. Dean wasn’t really sure how they were supposed to stop an archangel from leaving if he really wanted to. Granted, based on the look on Raphael's face, the mere suggestion that he might retreat had committed him to seeing the fight through. It was hard to tell who Raphael hated most, but Kali was no longer in the room, and there were plenty of lesser nuisances in front of him.

Sparks began raining through the gaping hole in the ceiling as Kali's bursts of flame ignited the tendrils of demonic smoke. The sparks drew Raphael's attention up to the hole in the ceiling of the large room and the sky beyond that. The archangel smiled to himself, then firmly planted his feet. The sound of rolling thunder drew the attention of everyone in the know.

“Raph! Lightning!” Kay yelled as a warning to the others.

Dean and Dylaniel both ran at Raphael, trying to stop him before he could wield such a devastating weapon, but they were too far away. While everyone was fixated on Raphael, Ruby poured a vial of coppery liquid onto her left palm, then touched the wall closest to her and said a few keywords.

Raphael raised his arm toward the sky to summon a bolt of lightning. The bolt of electricity came down at the hole in the ceiling, but instead of going to the archangel, it forked and spread along an invisible plane where the ceiling would've been before dispersing into several pieces of exposed rebar. Raphael’s brow furrowed at having his power redirected.

“Welcome to the faraday cage match,” Ruby shouted, making him scowl as he turned to give her his attention for the first time. “Your whole lightning thing means nothing in here.”

“If you think I need lightning to kill you—” Raphael raised his hand toward Ruby, but before he could do anything, Dean was on him and swinging. One of the slices landed across the back of the archangel’s forearm, severing half the muscles. Dean tried to redirect the momentum of the blade to swing at Raphael’s torso, but he was stopped mid-attack with telekinesis. Raphael squeezed him, snapping a few more ribs. “I'm going to enjoy watching Michael break you.”

“Not... happening.” Dean wheezed. “You're... dead.”

Raphael dropped Dean and turned just in time to see Dylaniel bring his sword down at him. He summoned his blade, blocking the strike just inches from his face. Raphael moved to counterattack, but Dean pulled a small knife from his belt and stabbed into the archangel’s right calf, slicing deeply through the muscle. Raphael deflected two rapid attacks by Dylaniel while kicking Dean across the floor away from him. With Dean out of the picture, Raphael grabbed Dylaniel with telekinesis, slammed him into the side of a forklift, and began telekinetically strangling him.

Dylaniel tried, but he couldn't reach Raphael with his sword. As he was being choked his vision began to defocus and his human and divine sights became even more disparate. Objects in the distance blurred and the faint glow of the angelic auras became brighter. He could see hints at the angels’ true forms battling each other without much care for the limits of their vessels. The wisps and ribbons of grace that he'd occasionally caught glimpses of were more than allusion to wings; the angels were grappling with them.

His eyes drifted downward, becoming heavier with each passing moment without oxygen. He
didn't recognize the very faint red ribbon of light in front of him at first. The force clutched him, entangled around his shoulders and neck. It was strangling him—it was Raphael strangling him. It was Raphael.

In a move of desperation, Dyaniel swung his sword up, intently at the red grace. The blessed blade sliced through the grace, cutting it from Raphael. The severed piece of grace faded away and Dyaniel fell to the ground. Raphael and Dyaniel were both frozen for a moment, shocked by the discovery that the effects of a blessed weapon weren't necessarily confined to the corporeal manifestation of an angel. Raphael's grace recoiled away from Dyaniel as the nephilim got to his feet. The cloud of grace extended back behind Raphael giving it the vague appearance of wings, one of which had been clipped ever so slightly. A little blood trickled from Dyaniel's mouth as he candidly smiled at the sight.

While Lilith and her knights were still recovering from the blow by Gabriel, Ruby ran through a weak point in the line and got to Sam. Her hands briefly touched his arm as she knelt beside him to look over the situation. She couldn't move him easily with his badly broken leg. To buy herself a few seconds to think, she pulled a metal canteen of salt from her bag and quickly put a barrier around them to at least stop Lilith and her knights.

“If we can break the cuffs I might be able to move myself,” he told her.

She started digging through her bag searching for something corrosive. After a quick check didn't turn up the right tools for the job, she started looking around the room in desperation. They were surrounded by enemies, with no obvious way to escape. A nearby explosion shook the building and Ruby leaned over Sam to protect him as much as possible from any potentially harm.

He touched her cheek. “Hey, it's okay. I love y—”

“Don't start—I'm gonna save you,” Ruby said, but her voice faltered. “You break the salt ring and then I'll get you to an angel. Okay?”

She grabbed onto his upper body and lifted him up a bit. He grimaced in pain, but didn't cry out. He kicked a break in the salt ring with his good leg, then she started dragging him away from Lilith, through the battlefield. They'd only gotten about ten feet when one of their side’s angels managed to get through the fray to them.

Rachel evaded two different attacks and a body that had been hurled across the room in order to reach them, but before she could make contact with Sam to heal him she was grabbed from behind. Abaddon pulled Rachel backwards by her hair, then stabbed her in the chest with an angel blade. Light shone from her mouth and eyes as her body was dropped to the ground.

Ruby let go of Sam, then moved to stand defensively between him and the Knight Captain. She drew Lucifer's blade from her bag, but before she could pull out any offensive potions Abaddon was already coming at her. She deflected the attack, though Abaddon swung horizontally at her, cutting the strap of Ruby's bag. Abaddon yanked the bag away with her offhand, throwing it aside.

“No tricks this time,” Abaddon said before kicking Ruby hard in the chest, launching her through a particle board wall into an office fifteen feet behind her. As Abaddon stepped over Sam to follow Ruby, Sam grabbed her legs, tripping her. He didn't have a way of actually fighting her, but anything he could do to slow her down from getting to Ruby was important. Abaddon pressed on Sam's broken leg, but he held onto her in a tight grapple. After considering her non-lethal options, Abaddon took her blade and roughly dragged it across his right wrist repeatedly until most of the tendons were severed, weakening his hold on her.
“I’ll finish her quick,” Abaddon told Sam while breaking free. She gave him a little kick to the gut as a parting gift before disappearing through the hole where Ruby had been hurled.

With Dylaniel suddenly able to see and fight the grace angels used to effect telekinesis, Raphael cautiously backed away from him. The archangel studied the nephilim for a moment, trying to figure out a new tactic, but Dylaniel didn’t give him more than that before charging.

Raphael blocked one strike, but a second landed on his chest, cutting a deep gash into the flesh. Dylaniel dragged his sword back up, cutting into his thighs as Raphael stepped backwards to avoid a more devastating injury. Raphael raised his hand to hold Dylaniel and his sword back with telekinesis, but the nephilim leaned forward, pressing against the grace. Raphael's eyes widened at the realization that Dylaniel wasn't just fight with a blessed weapon, there was something righteous in nephilim’s will itself. He spared a near instantaneous glance to see how many of the angels were watching: more than half.

Raphael stopped using his telekinesis, causing Dylaniel to stumble forward. Dylaniel had nearly gotten his footing back and his sword up when Raphael lunged forward, stabbing him straight through the abdomen. Dylaniel grabbed Raphael’s wrist, trying to keep him from withdrawing the blade and attacking once more.

With his freehand, Dylaniel raised his sword to strike Raphael, but the archangel teleported away. He staggered, unintentionally making Raphael's second hit miss vital organs despite landing. Dylaniel clutched his torso and fell to his knees. Raphael began reaching down to grab the critically wounded nephilim, but before he could Raphael was hurled into the ceiling.

“Don't you fucking touch him!” Kay yelled at Raphael before slamming him into the concrete floor.

Despite the demonstration of her powers, Raphael smiled when he saw blood pouring from her nose and her body shaking slightly. “Another soiled vessel,” he said as he stood up. “A pathetic shadow of my brother.”

“That's the problem with you assholes,” Kay fumed. “You're so focused on what someone is, you don't even think about what they're capable of—what I'm capable of.”

“You only have a fraction of my brother's power.”

“But I can see the future,” Kay said as she touched her fingers to her forehead and created a soft glow of the First Light for theatrics. Raphael hesitated for a moment intrigued by the thought that she might have precognition. An ability like that had very significant implications for a person who believed in fate as strongly as Raphael. She was counting on that. “You want to know what I see in your future?”

“If you think that I'm going to fall—” Raphael started, but Dylaniel's sword swung from behind the archangel, slicing his head off.

“Nothing.”

An invisible blast radiated from Raphael knocking back anyone who had been left standing. Two of the knights closest to Raphael were killed when they were struck, though Joseba and Mir were only stunned. Lesser angels like Hael and Castiel were knocked unconscious. The handful of high-choir angels slumped against any nearby vertical surface or staggered to stay on their feet, dazed by the death of such a powerful figure.
Anael shook Gabriel's body, trying to rouse the debilitated archangel. When she saw that he was too injured to help, she tried to stand up, but her legs gave out from under her. One of Lilith's knights approached her, ready to stop either angel from interfering. Anael positioned herself between Gabriel and the knight, then raised her angel blade.

Dylaniel was lying on the ground a few yards from where he'd been when he'd killed Raphael. His chest rose and fell with reassuring breaths that were somewhat undercut by the blood stain spreading across his shirt and jacket. He lifted his head, trying to take in the battlefield with his dim eyes, but his head dropped back down after hardly any time.

“Stay awake,” Kay told him as she dragged herself to her cousin. She wrapped her arms around him defensively while trying to apply pressure to his more serious stab wound. Kay could see Lilith across the room approaching Sam, but her powers were completely exhausted. She looked down at her cousin, then at how far she'd have to crawl in order to reach Lilith. There wasn't enough time. Kay placed her palms over Dylaniel’s healing tattoos and started a basic channeling spell.

“Stop it.” Dylaniel struggled to be let go, but Kay kept channeling the spell. “Stop her.”

“I can't stop the Apocalypse, but you're gonna live to see what's on the other side of it,” she replied as he fought weakly against her.

Lilith looked around the bloody and battered scene as she climbed on top of Sam. A handful of knights and Heaven’s angels watched while restraining the few prisoners capable of putting up a fight. Sam tried to fight her off, but his right hand was essentially useless from the injuries Abaddon had inflicted. Lilith grabbed his arms, forced them down to his chest, then knelt on them to immobilize him. She smiled down at him with cold satisfaction as she reached for Sam's head, eager to snap his neck.

“Mistress,” Abaddon called out as she stepped through the opening in the wall. She dragged Ruby’s body by its dark brown hair. Blood trickled from its mouth and a massive wound in its chest. Abaddon pulled Lucifer’s blade from Ruby’s back and tossed her body at Sam. She held up the angel blade. “I thought you might want to use our father's blade for the occasion.”

Lilith beamed at the prospect of using Lucifer’s angel blade. While waiting for the weapon to be brought over to her, she got up from atop Sam in order to watch him drag himself the three feet to Ruby’s body.

Ruby’s body was cold and empty. Its heart had been pierced by that loathsome blade. With some difficulty he wrapped his bound arms around her, pulling her corpse to him and cried. He didn't even watch Abaddon walk the blade over to Lilith. He didn't care.

Dean watched helplessly, devastated for his brother. He looked away, to Kay— Her face wasn't nearly as distraught. She looked tense, but not defeated. He turned back to Abaddon in confusion. Blood trickled from Abaddon's red hair, down the back of her neck, and was hidden among the black of her clothes.

“That's your lover, right?” Lilith goaded at Sam. “It's so sad. She got herself killed trying to save you.”

Lilith was nearly purring with pleasure, but Sam couldn't even think of her. Ruby was dead. Everyone else was injured or restrained. He wouldn't see his daughter again; she'd grow up without her parents, hunted by Lucifer. It had all gone wrong.
“You see Sam, Heaven was only half right. There's an order to all things. It doesn't matter how much you fight it. But it’s Lucifer who will win. Our father will rise as it is destined, and the strong will destroy the weak.” Lilith spoke to Sam in a soft mocking voice as she stepped forward to stare at Ruby's body. “I told you before, love’s a weakness. I guess you two deserve each other.”

“Mistress.”

Lilith turned just in time to see Abaddon plunge Lucifer’s blade into her chest. Abaddon leaned in so that she was glaring down at Lilith, then hissed, “What the fuck do you know about love?”

Lilith's body flickered and fell to the ground limp. As soon as Lilith was dead several of the angels of Heaven fled. The demons on Lilith’s side also retreated at the realization that their loyalties had just been thrown into chaos. Within seconds of Lilith’s knights fleeing, the demonic cloud above the building began receding and the rain of sparks stopped as the sky cleared. Everyone who wasn't trying to outrun the inevitable fallout stared at Lilith's body.

She was dead and someone other than Sam or Kay had done it. The last seal didn't break. Lucifer wasn't a threat anymore.

Abaddon pulled the angel blade from Lilith's body and dropped both to the ground away from Sam. Black smoke erupted from Abaddon's mouth as the knight’s meatsuit fell to the floor. Blood spilled out from a large hole in the back of Abaddon's head, which had been hidden by her long, bright red hair. The black cloud flowed weakly across the floor and poured into Ruby’s meatsuit. Ruby gasped and shuddered as she looked up at Sam.

“Ruby?” Sam’s eyes quickly looked her over, desperate to make sure it was really her.

“Told you… I’d save you,” She whispered as a little blood trickled from her mouth. He kissed her, then stopped for a moment to catch his breath between the tears of joy. Her right hand gingerly touched his cheek, wiping away a tear before guiding him to look her in the eyes. “French fries… every day… next 80 years.”

“Sounds perfect.”
December 13, 2010

Sam was lying in the hammock with Kaylee sprawled across his torso. They were wrapped in a wool blanket, despite the unusually mild late-autumn breeze. He was reading a book of illustrated poetry to her while she hugged her plush toy dragon. She snuggled into his chest, on the verge of falling asleep. Her heavy, drowsy breathes made him stop halfway through “The Road Not Taken.” He gently kissed the top of her head, content to let her nap if that’s what she wanted.

"Hey, Sam,” Ruby shouted as she came around the side of their cabin. “Bobby wants to know where you put the whiskey. You know the bottle he brought last visit."

Kaylee rustled at the sound of her mom’s voice, rolling around to see what was happening.

“It's in the cellar by the dried goods,” he replied. “I had to hide it from Flo and Pascoe a few weeks back.”

“You're a hero to us all.”

“Not to Flo and Pascoe. I'll go grab it. It's tucked behind the lentils on the top shelf,” Sam explained. He started to get up, but Kaylee gripped the edge of the book in protest. He hugged her, then assured her, “We’ll finish the book later. I promise. Right now I have to help grandpa find some booze.”

He placed her on the ground next to him, then climbed out of the hammock. Kaylee carefully reached back into the hammock to collect her dragon toy before quickly walking over to Ruby.

“Come on, starlight.” Ruby picked up Kaylee. “Are you excited for your party?”

“Yeah.” Kaylee smiled and hugged her mom’s neck.

“You want to wear a pretty dress?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to wear the blue dress?” Kaylee buried her face in Ruby's neck and shook her head. “You want to wear the red dress?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let's go get you changed while your dad helps grandpa pregame, then we can play while your guests arrive,” Ruby suggested as she carried Kaylee back to their family's cabin.

Sam made his way around back to the underground cellar. He completely ignored the half of the pantry dedicated to spell reagents. As the most dedicated vegetarian in camp, the top shelf of lentils was his private hiding spot. Generally speaking, he didn't have much in the way of contraband, but the premium spirits definitely counted. He located the blue label, checked the bottle for dust, then went to find Bobby.

“You know the rules: no work in the camp,” Sam said as he placed the bottle on the small dining
table in Bobby’s guest cabin. Aside from the bottle of whiskey, the little table was covered in notes for what Sam hoped were three unrelated cases.

“And you know that rule’s horseshit.” Bobby rejected the thought. “Everyone gets more work done here than back in that mess.”

“Yeah, well, at least hide it better. You're supposed to be relaxing and having fun.” Sam eyed Bobby's cell phone, which rested atop the largest file. “Is everything alright?”

“Garth just got picked up by an actual Fed. I think I've got it mostly sorted out. I'm gonna have to start calculating interest on all that kid owes me,” Bobby muttered. “The hunters network isn't just for getting bail money.”

“Hey, I'm grateful for any hunters you can coach and keep away from the shoot-first mentality. And if bail money helps you keep them on the straight and narrow, then I'm sure Ruby would be happy to rob a bank for you.”

“Don't make offers you aren't ready to see through,” Bobby cautioned as he rummaged through the kitchenette for a glass.

Sam was declining Bobby’s silent offer of a glass when he heard the unmistakable purr of the Impala approaching outside. He headed out to the main clearing between the cabins to greet his brother. The pristine, black childhood home came down the narrow dirt path leading into camp, then parked next to one of the smaller guest cabins that Dean preferred to use while visiting. A dozen of the kids ran out from the woodworks, excited to have some visitors, and swarmed the car.

Dean climbed out of the driver’s seat. He was ready for the mob, having learned over several visits that the key was to distract and bribe the children. Without missing a beat, Dean started pulling small sets of legos from the backseat and tossed them around, one to every kid. Upon receiving their little puzzles, each kid retreated off to some warm location to assemble their new toy. Castiel got out of the shotgun seat once the area around the car had cleared.

Ruby came out of their cabin, saw that Dean was the reason for the commotion, then put Kaylee down on the ground. The one-year-old awkwardly walked as fast as she could across the clearing, fuzzy red dress thankfully short enough to not trip her. When she got closer to Sam and Dean, Kaylee hesitated, suddenly reconsidering who she was rushing to.

“Kaylee, go say hi to Uncle Dean,” Sam encouraged while gesturing at his brother.

Dean reached into the car one last time and pulled out a bright orange, plush tiger toy, then held it at Kaylee's eye level. Her dark brown eyes widened at the sight of the colorful prize and she redirected herself to him. When she was in arm’s reach, Dean picked her up, then gently spun her around.

“Hey, munchkin,” Dean greeted her before making the toy tiger bite softly at her stomach.

“No, Dee.” She managed through her giggles.

He stopped tickling her and instead gave her a briefly solemn hug. She had trouble pronouncing his name—that's how the other Dean had gotten the nickname. He let the sad memory roll off of him, then put her back down on the ground.

“You got it, birthday girl. No more tickling... for today,” Dean agreed. He handed her the toy, which she promptly brought over to show her dad. Sam picked her up, then went to greet Dean himself.
“You know how to make an entrance.”

“What can I say, I'm great with kids,” Dean replied with a sarcastic smugness.

Sam smiled at the boasting, then corrected, “You're great with kids, but we're going to be finding lego pieces littered around the camp for the next two years.”

“Greatness comes at a price.” Dean spotted Bobby coming out of his cabin. “Is Jody here too?”

“She wanted to come, but she's working a triple homicide,” Bobby explained as he walked over.

“Humans or the bump-in-the-night variety?” Dean raised an eyebrow. “Cas and I can swing through on our way back down if you need some support.”

“It's hard to say, but if you want to stop by I know she'd like to see you.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dean agreed. “I owe her a steak dinner anyway. It turns out she was right about the missing persons in Sidney being a vampire nest.”

“Hey, Sam. If you’re free for a minute, can you help me with the stove?” Ruby called out while looking anxiously through the door of their cabin. “I’m about about ten seconds from ripping the range off the oven.”

“I'll be right back. Duty calls,” Sam apologized, then held out Kaylee inviting anyone to watch her. Bobby happily swooped in and perched her on his hip while holding his undrunk glass of whiskey in the opposite hand.

Once Sam had left, Bobby turned to Dean and Castiel, then opened his mouth to ask about the latest hunt when a dark purple motorcycle drove down the dirt road and stopped next to the Impala. The female rider dismounted before removing her helmet. Kay's hair was a pixie cut and she wore a black leather jacket with an embroidered border of red blossoms.

"Am I late?" she asked, looking around at the three other guests, the birthday girl, and nobody else as far as she could see.

“Right on time,” Dean assured her. “Sam and Ruby are just battling an aging appliance and I distracted the kids with some toys.”

“Did you say toy—” Tom started to ask, having been lured out of Belda’s cabin by the rumor of presents, but his train of thought was completely derailed. He stared at Kay's motorcycle in slack-jawed awe. Kay wasn't surprised young Tom liked it; she'd bought the same model and color as her older brother's bike. “That's so cool.”

"When you get a little older, if you want I can teach you how to ride," Kay offered. It was only fair to return the favor.

The boy beamed up at her. “Really?”

"If it's okay with Sam and Ruby." She'd hardly gotten the words out before he started running around looking for his guardians. Kay took a step to chase after him, but settled for yelling, “You might want to wait til you're older to ask them!”

“You're gonna get in trouble,” Dean teased.

“Alright, retreating back to Hell.” Kay turned around and pretended to get back on her motorcycle.
Dean hooked her arm, then started walking her towards Sam and Ruby’s cabin.

They had barely taken a step when the sound of flapping wings caught their attention. Dylianiel appeared right next to Kay, flanking her. He wore pale blue jeans and a light grey wool coat that extended to mid-thigh. His blonde scruff was valiantly attempting to form a goatee, but unlike his dad's style he wasn't growing out a mustache. He held a small box wrapped in pastel blue paper.

“I like your hair,” Dylianiel told Kay in lieu of a greeting.

“Thanks.” Kay smiled at her cousin. “Sorry I had to cancel on lunch last week.”

“You don't have to apologize. You have a busy schedule.”

“That doesn't mean I can't make time for family.”

“We see each other at least once a week. You aren't abandoning me,” Dylianiel pointed out. “But thank you.”

“It's longer on my end,” Kay complained.

“We don't have to stick to a weekly schedule. You could visit more often if you'd like,” Dylianiel suggested. “I know the others also enjoy your company.”

“You're always welcome at the bunker,” Dean agreed.

“Maybe,” Kay replied, then explained, “Things have just been a little crazy the last however-long.”

“I can imagine,” Dylianiel acknowledged. “Are you spending the night at the camp or do you have to get back?”

“I think I'll actually stay here.” Kay glanced around at the strangely familiar and foreign setting. “It's been forever since I've seen this place at night.”

“It's… not the same, but in its own way it's very nice.”

Once everyone had arrived, the coven and guests gathered in the camp’s community building for an early dinner. It was a potluck with every cabin bringing at least one dish. After struggling against a finicky stove, Ruby was able to contribute something resembling a fish stew and Sam made some last-minute biscuits while Dean and Kay entertained Kaylee. Between all of the cabins bringing dishes, the spread was far too large to be fully consumed. Luckily, they started early enough in the evening that there was plenty of time for going back for additional helpings.

The older children ate quickly, then played on the end of the community hall that had been cleared of tables. The birthday girl sat in her highchair beside the largest table, which had been claimed by the extended family. Sam and Ruby flanked their daughter, helping her try the softer foods. In general there were at least two or three conversations floating around the large, circular table at any given time. It was the first time since Sam's birthday months earlier that the whole family had been together and there were plenty of stories to be told.

Sam walked over to the serving table and started dishing up a second helping of salad when Kay came up next to him. She studied the options before meticulously picking through a pot of curry looking for the best chunks of goat and potato. He watched her for a second trying to discern what standards she was using. She glanced up, realizing that she'd been caught, then grinned innocently at him.
“Any chance we can attribute this to my predatory instincts and not just me being persnickety?”

“I don’t know. I really like the idea of the Queen of Hell being a picky eater,” Sam gently teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him slightly before taking a large, unvetted scoop of curry. “How’re you liking your demonic Kindle?” Kay asked as she eyed the rest of the dishes thoughtfully.

To help give Sam a broader library for his research and entertainment, Kay had Morrison and the head archivist of Hell create the equivalent of an ebook that was linked to Hell’s complete archives. The ebook was still just a prototype, but it was arguably one of the most valuable magical artifacts in the northern hemisphere. To his credit, Sam truly appreciated the amount of effort and trust the device symbolized and treated it with the appropriate level of respect.

“It's great. I mean, I can't get through a whole paragraph of Abyssal without having to look up a few words, but I'm getting through a good number of tomes.”

“Can I set you up with a project?”

Sam eyed her warily. “What kind of project?”

“All research, nothing messy,” Kay assured him, but her voice lowered ominously. “There's been a little chatter that caught my attention and I was wondering if you could dig around on it. You can tap any of our archivists if you want help, but I'm thinking it might be good to check Earth resources too.”

He put his plate down and leaned a little closer, thoroughly intrigued by the setup. “What's got you that curious?”

“I'm trying to find out about something called a demon tablet.”

As soon as Kay said the name Sam's smile faded a bit. A week earlier he'd had a vision of a stone tablet of indecipherable writing.

“You think it was the one from that vision?”

“Maybe.” Kay shrugged. “I don't know what it means, but luckily so far it's been really small ripples.”

“I'm on it.”

“Thanks.”

“Have you….” Sam started to halfheartedly ask a question as Kay turned to head back to the table, but hesitated when she returned her attention to him. After summoning a little courage he broached the unpleasant topic. “Have you had any visions with him in it?”

“No.” She knew he was referring to Lucifer. Ever since the power plant she could tell when Sam was namelessly referring to the archangel. His tone became both slightly ashamed and concerned. “You shouldn't be able to hear him anymore with the extra warding on you. Are you sure you aren't just having more nightmares?”

“Maybe.” Sam acknowledged the possibility. “It's just, you said that thing in our vision is called a demon tablet—”

“I'm speculating.”
“Have you heard any chatter on something called an angel tablet?”

“No.” Her brow furrowed. “Why?”

“About a month ago I had a nightmare or….” Sam stopped himself from calling it a vision. “He wanted me to look for something called an angel tablet.”

Kay stared at him very seriously. As soon as she'd mentioned the Demon Tablet he'd felt a small knot in his stomach. Her silence seemed to be some sort of corroborating anxiety.

“Have you been looking for it?” she asked.

“No—god, no.”

“If you find any mention of an angel tablet while you're looking for info on a demon tablet—”

“I'll stop and hand off my research immediately.” Sam raised his hands slightly, miming a forfeit. “I don't want…. I don't want any of that, whatever that is.”

“It might be nothing, something you read somewhere,” Kay suggested, though she didn't look convinced. “We can talk to Cas or call Gabe after the party; see if they've ever heard of it.”

“Can we keep this within the family as much as possible?” Sam hated to think what would happen if Heaven heard any new rumors about him and Lucifer.

“Absolutely.”

“How are you liking Alaska?” Sam asked Dyaniel after returning to the table.

In general, the family was supportive of Dyaniel's experiment with living in Alaska, though no one really appreciated the appeal on a personal level. For one thing, he'd settled just inside the Arctic Circle and with the winter solstice less than two weeks away, he was probably only getting a few minutes of sunlight a day, if that. The location was cold, flat, and lacked many conventional comforts, including many of the natural wonders Alaska was known for. Though as someone with the ability to teleport, Dyaniel wasn't as fazed by travel.

“It's stunning. The vastness of its wilderness is beautiful. Aside from some human settlements and fuel harvesting efforts, the land is so calm,” Dyaniel replied, excited to share details of his attempt at finding his own place in the world. “You should come visit sometime. I know several sites that are literally awe-inspiring.”

“Thanks, but I'm not really into camping,” Sam declined.

“You wouldn't need to. I live about ten miles from Selawik, one of the villages,” Dyaniel assured him. “I have a friend, Ukiuk, you could stay with her if you’d wished to stay for a few days.”

“I wouldn't want to impose.”

“She’s asexual if you're concerned about appearances.”

“I wasn't—” Sam purses his lip, then glanced at Ruby, who was leaning back in her chair watching him with a bemused smile on her face. “I just meant that I wouldn't want to inconvenience anyone.”

“I expect that you'd be put to work. There's always something to do,” Dyaniel admitted. “If you
don't mind them knowing about your powers, your use of the First Light could be very helpful in the winter season.”

“I'm not sure how good an idea that is.” Sam scratched the back of his head, a bit embarrassed by the idea of using his powers in public. After a moment he furrowed his brow at a startling thought. “Wait, do they know you're a nephilim?”

“Yes,” Dylaniel answered frankly. “The village is only accessible by boat or small aircraft, so my ability to teleport has been invaluable to the community.”

“Dyl’s the guardian angel of the last frontier,” Kay commented with a little toast.

“It's pleasant. Aside from hunts with Dean and Cas, I haven't killed anyone in six months.”

“Six months, new record,” Ruby said between bites of her garlic bread. “You should be proud.”

“I am,” Dylaniel replied, then finishing his glass of port in one long pull.

“How many people have you killed on hunts in the last six months?” Bobby asked.

“Twenty-eight.”

Kay smirked, “Baby steps.”

“To be fair, we mostly bring him in for high volume situations like nests,” Dean offered as a potentially skewing factor. “It's not like he's tearing through a garden party.”

“So Dyl, you're just like an outdoorsman? Hunting in the tundra and making jerky on wooden racks?” Ruby mused aloud. “You’re really not even dabbling with this Heaven stuff?”

“I have an electric smoker,” Dylaniel corrected, then addressed the bigger picture. “I expect that I'll be drawn back into the politics of Heaven at some point, one way or another. In an ideal reality it will be when the first few nephilim are born, but so far I haven't heard of any pregnancies.”

“I guess you are the resident expert.”

“Heaven will need to finalize their new policy on nephilim quickly,” Castiel agreed, then added almost nervously. “Apparently six of Anael’s original refugees are coupled in one respect or another.”

Kay sat up a bit at the news. “I didn't know angels had started dating. This is a big deal—”

“Hang up your crown for the night,” Bobby interjected, then nodded to Sam. “No-work-in-camp rule is in full effect.”

“Do you know which angels are dating?” Dylaniel asked, ignoring the old hunter’s edict.

“Anael’s been evasive on the subject,” Castiel said apologetically. “I think she's still wary of Heaven persecuting those she'd sheltered. She spent many years fearing Heaven. I expect that’s a difficult mindset to overcome.”

Anael had cooperated with minor efforts to re-establish some relationship with Heaven, but by no means had she returned to significant duty. Her fall had been pardoned on account of her service in stopping the release of Lucifer, though she had opted to remain on Earth to the frustration of many high choirs. In an attempt to keep her somewhat within the hierarchy of Heaven she was offered several new commands and responsibilities, but she declined the vast majority. The only duty she
accepted was contingent on her ability to continue operating on Earth and allowed her privacy. She was arguably a worse recluse than Dyaniel; for the last half a year she had only spoken to the others via telephone.

“Personally, I wouldn't blame her for being worried about her refugee angels,” Dean commented. “I know Heaven’s being more tolerant, but I don't know how that place is gonna keep itself together long term.”

“It's not as bad as you believe.” Castiel rejected the pessimistic view. “We're making great strides in finding a system of governance that is democratic while… accommodating our disproportionate populace.”

“Choir tensions?” Sam asked.

“Some of the high choirs believe that voting should be weighted—”

“Revolution!” Ruby raised her glass of ginger ale in a faux rallying cry, but no one played along.

“One more civil war and they won't have anyone left to steer the ship,” Dean muttered. “They need to replace their dead somehow.”

“They could accept nephilim as peers,” Dyaniel suggested what seemed to him to be the obvious choice.

“What nephilim? Aside from you,” Dean said with a shrug-like gesture. “Heaven better hope all their little political factions can play nice for like twenty years.”

“Welcome back to literal fucking politics,” Ruby commented, then pointed across the table at Castiel. “Cas, you heard the man. Go impregnate someone.”

“I'd prefer not to,” Castiel said unenthusiastically.

“I was joking.”

“He’s still working on the humor thing,” Dean cautioned.

“We’ve been working on puns,” Castiel reported, then added hopefully, “It's been very labor intensive.”

Ruby groaned. “God dammit, Dean. Why'd you have to go and do something like that?”

“Did I not time the joke correctly?” Castiel asked. “Was it not clear?”

“You did great,” Dean assured him. “That’s just how puns work.”

“Have you visited Heaven yet?” Sam asked Dyaniel, trying to avoid additional talk about puns.

“No. It hasn't stabilized enough to be considered safe.”

“You wouldn't be harmed if you were to visit. There exists a standing invitation,” Castiel told Dyaniel for at least the twentieth time.

One of the three major political factions in Heaven continued rejecting the idea of nephilim and had made multiple calls to investigate Dyaniel's killing of Raphael. It didn't by any means rise to the level of hostility that Dyaniel had faced in his original time, but he didn't care for the risks
associated with seeking out contact with Heaven. He wasn't actively hiding, but he maintained his anti-detection warding and only agreed to meetings with a handful of trusted angels. Any attempts by angels to detain or harm him would likely result in considerable upheaval in Heaven, though he wasn't about to do anything to encourage tempting such a test.

Dylaniel once again declined the invitation. “Thank you, but I'd prefer to maintain a cautious stance on the issue.”

“Is there anything we can do to make you feel safer in Heaven?” Castiel asked, hopeful that he'd be able to help Dylaniel get in touch with a large and previously unexplored piece of his heritage.

“The traditionalist party is unnerving, but I doubt I'll ever agree to share the same plane with Michael,” Dylaniel replied frankly. “If Heaven wouldn't mind executing him, I might be convinced to visit.”

“You know, nothing extravagant,” Kay commented.

During the revolution in Heaven, Michael and significant portions of the high choirs had been overthrown and imprisoned. The decision of how to deal with them hadn't been settled, though releasing them outright was universally deemed to be a bad idea. Proposals ranged from binding them with covenants before a conditional release to corporal punishment to execution. The majority of angels leaned toward the an extended imprisonment or tightly regulated release.

Many of the angels viewed the conspiracy to participate in the apocalypse as an almost forgivable mistake. There had been guidance in the form of prophecies and divine interpretations after all. The larger issue was the disgraceful treatment of both humans and angels in the course of trying to follow the mistaken belief. While hunting for their prey and assisting Lilith in the breaking of the seals, Heaven had been directly responsible for 1,837 human and 379 angel deaths, though the casualties suffered during the fighting inside Heaven were generally acknowledged to be the price of war and weren't held against Michael and the others with the same resentment.

“Michael is completely secure,” Castiel commented.

“He is a problem for me, but it's not just him. There will be too many variables and too much attention,” Dylaniel elaborated. “I don't like large groups and crowds. They make me uncomfortable.”

“You can't tell me that you didn't feel comfortable with the AFE?” Dean asked. “There were a ton of people there and I saw you strutting around like you owned the place.”

“That's different. It was familiar and we had structure,” Dylaniel explained, then took a sip of his second glass of port before adding, “The planes as they are are chaotic.”

“We have governments and laws. We aren't the Wild West like you guys had,” Dean countered. “We don't have a big piece of the country called the Badlands.”

“It's a national park four hours from my house,” Bobby corrected a bit indignantly. “I took you there when you were in middle school.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Your governments are weak and ill-equipped to handle the existence of the extranatural,” Dylaniel argued. “I seriously doubt that comprehensive statutory reform is possible—”

“Someone’s been studying their civics,” Sam commented quietly.
“—and human tribunals are a joke,” Dylaniel continued, ignoring Sam.

“I think Dyl needs to run as an Earth reform candidate,” Dean suggested. “I can see the campaign slogan now ‘Dylaniel Winchester: These other guys are idiots.’”

Ruby piled on. “Dylaniel Winchester: I’d rather not kill to make this happen.”

“Dylaniel Winchester: Military rule isn’t so bad,” Kay chimed in.

“Dylaniel Winchester: You should probably learn to live off the land,” Bobby added.

“I know you all think you’re funny.” Dylaniel’s brow furrowed subtly. “But those actually are fair comments.”

“Dyl, never change,” Kay told her cousin with a heartfelt smile.

“How’ve you been?” Sam asked Kay while the other side of the table got off on a tangent about a hunt they’d worked on together a month earlier. “You’ve been a little hard to get ahold of the last few weeks.”

“We’re having a few headaches with the Order, nothing too serious though.”

The Order of the Morningstar was a group of Lucifer loyalists who had cropped up in the weeks after the sixty-fifth seal broke. The group originally was only a handful of high ranking demons from Lilith’s army, but when the populist revolt took power in Heaven, many of Lucifer’s angelic supporters fled to Earth and over a hundred angels seized command of the organization. In recent months even some humans had started joining the Order, seeking a powerful leader in the midst of the terrifying changing world.

The group was something of a nuisance to Hell and specifically Kay, but Sam found the entire situation disturbing and potentially dangerous. At least one of the angels that had initially accompanied Zachariah into the fight at the power plant must’ve survived because the gossip that Lucifer had spoken to Sam directly had spread like a plague. Heaven’s interim government had deliberated on the issue for several days before deciding not to take any preemptive action against Sam as long as he adhered to a few strict rules. He was to remain heavily warded against communication with Lucifer, which he was happy to do. He wouldn't rally forces without the permission of Heaven; luckily leading an army was the last thing he wanted to be involved in. And finally, he wasn't allowed to wield Lucifer’s blade or make any showing of association with Hell’s monarchy, such as wearing its iconic red blossoms or the sigil of Lucian.

He didn't want to break any of those rules, yet as Lucifer’s favored vessel, the Order of the Morningstar would love for him to break all or any of those. Maybe he wasn't being hunted as before and maybe he wasn't a celebrity like Kay’s dad, but he did have that little bit of pressure on him. As a result, Sam tried to avoid large crowds where he might be identified and risk being placed in an interesting situation. It'd only been a year since his face was plastered onto the mind’s eye of every person even tangentially related to the supernatural. In another year or so he hoped to have faded from the spotlight sufficiently, but for the moment he was fine mostly staying at home with his kids.

“Do you think I should call my probation officer?” he joked halfheartedly.

“Wouldn't hurt for you to check in with Anael,” Kay agreed. “But this last thing was just some angels raiding a few honey farms in Missouri.”
“Honey?”

“I have no idea.” Kay shook her head. “They killed themselves instead of being taken. Tore one of my knights in half. What a fucking mess.”

“Which knight?”

“Garlum. She’ll be down for another few months at least.”

“Are they getting any quieter?” Sam asked.

He tried to avoid looking up the Order online. Not only would it inevitably be depressing, but he was worried how it might look. Technically, he wasn't prohibited from researching them, yet if he somehow ended up scaring Heaven he really didn't want records of him monitoring the Order online. Instead he got his gossip from his family and close friends.

“They're about the same.” She shrugged. “We think there are only a few hundred of them in total. I wouldn't lose any sleep over them if I was you.”

“Luckily, my concerns are pretty limited here: will Tom start asking for motorcycle lessons? By the way, thank you for that.” Sam glared in mock annoyance. “And do we have enough reagents to make up for the fact that no one ever cuts enough firewood?”

“Well, if you really insist on worrying about new and exciting things, Shola’s about ready to tear her figurative-hair out over the latest contract to buy real estate in the Silicon Valley.”

He absentmindedly chewed his lower lip. “I shouldn't….”

“One of the pre-existing tenants is a coven and another is a third-tier demigod. The game’s in not tipping our hands or outing our sympathetic third parties.” Kay smiled. “You know you just want a peek at the file.”

“I'm not making suggestions,” Sam warned, then finished his beer. “But if she wants to swing by and vent—”

“Yeah. You love it.”

Dean grabbed another two beers for him and Sam, but didn't hand over Sam's bottle right away.

“One sec. Let me get it for you,” Dean said as he started fumbling around looking for where the bottle opener had been put down. Sam reached out for a bottle, but Dean continued to delay. “I don't mind. Anyway, it's easier for me—if I can find the damn opener.”

“I'm fine.” Sam took the beer from Dean, then held the bottle between his knees while undoing the cap with the ring on his left hand. “This might come as a shock, but even with a bad hand I get by just fine.”

The damage that Abaddon had done to Sam’s right arm was somewhat mitigated through two surgeries, but he didn't have full functionality in his hand. His fingers couldn't close all the way and to the extent he could grab objects, his grip strength was well below average. Aside from having to become left-handed, it didn't have a significant impact in his everyday life. He hadn't yet mastered writing legibly with his left hand, but he preferred a keyboard anyway. The only domestic skill he was diligently practicing at, in order to overcome his dexterity problem, was braiding hair.
Since officially retiring after the power plant incident, Sam hadn't been keeping up his previous level of combat training. Despite two months of practicing, he'd more or less given up on using firearms. Flo had diagnosed the problem as his dominant eye not adjusting to his new dominant hand. In theory it might correct over time, but he decided to instead adjust his training to his new circumstances. He mostly practiced unarmed combat or with his powers. At that point, his ability to beat Pascoe or Ruby in a sparring match was largely tied to the extent he used telekinesis, but he’d at least found something that worked for him.

“I didn't mean anything by it,” Dean apologized.

“I know,” Sam said. “I'm getting better. Watch this: Hey, Pascoe!”

When Pascoe looked to see what was happening, Sam pointed at a glass jar of mixed nuts and raised his right hand. Pascoe picked up the container, then threw it across the room at Sam. The jar stopped in mid-air about half a foot in front of Sam's hand. He carefully plucked the projectile from the air before offering it to Dean.

“That's still gonna take a while for me to get used to. You gotta warn me when you do tricks like that,” Dean commented while pulling a vaporizer out of his jacket pocket. He took a hit, then blew the exhale up and away from Kaylee. “Just don't ever light your hands on fire or strip a clock in front of me. I’ll have a complete fucking breakdown.”

“Other me?” Sam asked, earning a nod from Dean. “Don't worry. I'm staying away from all things exciting.”

“I'm more worried about all things exciting staying away from you.”

They watched Kaylee try to chase Tom and some of the older kids. She’d stagger after them, occasionally being allowed to catch up to them. Tom was very gentle with her, making silly faces or tickling her, but never enough to the point of startling her or making her become upset.

Sam and Ruby hadn’t explicitly asked Tom if he wanted them to adopt him, but they had tried to make it clear that their guardianship wasn’t just some stopgap measure. Tom wasn’t some burden that they’d taken on out of the necessity of sharing the load with the rest of the coven. They were there for him to whatever extent he was comfortable and overall he’d happily fallen into the role of big brother, occasionally inspired by Sam’s stories about Dean being there for him when he was a kid.

“How's life as a stay-at-home dad been treating you?” Dean asked his little brother.

“It's not like I'm spending my days baking cookies. There's so much to study in terms of history and magic and I've been training with my powers.” Sam looked at Ruby, who was playing with Kaylee a bit of her way back from the drinks table. “It's nice having a home.”

“I’m really happy for you.”

“Maybe when Kaylee's a little older I can get back out and work a bit.”

“Work as in?”

“Not hunting; maybe something quiet, like teaching. Kay gave me a standing invitation to basically be a human...er Crossroads negotiator on Earth, but that probably won't fly with the terms of my probation. Also, I'm not really sure how to feel about it, but it’d at least be interesting.”

“Congratulations, Sammy.” Dean grinned. “You found the most convoluted route to being a
As everyone finished eating, people at the table started getting up to go mingle, play with the children, or find a drink that was stronger than beer or wine. When the table was sufficiently cleared that Sam and Kay were more or less left to themselves, Sam decided to bring up a delicate topic.

“How’s your personal life?”

“Is Crowley hassling you?” Kay evaded and counterattacked.

“He drops by occasionally.”

Despite Sam’s officially prohibition when it came to Hell’s hierarchy, the archdemon would stop by at least twice a month and try to convince Sam to take some greater interest in Hell. There was no doubt in Sam’s mind that if he was caught dabbling in Hell’s affairs, he'd end up in another angel-operated prison, but Crowley had repeatedly pitched that as potentially a necessary risk. If something were to happen to Kay, Sam was the only other person remotely capable of filling her shoes in many respects. And while there was the hypothetical threat of Heaven punishing Sam, there was an even more catastrophic hypothetical threat of Hell’s government collapsing. Sam hated to admit that it was something to consider, but he’d hated it even more when Crowley had once referred to him as the Prince of Hell.

“I’ll tell him to ease up on you,” Kay offered. “He’s just trying to get his ass covered if something goes wrong. He’s number two on the chopping block.”

“And he wants me as number two instead.”

“I’d prefer to think of him as thinking of the good of the realm, but you know two-birds-one-stone.”

“You don’t have to yell at him or anything. He’s always nice about it. He brings bribes.” Sam nodded toward the small jungle gym out one of the windows. “I just don’t want him stepping up his methods or teaming up with Morrison to do—I don’t even know what.”

One of the unforeseen benefits to Sam being restricted from interacting with Hell was that some of the enthusiasm to study him for breeding research had dwindled. Suddenly having Sam visit Hell bordered on an invitation for Heaven to take action. In theory Heaven would simply try to detain him, but if he was located in Hell at the time it would require crossing into a sovereign plane. It wasn’t a guaranteed outcome, but merely having Sam enter Hell could trigger a war between two planes that were still recovering from their own civil wars.

As much as the Council wanted to pursue research on reproduction, the risks of using Sam were too significant to ignore. Kay had managed to spin the situation as not a total loss. Sam was alive, safe, and not actually under the direct control of Heaven. Hell’s best hope for breeding was in the reserves. In the meantime, Kay had agreed to seek out one or more suitors to eventually have a child with. It was essentially the same arrangement as she’d had previously, but in this time there was less of a sense of urgency.

“They aren’t about to make you do anything,” Kay promised, then realized that they’d found their way back to his initial question about the status of her personal life. “I went on a date, like on Earth with a meal and everything.”

“Does the guy knows what you do?”
“Upper management of a recycling center.” Kay grinned awkwardly. “It's not even a lie as such.”

“Recycling, wow.” Sam laughed and nodded. “Saving the Earth.”

“I don't really see it going anywhere with him anyway.” Kay shrugged as she played with her wine glass. “Did you ever meet Joseba?”

“Arch?”

“Knight,” She corrected. “He's trying to figure out how to court me.”

“Did he bring you flowers?”

“It's Hell. I bring the flowers,” Kay joked. “He's been hovering around the Citadel instead of going out. Not to mention, I can read him like a book.”

“Do you like him?” Sam asked, hoping that she wasn't planning to settle on his account.

“He's definitely not the worst I could do: very sharp, charming, good fighter.” Kay paused for a moment, then added, “It's really weird not having any angels court me. They made up more than half my suitors back home.”

“Hell isn't really an ally with any angels in this time,” Sam observed aloud. “I guess that's going to change all sorts of things, including who you date.”

After dinner some music was put on and a portion of the free space where the kids had been running around was converted into a small dance floor. Belda and Flo were among the first few people to start dancing, but when they realized that there weren’t any men on the dance floor they began looking for prey. They passed by the main table for some reconnaissance, then struck. It took several pitches and making some puppy eyes, but they managed to lure both Pascoe and Dean to the dance floor. Within a few minutes the mildly-intoxicated Dean started getting into it and took up the position of dancing between Belda and Flo. Both women moved closer to him, occasionally touching him in a distinctly flirtatious manner.

When Blenda candidly glanced down at Dean's body, Kay noted to the others still at the table, “Dean's looking awfully popular.”

“It's not as easy for the coven to get into town as it used to be,” Sam explained.

“He's fresh meat,” Ruby elaborated. “I'll give them another hour before I spray them with the hose. Don't want to risk him knocking up a quarter of the coven.”

Dean pulled back some of Flo’s hair and whispered in her ear. She turned around to face him, wrapped her arms around his neck, then ground against him slightly.

“Keep it PG!” Ruby shouted at them, nodding to the kids playing about fifteen feet away.

Dean raised his hands in forfeit. When Flo didn't let go of him, he leaned in and told her something that made her look a bit disappointed. He smiled apologetically, but they quickly recovered once she started dancing a little farther away from him.

“How many nights were you two planning on staying here?” Sam asked Castiel, who remained seated at the table, casually watching the spectacle with the others.

“Three,” Castiel replied. “I can teleport Dean back to the bunker if he becomes a problem.”
“He seems to be doing okay.”

Pascoe worked his way through the dance floor to be next Dean. He seemed even less concerned with Dean’s personal space. The two of them were leaning in close to talk into each other’s ears as they danced. At one point Dean started laughing at something hard enough that he had to hold onto Pascoe and briefly rest his forehead on the witch’s shoulder. Pascoe’s hand slid up under Dean’s shirt. Dean blushed, then turned his back to the onlookers as he batted Pascoe’s hand away.

“Kiss him!” Ruby heckled. Without bothering to look back towards her, Dean flipped Ruby off.

"Dean seems to be more… comfortable with himself," Sam observed aloud.

“One less impediment to fucking around,” Ruby commented.

"I think he’s had fewer sexual partners than your statement suggests,” Castiel corrected. “In our travels over the last year, I’ve seen him turn down every sexual invitation he’s received and he hasn't invited anyone back to his motel room.”

“He hasn't had sex for a year? Dean?” Ruby asked in disbelief.

“He had a hard time after Hell with PTSD. Maybe he’s just not feeling up for that yet,” Sam speculated.

“I don’t think he’s celibate,” Castiel disagreed. “When he’s based out of the bunker, he usually spends two or three nights per week sleeping somewhere else. He asked me not to follow him…. For the last three months he’s had an additional key on his keychain.”

“You think he’s dating someone?” Sam asked, mouth curling helplessly into a smile.

Ruby looked at Castiel and asked, “I take it you aren't getting any?”

“One time he offered to perform fellatio on me in exchange for a cheeseburger, but I think he was too intoxicated for it to be sincere.” Castiel pursed his lips at the memory.

“He sounds like a much more entertaining drunk nowadays,” Ruby mused aloud. “We need to get some more drinks in him.”

“Just don’t get him in trouble,” Sam cautioned.

Belda finished dancing and walked back over to the table, swaying a bit too much while she moved. She picked up her glass of wine, took a sip, then sat down next to Dylaniel. Her finger absentmindedly traced the rim of her wine glass as she smiled at the nephilim.

“How old are you?” Belda asked.

“Twenty-two,” Dylaniel replied.

“It's nice to meet someone closer to my age. I'm twenty-three.” She leaned forward, beaming at Dylaniel. “You have beautiful eyes.”

“Speaking of trouble,” Kay murmured to Ruby at the looming strikeout.

“Thank you. You seem very nice, but I'm not interested in having any sexual interaction,” Dylaniel stated as politely as such a statement could be made. Belda stared at him, befuddled by being turned down so directly. When she kept looking at him, Dylaniel added, “Also, your decision-making might be impaired from the alcohol. You should be careful about that.”
“I… okay.” Belda glanced down at her mostly-drunk glass of wine. Ruby collected her thoroughly tipsy witch, wrapping an arm around her, and physically moving her away from the awkward encounter.

“Don’t worry, Bel. You were just barking up the wrong tree with him.” Ruby patted her back as they walked away. “Let’s go throw shit into the bonfire outside and if you still wanna catch a dick after you sober up we’ll port you and Flo wherever you feel like prowling.”

“Someone should probably warn Pascoe not to go after you either,” Sam told Dylaniel.

“I’m theoretically flattered.” Dylaniel assured everyone while refilling his glass of port. “I’d just prefer that no one embarrass themselves trying to proposition me. I know that some people find that sort of thing enjoyable even if they don’t intend on acting upon it, but human flirtations are so complicated. Half the time they don’t even make sense.”

“It was nicer when your suitors came in manila folders, wasn’t it?” Kay joked.

“No.”

Dean stopped dancing and returned to the table, grabbing an empty chair next to Sam. The elder Winchester leaned back in the chair, then glanced at his brother. It was nice to see Dean not feel too self-conscious to fully enjoy himself at the party.

“Having fun?” Sam asked.

“Turns out witches know how to party.” Dean took out his vaporizer again, took a puff, then passed it to Sam. “Who knew?”

“I told you you’d get along with the coven,” Sam said, then took a hit.

“Yeah, you did.” Dean looked around at the room for a few seconds. “Man, I guess a lot’s changed in the last year.”

"Speaking of things changing, how are things going?" Sam tilted his head pointedly at Castiel, who had been pulled into a conversation with Bobby and three witches on the other side of the room.

"Cas?" Dean nodded, understanding the unspoken question. "He's a good guy. We're friends. I don't think that either of us is planning on changing up what that means just yet."

"Yet?" Sam kept baiting Dean on the topic of his love life. "You don't really need to reinvent the wheel on happiness."

"I don't know if anything’s gonna happen with Casand me.” Dean chewed his lips in hesitation. “ Anyway… I'm sort of seeing someone right now.”

"Hey, that's great.” Sam smiled, both to be reassuring, but also because he was happy to see that Dean felt comfortable sharing what had evidently been something of a secret. “How serious are things?"

“I have a toothbrush at his place.” Dean grinned meekly, then played with his vaporizer anxiously. “He, um…. He doesn't know I’m involved with this kinda stuff. He thinks I’m a car mechanic, who travels as part of the job and I go on normal hunting trips. That's why I disappear every once in a while and have guns…. I think he’s a little spooked by magic and the supernatural stuff—Hell,
I don't know if he even thinks it's real. We haven't really talked about it. I don't think he's particularly into the whole magic thing—not that most people are—you know how it is. I guess, maybe not if you're cooped up around here most the time.”

Dean was visibly flustered trying to explain the basis of his relationship or maybe trying to justify the secrecy he'd been practicing. Rather than pushing for more information about whoever Dean was seeing, Sam decided to give him a short reprieve and discuss the bigger picture of the public perception of the supernatural. Though Sam didn't exactly have a traditional family or live in a traditional setting to give him a proper frame of reference.

“I sometimes catch the news, see the little changes.” Sam shrugged. “It's hard to not want to get involved.”

“You've got your own responsibilities. No one thinks less of you for getting out, and anyone in the know thinks highly of you for getting out,” Dean assured him.

“I know Bobby and Rufus are holding out, but if you're actually thinking about settling a bit… are you going to register?”

With the veil starting to be pulled back on the supernatural underbelly of the world, in the last six months there had been countless major and minor shifts in society. One of the most pressing for the immediate community was the registration efforts for both witches and hunters, though attempts to get voluntary registries had yielded underwhelming results.

The witches were understandably hesitant to register for fear of some impending trials or literal witch hunts, either government sponsored or at an informal local level. The witch registration efforts were easily muddied thanks to non-magic worshippers, a handful of lawsuits over religious freedom, and the unnaturally bad luck that seemed to befall every aspect of that department’s efforts. There were rumors that state and federal authorities were working to recruit white hat witches, but without the backing of the Maji, their efforts likely wouldn't be incredibly effective.

The hunter registration efforts were something else. Unlike witches, hunters didn't have a history of institutional persecution. They just hated being told what to do. Many of the older hunters flatly refused to register despite promises that they'd be allowed to keep hunting, just with some accountability in exchange for not having to impersonate law enforcement officials and the new ability to charge for their services. A significant percentage of the younger hunters had registered within the first few months in anticipation of the changing winds. But a lot of hunters were caught in a strange grey area.

“I don't know. I probably won't register,” Dean admitted. “I only do maybe three hunts a month at this point and if I did…. Tamara told me that there's like a hundred-page application. You have to list out previous hunts, your weapons, your books, and stuff like that. She has to have a $1,000,000 liability insurance plan just to fucking hunt and the premiums are something awful. Half the hunters I know can't afford to go legitimate.”

“Sounds like you guys need to unionize,” Kay pointed out, then added, “Before you ask, Crossroads won't represent you.”

“Yeah, well as far as I'm concerned that's someone else's problem. I don't want them digging into my life. The fewer people that know who we are”—Dean gestured at his family and the coven —“the better.”

“So your boyfriend really has no idea?” Kay asked.
“If this looks like it's going somewhere, I'll tell him,” Dean conceded. “For now, I'm just seeing if he can stand me minus all the crazy.”

“How'd you explain the scar?” Sam gestured at the four-inch-long scar Abaddon had put on Dean that ran through his right eyebrow up to a half-inch past his hairline.

“Mugging.”

“You've killed an archdemon and seraphim. It's cute to think you got bested by some mugger,” Kay commented.

“Yeah, but it plays well.” Dean grinned, then shook his head at a memory. “I actually intentionally took a few hits in a fight because he was watching. I mean, I still beat the shit out of the other guy, but I didn't know what to do and I didn't want it being completely one-sided.”

“He saw you bloody a guy? That's like third base for you Winchesters,” Ruby teased.

“When do I get to meet him?” Sam asked with a false nonchalant tone.

“Don't.” Dean pointed his vaporizer at Sam accusatorially. “He's a civilian.”

“I'm a civilian.”

“Please. You're the Ward Cleaver of Hell and the occult,” Dean countered. “I'm not saying never, just I don't know if it's going anywhere and I don't want to get things complicated if it doesn't need to. You know I'm really protecting you.”

“Really?” Sam smirked at the obvious spin. “You're protecting me on this?”

“Okay, let's say you meet him.” Dean paused for a beat, clearly trying to think of a justification on the fly. “Wouldn't it be weird if you came all the way down to Lawrence for a visit and didn't bring the kids? Kaylee's about the age when she's gonna start flashing black eyes. What if Tommy slips up and mentions magic? You don't want those kinds of problems.”

“First of all, I can visit you on my own,” Sam said, happy to take shots at Dean's hypothetical. “It could be for work—”

“You don't have a job.”

“Well, as long as you're lying about your job—”

“I actually do fix cars,” Dean corrected.

“No kidding?” Sam raised his eyebrows. “You have a legitimate job?”

“I mean, I get paid under the table, but it's better than spending all my nights hustling pool.”

“I could meet him,” Kay interjected. “I don't have any kids and I'll try really hard not to flash my eyes black.”

“Cute. ‘J, I'd like you to meet my alternate timeline niece, who’s Queen of Hell. You know that parking ticket you have; she can take care of that for you.’” Dean acted out the sarcastic scene.

“I don't do parking tickets,” Kay informed everyone. “Anyway, just tell people I'm your half-sister, like you do with Dyl.”
On more than one occasion Dean and Dyaniel had been mistaken for siblings while on hunts together. After the third time they agreed that the story would be they were half-brothers. The theory was that it would allow for a level of access and confidence, while creating an excuse for not knowing everything about each other. Aside from acting as a cover, they both had to admit there was some appeal in having a less complicated interpretation of their familial relationship.

“Dyl is like ten years younger than me. We're almost the same age. It's gonna look like my dad got some on the side.” Dean critiqued the suggestion. “That's gonna leave me making up a whole new dynamic to my legitimately fucked up relationship with my dad.”

“No one’s gonna think that. Dean, you look a lot older than Kay,” Ruby teased.

“One year.” Dean raised a single finger. “Just one fucking year.”

“And yet all those grey hairs,” Ruby smirked.

“Pascoe’s putting together a game of Never Have I Ever,” Dean excitedly told those lingering around the table after returning from the dance floor for a quick second round.

“And that’s how Dean died,” Ruby commented.

“I'm not familiar with this game,” Castiel interjected, suddenly concerned about the possibility of fatalities. “How would we play it?”

“Everyone has a drink—” Dean started to explain.

“An alcoholic drink,” Dyaniel clarified.

“—and we go around the table making statements that start with ‘Never have I ever,’ and end with some sort of risqué thing. Then everyone who's done the thing has to take a sip of their drink.”

Dyaniel nodded at the summary, then added, “The objective is to embarrass the other players while making them intoxicated.”

“I'm not sure it's fair to be playing against an angel,” Kay warned the others. “I've seen a few of them put away a gallon of rubbing alcohol and still walk a straight line.”

“Let him play,” Dean encouraged, then looked back to Castiel. “If you want to.”

“I'll try it… for at least a few turns,” Castiel agreed.

“I'm not playing,” Ruby declined without elaboration.

“Come on, Rube. You’re probably my only competition,” Dean complained.

“Another time,” she promised. “Don’t underestimate Pascoe or Flo.”

“Or Kay,” Dyaniel added. “She may have served in a position of authority for many years, but she has been a public menace longer.”

The players relocated to a table in a nook far from where the few remaining children were playing and dancing in defiance of curfew. Ruby perched herself on a stool at the threshold to the nook so that she could play lookout while still enjoying the show. Sam, Dean, Castiel, Dyaniel, Kay, Pascoe, and Flo took their seats around the circular table, then liberally-filled glasses of scotch and port were distributed. After several rounds of rock-paper-scissors, Sam was determined to be the
first person to give a prompt.

“Never have I ever paid for sex,” Sam said while staring pointedly at Dean. Dean smirked a little annoyed grin before taking a sip.

“No surprise there,” Ruby called from the bleachers.

Pascoe also took a sip then everyone looked to Dylandiel, who was the next person in sequence to give a prompt. But before he could speak Kay made a small, fake coughing noise to catch the other's attention.

“Does it count if you own the brothel?” Kay asked meekly, then elaborated. “Hell likes to have a significant number of investments on Earth so that we don't run into trade—”

Dean pointed to her glass of scotch. “Fucking drink.”

Dylandiel took his turn with the confidence of someone fishing with dynamite. “Never have I ever given a blow job.”

Kay didn't even put down her glass after the first round before taking her second sip. Flo and Pascoe drank without a moment's hesitation. Dean tried to maintain his composure while drinking, though his ears turned a bit pink. Sam took a sip, then shrugged at Ruby when she started making intrigued faces at him.

“One time. It was college,” Sam explained.

“Someone's got daddy issues,” Dean joked. Sam picked up an individual sized bowl of popcorn from the table and telekinetically threw its contents straight at Dean. Dylandiel had wisely covered the top of his glass of port with his hand, but Dean hadn't taken the precaution. Dean plucked the scotch-soaked pieces of popcorn and ate them experimentally.

“Never have I ever been naked in public.” Pascoe initiated the next round.

Dean, Flo, and Kay took a drink.

“Never have I ever had sex in a public place.” Flo offered up the variant, causing Dean, Pascoe, and Kay to drink. She stared at Pascoe, then asked, “How do you have sex in public without being naked?”

“Carefully.”

“Bonus round and losers have to drink,” Ruby happily interjected. “Which one was the strangest public place?”

“Movie theater,” Pascoe answered.

Kay threw her hat in the ring. “Ruins of a factory.”

“I don't know.” Dean shook his head. “That doesn't sound like there’s much risk of being caught.”

“We were waiting for our rescue party,” Kay replied smugly.

“Touché. Church confession booth,” Dean answered, earning a few raised eyebrows. With an expression as absolute pride, he added, “Between a wedding ceremony and the reception.”

Kay and Pascoe didn't even wait for someone to declare Dean the winner. They both raised their
glasses, conceding the loss.

“Is that the first time you didn’t drink?” Sam asked Dean while eyeing the elder Winchester’s already half-drunk glass. “I think we need to redistribute the damage a bit.”

“We’re not making Dyl drink enough,” Dean observed aloud. “He hasn't touched his.”

“New approach,” Kay said before considering how to make Dylaniel join in the game while keeping it entertaining for the rest of the group. “Never have I ever decapitated someone.”

“Safe play,” Sam commented, then took a sip along with Dean and Dylaniel.

“Hey, Dyl, keep drinking.” Kay pointed at her cousin’s glass when he started to set it down. “You’ve removed more heads than the guillotine.”

“The rules state it’s one sip per topic—” Dylaniel began arguing.

“I've decapitated vampires. You decapitated an archangel.” Sam laid out the disparity. “There's no way that we take equal sips on that.”

“Dyl.” Dean refilled Dylaniel’s glass to full. “Finish it.”

“This game is more enjoyable when you’re drunk anyway,” Dylaniel agreed, then downed his glass in four swigs.

“Maybe Cas shouldn’t be drinking after all,” Sam suggested at the sight of Dylaniel drinking so much so quickly. “We need at least one sober person capable of healing alcohol poisoning.”

“I suspect it won’t be a problem,” Castiel assured him. The angel paused for a few seconds trying to decide on a prompt. “Never have I ever harvested physiological resources from the corpse of an enemy.”

Dylaniel drank without hesitation. Kay thought for a moment, then also took a sip.

“Okay, that went to a weird place, but good effort.” Dean offered Castiel words of encouragement.

“Does hunting or fishing count?” Sam asked.

“I don't see why not,” Castiel replied, causing Dean, Sam, and Flo to drink too.

“Your turn, Dean,” Sam informed his brother after Dean failed to suggest a prompt.

“I’m having trouble thinking of something that wouldn’t apply to me other than like filing a tax return… Huh.” Dean’s face scrunched up a bit betraying his intoxication.

“Well, if the floor is open—” Sam began, but Dylaniel jumped in with a prompt.

“Never have I ever had a three way.”

Dean, Pascoe, and Kay all drank.

“Wait. Does your boyfriend—” Pascoe started to ask Dean, but Dean held up his hand to halt the question.

“No. Not happening.” Dean replied. “Anyway, he isn’t your type. He can’t bench his own body weight.”
“Oh, god—you and those girls,” Sam complained at the memory coming back to him, then took a swig completely unrelated to the rules of the game. “I thought I’d killed that part of my brain. That was the worst thing I’ve ever stumbled on.”

“You’ve literally tripped over a flayed body,” Dean said a little offended.

“I stand by my statement.”

“Never have I ever had sex with a non-human,” Pascoe prompted the group, staving off any potential sibling argument.

Sam, Dean, and Kay drank. After a moment’s hesitation, Dylaniel took a small sip of his drink. Kay just stared dumbstruck at her cousin for several seconds.

“You’re kidding.”

“I didn’t care for it. I’m not going to elaborate, so I suggest we move on,” Dylaniel said completely neutrally.

“Never have I ever been arrested,” Flo interjected as a way of changing the topic away from Dylaniel’s sex life. Sam, Dean, Pascoe, and Dylaniel all took a drink.

“Not Kay?” Ruby asked, then joked, “So all it takes to keep a Winchester out of jail is diplomatic immunity.”

“Okay, that’s it. I’ve really need to stop.” Sam pushed the remainder of his glass to rest in front of Kay and scooted his chair back from the table. “I need to sober up a little bit before I have to go tuck in kids.”

“That’s not a problem. I think we had a few overly applicable topics and participants.” Dylaniel nodded at Dean, who was using his hands to physically hold up his head. “I think Dean is both the undisputed winner and loser, and needs to get some water.”

“Rube, you should’ve played,” Dean said a bit too loudly. “I bet you’d be so drunk.”

“The drunkest, Dean, the absolute drunkest,” Ruby replied, earning a disappointed pout from Dean.

“Come on, Dean.” Pascoe started helping Dean up. “Let’s go watch the bonfire and I’ll try to scrounge up an anti-hangover potion.”

Sam watched Pascoe lead Dean toward the door, but the pair stopped short and took a detour to the dessert table. Sam got up from the table, then looked around the room. Kaylee and Tom were still played with a few other kids on the far end of the hall, but a considerable number of people had cleared out, presumably for an early bedtime or to enjoy the bonfire. Sam walked around the table, stopped behind Kay, and touched her shoulder to get her attention.

“Are you going to be around for a few minutes?” he asked her. “There’s a thing I need to go do real quick, but I want to talk with you for a second afterwards.”

“I’m planning on staying up for awhile.”

“Sounds good.” Sam stopped by Ruby on his way out of the community hall. Ruby grinned up at him, amused by his performance in the game, but she didn’t bother explicitly teasing him. “I’m going to go grab the little box from the cabin.”
I'll supervise here.”

After the game broke up, Ruby relocated to be closer to the kids. She pulled up a seat at a table with an excellent view of the combination dance floor and play area. Kay sat down next to her and handed her a new bottle of ginger ale.

“Have you talked to Sam about the nomination?” Kay asked her.

“He's supportive of whatever I decide.”

“No surprise there.”

A month earlier the third highest ranking Maji, Visdemon Rias, had been killed while visiting a coven in Quito. Instead of just escalating everyone one rank, there had been a groundswell of Maji advocating for Ruby to fill the power void. A special election had been held without any tampering on Kay or Morrison’s part and Ruby had been nominated by a 87% vote. All that was left was for Morrison to formalize the change in rank—assuming that she wanted the new position.

“How dangerous is it really?” Ruby asked while watching her daughter play.

“Rias took more risks than most.”

“I might not be on the same level as you or Sam, but people have heard of me and not all of them want to play nice.”

Taking on a leadership role within the caste meant that her activities would be more closely monitored. She wasn't concerned with leading anyone back to the coven. They had many security measures in place to prevent that. Her fear was having her attendance to any future events broadcast. As long as Kay didn't have any children, Ruby had the distinction of being the only demon to breed and that was undoubtedly a thorn in someone’s side.

“You wouldn't have to expose yourself,” Kay assured her. “You can help lead the Maji without putting yourself out in the world like that. You know how important your safety is to the realm.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me.” Ruby sipped on her ginger ale. “If anything happens to Vormont and Morrison, that'd leave me as arch.”

“Would that really be so bad? The Council can always use pragmatists.”

“I don't want to be famous for being a breeder. If that's what's going on.”

“It's not that. With everything you did with Abaddon and Lilith— Maybe they first heard of you because of Kaylee, but that's nowhere near where you are now.” Kay paused for a moment then took a new approach to her pitch. “You can have the Cerberus Project.”

With the grow public knowledge of the supernatural, Hell’s interest in security had increased significantly. The realm may have been fortifying against angelic physical attacks since Dean's rescue from the Pits, but physical security wasn't the only issue. It was a well known secret that every human government with enough influence was attempting to gain intelligence on Hell. This was both an understandable precaution and the first step to potentially action. Whether that action would be the application of political pressure or war, it wasn't yet clear.

Most demons assumed that the humans wouldn't be so foolish as to start a conflict with Hell, but Kay didn't maintain her authority by taking threats lightly. A few months earlier, the Turkish
government had attempted to detain a demon envoy. She provided one warning to release the
prisoner within five minutes or he would be retrieved forcibly. The envoy was back in Hell four
minutes later. After that incident all business ties with Turkey were cut, and according to
Crowley’s lengthy report on the incident’s impact, resulted in a 7% drop in the value of the
Turkish Lira.

As the actual interdependence of Hell and Earth became more apparent to the humans, there was
rising concern that there would be a security breach. Several of the human governments were
already assembling teams and researching the other planes. To address that potential problem,
Project Cerberus had been started. The objective was to monitor and improve Hell’s security while
tracking any would-be infiltrators back to their source. Short of a full-blown war, the Cerberus
team worked in Hell, developing new spells, monitoring threats, and coordinating intelligence
gathering. It was a high-value, strategic, and creative assignment, that didn't put her out into the
middle of any battlefields.

“The Cerberus Project? There's no way that's up for grabs.” Ruby rejected the possibility.
“Morrison has got to have his claws dug in a foot deep already.”

“He's prepared to hand it off. With the rising human interest in the occult, he has more than
enough work on his plate.”

Ruby turned in her seat to stare at Kay. “You're serious?”

“We need to stay ahead of the curve. I don't want the humans digging through our infrastructure,”
Kay explained, then added, “I trust that you will tackle the problems, but you will also tread lightly
when politics demand.”

“I have an interest in avoiding a war with Earth.” Ruby guessed at her additional appeal for project
lead.

“We all do; you just already know that fact.”

“I’d have to start putting in regular time downstairs.” Ruby stated the obvious. She'd managed to
avoid going down more than a few times in the year and hadn't gone since October. “How soon
would I have to start?”

“I could give you maybe a few weeks.” Kay speculated. “There might be a little flexibility, but I
haven’t really tested the waters. If we can establish a secure communication line from the Citadel
to here, then you might not need to be down more than a few hours a day.”

“I've gotta think about it, talk to Sam again.” Ruby nodded to herself. “I'll let you know within a
day or two.”

As Sam was leaving the community building he saw Dean and Pascoe discussing something as
they walked down towards the bonfire. At the end of some sort of joke Pascoe’s hand slid down
and touched Dean's ass. Dean turned around and pushed Pascoe backwards into the side of the
community hall, pinning him to the wall with one hand. Dean leaned forward, placing a finger on
Pascoe’s lips. Sam was watching only about ten feet away, but he was largely hidden in some
shadows around the corner of the building.

“Pas, I know we’ve got this little game we play with each other and that's fine, but not when we're
both this shitfaced.” Dean patted Pascoe's cheek. “Don't grab. Don't cross that fucking line
because I don't want our nice thing getting fucked up.”
“Sorry. Innocent slip. I’m not trying anything, I swear,” Pascoe apologized, then hesitated for a few seconds before asking, “Are you still my wingman?”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded after a thoughtful moment. He let Pascoe go, then gave him a friendly shovel him in the shoulder. “You wouldn't get any ass in Lawrence without me.”

“Oh, man. Is Ryan still around?” Pascoe placed his hands over his heart as they resumed walking off across the camp. “The fucking Krav Maga instructor with the leather jacket.”

“We haven't done the rounds since you were in town last time.” Dean's voice trailed off as they got farther away. “I'll see what I can find out from J. He's more involved with the scene.”

Sam peeked around the corner to see them wandering off toward the bonfire. He had to admit it was a bit strange to observe his brother abruptly shoot down a flirtation. It was actually incredibly comforting to see Dean stand up for his ability to give informed consent. Had it been a few years earlier and a woman had gotten handsy with him while he was that drunk, Sam would’ve expected Dean to just go along with anything. He supposed that really was a testament to Dean's attempt at monogamy. Sam turned the other direction and headed to his and Ruby’s cabin.

Sam grabbed a small, white cardboard box from his nightstand, then started heading back to the community hall. On his way he saw Castiel standing alone on one of the short docks, looking out at the lake. He wasn't as close to Castiel as Dean and Dylaniel, and he still had some trouble reading the angel, but Sam was concerned about him. Heaven was still sorting through a huge political education, Dylaniel was resistant to Castiel’s clear desire for him to become more involved, and Dean was in a relationship with someone else.

“Hey, Cas,” Sam said, announcing his presence as he approached down the little dock. “How are you doing?”

“I believe I'm generally in a good state,” Castiel answered. “This isn't how I expected events to unfold, but we're all alive and even if it's tenuous there is peace. I'm grateful when I think about where we were a year ago. I'd never thought so much could happen in such an insignificant span of time. I expect the next year will bring more changes. I only hope that they're for the better.”

“That's a good outlook,” Sam agreed, then pressed to the narrower issue. “More specifically, I was wondering, with Dean seeing someone else… are you okay?”

“I’m… okay. Neither of us has attempted to advance our relationship beyond friendship. I admire your brother in many ways. One of the attributes of his that I admire most is his loyalty.” Castiel pursed his lips before adding, "If his current partnership ends, then I'd have a lot to consider, but for the moment I have plenty of other matters requiring my attention.”

To Sam’s ears that sounded an awful lot like an admission of unrequited curiosity, if not fully-formed feelings. He decided to drop the topic rather than risk making the situation worse.

“What sorts of matters?”

“Dean has gone on fewer hunts since becoming intimate, so I have been spending more of my time working with Hael and Gabriel to organize the angels located on Earth. But a few days ago….” Castiel paused for a moment, debating how much to confide. “I've been asked to assist directly with the restructuring and unification of Heaven.”

Sam blinked at Castiel, thrown by the last part. “I thought Heaven was unified.”

He knew they were still going through some changes in format, but the leading theory on Earth
was that Heaven would at least rally behind self-preservation. Angels were known for putting their survival as a species very high on their list of priorities. As a population that was incapable of internal reproduction, maintaining unity had been a cornerstone of their culture. That was part of what made Michael and Raphael’s actions and the subsequent revolution so horrific, angels had needlessly killed each other. Common thought was that the pure shock of the loss would help keep Heaven somewhat stable. Maybe Dean and Dylaniel were skeptical, but that could be partially attributed to their very personal fear of Michael getting out.

“It is stable, but at least three political factions have emerged so far. Our grasp of a democratic system is… refining.” Castiel’s voice sounded worried to Sam's ears. “There has been a considerable decline in Heaven’s efficiency as a result of this process. The parties are trying to cooperate, but they’ve reached numerous impasses. There is concern that if the tensions rise to the point of interfering with our duties as caretakers of the human souls, then it could lead to another internal conflict out of desperation.”

“You think Heaven might lockdown with another civil war?”

“My larger fear is that Heaven’s political factions might seek out alliances with factions of the other planes in order to gain legitimacy or political advantage.”

“You aren't in favor of interplanar diplomacy?” Sam was struggling to understand what Castiel was getting at.

“I would support it once Heaven is fully united. As it currently stands now, it would be disastrous.” Castiel’s lips thinned. “If Heaven’s political factions ally with Earth and even Hell factions along ideological lines, they’ll become that much more dangerous. The Templar movement has been quiet since Heaven’s turn inward, but I don't doubt they would revive immediately if they receive support from our traditionalists. I think an ideological conflict intersecting more than one plane is a threat to be taken very seriously.”

“You're talking about another interplanar war?” Sam's stomach knotted at the thought.

“I'm not suggesting that such a scenario is likely at this point, merely that I'd like to avoid it.” Castiel gave the small measure of reassurance. “I think that if I work within the reconstruction efforts with that threat in mind, we might stand a better chance of avoiding it.”

“Can you do something for me?” Sam knew that he wasn't supposed to dabble in interplanar politics, but while he was among family and at home he felt a bit more empowered to bend the rules. “Talk to Kay about the situation. She might be able to make some suggestions.”

“She will utilize any information gained from me to assist Hell,” Castiel countered.

“She wants Heaven stable because a stable Heaven doesn't mess up the other planes,” Sam pointed out, earned a nod of acknowledgement from Castiel.

“Disclosing confidential information under circumstances like these would be difficult to explain.”

“It's normal for these little avenues of communication to exist. Historically, it's connections and back channels like that that prevent the outbreak of wars in the first place.”

Castiel raised an eyebrow at the thought. “And I would not be considered a spy?”

“I can't promise that,” Sam conceded.

“It's suspicious enough that I attend your family's functions.”
“Last I heard, you're a war hero.”

“And how long will that be the case,” Castiel said almost to himself. “I do not care that so much of your family is Abyssal, but if I choose to be a ‘connection’ or ‘back channel’ as you suggested, it might be wiser for me to avoid coming here.”

“Can I suggest something?” Sam asked, causing Castiel to look at him for the first time in the conversation. “Keep doing at least one or two hunts with Dean in order to have an excuse to sneak off to the bunker. Even if he retires from hunting or wants to settle down with that guy, keep Dean as an alibi.”

“I expect that a significant number of my siblings would prefer that Dean and I be… involved.” Castiel nodded slowly. “It's unlikely that I wouldn't be questioned for visiting him. I’ll see if he’s willing to help me in that capacity. Thank you for the suggestion.”

“Cas.” Sam put his hand on the angel's shoulder in a parting gesture. “Whatever you do, stay safe.”

Sam returned to the dining hall to find that most of the kids had been taken back home for bed and all but a handful of the adults had gone home or relocated to the bonfire on the end of camp. Ruby and Bobby were still at the table, chatting while watching Kaylee attempt to make the most out of the final minutes of her party. Kay was talking with one of the witches, but she excused herself from the conversation when she saw Sam waiting to speak with her. When Kay walked over to him, Sam handed her the small box he'd retrieved from the nightstand.

“What do you get the woman who has everything?”

“A vacation,” Kay joked, then clarified, “That wasn't me complaining or asking. I know how it'd look for you to go downstairs.”

“It's not a vacation,” he apologized. “I don't have that much influence, but I did have to call in a few favors to get this.”

Kay opened the box. Nestled in some decorative shredded paper was a silvery pendant. It was an inverted teardrop edged with horns and small flowers. Inside the teardrop was fine Arabic text reading, ‘A guidance and a mercy for those who do good.’ She didn't move to pick it up; instead she just stared at the little treasure in shocked silence.

“I scratched it up and that area of the plant was buried in rubble, so it had to be recast. I checked with Dyl on the design, but he wasn't 100% sure. I hope it's at least close,” Sam explained, uncertain if he'd somehow messed up the gift.

“It’s perfect,” Kay said through at audible tightness in her throat, then looked up to Sam. “I gave it to you. You should—”

“I didn't want to presume, but….” Sam nodded to it. “Pick it up.”

Kay picked it up to find that the box actually contained two matching pendants stacked on top of each other, each half the thickness of the original. She gave him one and held the other one clenched in her hand. Unable to keep her composure anymore, she hugged him tightly. He held her back for as long as she needed.

“Thank you,” Kay whispered after a long while.
“Happy birthday.”

Kaylee was diligently trying to continue dancing to the music on the kids' side of the dance floor, but it was well beyond her bedtime and her drowsy little body kept falling on its cushioned butt. Sam walked over and picked her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he started gently moving to the music. He kissed the top of her head. Her small hand reached up and tried to pull his face down to her. When he leaned down she kissed his cheek, then went back to resting her head on his shoulder. He danced with her until she fell asleep.

Ruby watched him dance with their daughter for a several minutes, then got up from her seat when a slower song came on. She said something to Bobby, excusing herself from their conversation and walked out to the dance floor. Sam wrapped his free arm around her as she held him back around the waist. Her head rested against his chest, opposite from their dozing daughter. They slow danced for a few songs before Ruby took his hand and they retreated to their cabin to put Kaylee to bed.

When they got to the nursery, Sam leaned forward, gently easing Kaylee down onto the changing table. She stirred a little as he and Ruby changed her into her pajamas, but thankfully Kaylee was too sleepy to put up a real fight. Afterwards, Ruby sat in the nursery’s rocking chair and watched Sam sing a quick lullaby to their daughter. Kaylee let out a long yawn as he put her in the crib and draped her blanket over her.

Ruby got up from her seat to join him. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the edge of the crib, then watched their daughter sleep for a few seconds. Sam moved to stand behind Ruby and wrapped his arms around her.

“She's perfect,” Ruby whispered while interlacing her fingers with his.

“Yeah, she's just like you,” Sam whispered back, then kissed Ruby's neck just below the ear. His freehand caressed her waist, then slid down to settle on her lower abdomen.

“Do you want to tell everyone while they're here?” she asked. “I'm gonna have to tell Kay if I take the visdemon position, but I'm pretty sure she can keep a secret.”

“The more time you spend in Hell, the faster the word’s going to get out,” Sam mused aloud. “We’ll have another gathering in January for Dean's birthday. We could tell them then.”

“Stealing Dean's thunder on his birthday? Count me in,” Ruby joked, then added more seriously, “I’ll only take the new rank if I can keep my time downstairs minimal to start. I don’t want you missing all the magic and wonder.”

“You just know how good my back rubs are.” He started gently massaging her lower back, then said, “Thank you, for thinking of me.”

“Always.” Ruby watched Kaylee sleep for a few minutes while Sam rubbed her back and occasionally leaned down to give her a peck on the back of her neck. “I know I'm jumping the gun, but I was thinking, if it's a boy what about the name Anansi?”

“Anansi?” Sam briefly stopped the massage while trying to place the name. “You want to name our kid after a trickster?”

“Ooh.” Ruby turned around to face him. “Looks like Dyl isn't the only one who's been doing his homework.”
“Yeah, well, I have a lot of time to read.” Sam smiled down at her. “Naming a kid after a trickster—and with the stories about Kay’s siblings…. You’re playing with fire.”

“Yeah, but fire is awfully fun.” She bit her lower lip mischievously while playing with the collar of his shirt.

“Anansi Alexander Winchester.” Sam tested the name aloud. “I like it.”

Chapter End Notes

So that’s Job & Family. After over two years of writing I think there’s just too much for me to say, so I’ll leave it simply:

Thank you for taking the time to read my story. Special thanks to all of you who have been reading this while I was working on it & commented/gave me encouragement throughout the long process. You know who you are.
If you’ve enjoyed it, I’d be grateful if you leave kudos, comments, or recommend it to a friend or on social media. I’m always up for answering questions (either in the comments or on Tumblr) and I do take ficlet requests via Tumblr for J&F Deleted Scenes or more generally. Thank you again, it’s been a hell of a thing.