Summary

Dean and Sam have caught wind of a demon on a killing spree from Colorado to Florida. When they discover the demon's next target is an Immortal & the demon isn't just a demon, nor are the Immortals what they believed, it all turns upside down.

Notes

This story is set during Season 4 directly after “The Monster At The End Of This Book” and the epilogue crosses over with “Jump The Shark” and directly before “The Rapture.” It was pure whimsy and such, that inspired me to write this. Make of that what you will, but here it is for your enjoyment…or not. The base idea behind this other than pure self-gratification was…what if the Winchesters had to look at the mirror reflection of their circumstances…in someone else?

I can’t even begin to say how much I loved writing this. Many kudos to Jensen Ackles, Jared Padalecki, Misha Collins, the writers, the producers, Eric Kripke, Kim Manners and so many others, for creating this world I, and so many others, love so damn much it hurts. I promise to return Dean, Sam and Cass in the same shape I found them in…I swear…
West Palm Beach, Florida

April 2009

The accountant couldn't believe what he was seeing. It couldn't be real. It just couldn't be. He looked down at the whiskey bottle in his hand and then back at the scene before him at a loss for what to do. He had only meant to cut through the alley to walk home in the balmy night air after he'd had a few too many drinks to drive himself home. This had to be a hallucination, like seeing pink elephants...only worse.

At the end of the alley were two men, one had hair that might have been brown but the shadows in the enclosed space hid most of his features. He was on his knees before the other, a tall black haired man, with his hand clutched to his midsection. The black haired man had a sword raised high over his head and he looked positively insane, his mouth twisted into a horrifying snarl. The accountant
stood frozen in place, watching, unable to turn away.

"Who are you?" the brown haired man asked, gasping for breath. The black haired man cocked his head as if considering if he should favor his victim with an answer or not.

"Ahriman," he said as a crazed smile broke over his face. In the darkness of the alley the accountant could see little else of the man's visage, but the smile alone made him shiver.

"Why?" the brown haired man asked of his attacker again.

The black haired man's smile widened as he answered, "Because I can." Then, he brought the sword down on the other man's neck and his victim's head rolled to the side of the alley to lie beside his fallen sword.

The accountant gawked; he could swear the black haired man's eyes flashed red in the darkness. A sudden hum filled the air, and the accountant could feel the hair on his body stand straight on end, a tingle rippling over his skin as little bursts of electricity began to emanate from the headless corpse, to flow over the ground like snakes toward the black haired man. The tendrils of lightning traveled up his legs and seemed to grab him in the center of his body, nearly wrenching the monster off his feet, his head snapped back, his arms out flung as a single bolt of lightning burst from the sky to encompass him.

The accountant's terror freed him from his frozen gawking, he dropped the whiskey bottle, shattering it and fled with a single high-pitched squeal of fear. Behind him, the monster writhed in the clutches of the web of blue energy, a sound that was half maniacal laughter, half pained scream, issuing from his throat.

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"You have to tell me where the spring is!" Erin Morgan pleaded with someone on the other end of the phone held to her ear. She paced frantically back and forth across her kitchen in apprehension, one hand twined in her blonde hair as if she had to hold on to herself to keep from losing her mind.

"It wouldn't do you any good if I did. It's too far away. You'd never be able to get there," a man's British accented voice answered on the other end.

"Damn it, just tell me!" Erin demanded swinging in her desperation from pleading to anger.

"You know it's too late for that," the man insisted.

"Don't give me that. It worked for Duncan, it will work for him!" Erin snapped.

"He's already hunting you and he's not just killing us. It's gone too far," the man said calmly.

"What do you want me to do? Kill him?" Erin growled.

"Yes! He's taken nineteen heads in a week. He's killed eleven innocent mortals. The bodies are piling up so fast the Watchers can't take care of them all before the media gets wind of it!" The man said in exasperation, as if Erin should have known that was the most logical course of action.

"Methos, please," Erin pleaded. There was a moment of silence before the man, the oldest known
living member of their kind, answered again.

"Alright, fine. I'll tell you where it is, but this is not the same thing that happened with..."

"I have to try something, anything," Erin said in agonized defense, cutting him off.

"What you're looking for is in France," Methos said, then rattled off the exact location to the woman in a weary voice. Quickly, Erin scrawled the information down on a notepad.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"It won't work. This isn't what you think it is. It's not a dark quickening. It's a demon. One that wasn't supposed to show up again for another nine hundred and eighty eight years. Christian is possessed, which shouldn't be possible, and he is going to kill you. You took yourself out of The Game, you'd be rusty up against a normal immortal and you think you can beat one that's been possessed?" Methos tried again to reason with the woman.

"I've only been out three years. It's not like I don't stay on my toes... I have to try," she said.

"It's your funeral. You want pink roses or white on your grave?"

"Not funny."

"Wasn't meant to be. Maybe I'll just skip the funeral and go to a baseball game. Since you're being an idiot!" Methos bit.

"I can't kill him! It's Christian. He was my student. He's the closest thing I have ever had to a brother besides Duncan," Erin insisted.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Methos snarked, letting the rhetorical question slide by without giving her time to respond. "Nearly two thousand years and you're still as stupid as the day you died. I taught you better than this. You don't have a choice. You cannot atone for your moral transgressions by saving him. He can't be saved," Methos argued vehemently. It wasn't that he didn't understand why Erin refused to kill her protege, why she was so hell bent on saving him. He did. He knew all too well why. Methos had a few thousand skeletons in his own closet but Erin wouldn't see reason.

"There's always a choice."

"Yes, the wrong one!" Methos said.

"You can't change my mind Methos. Don't tell Duncan. You know he'd only come here trying to help. If this is what you say it is, if it gets me, it will be after him."

"Yes, it will. It's going to be just a little ticked off MacLeod sent it back where it came from don't you think? Why do you think it's targeting you? MacLeod cares about you. You've known each other for centuries. That's what this thing does. It manipulates you. It kills what you hold dear or makes you do it. That's why you have to kill Christian," Methos argued, refusing to give up on convincing Erin she'd chosen the wrong course of action.

"There has to be another way," Erin rebuked.

"Erin, if you don't stop him someone else will try and they will die. This thing is risking exposing all of us, despite the measures we've taken to stay hidden for millennia," Methos added in warning. Now, it was Erin who paused before answering, her fingers clenched tightly around the phone in torment.
"I know," she said.

Methos sighed in resignation; no amount of arguing could seem to convince her, "Watch your back."

"It's not my back I'm worried about," Erin said and hung up, her gaze shifting out the large second story windows of her apartment to the city below. Somewhere on the other side, lightning crackled across the sky and shot in a searing line to the ground. The blonde woman's mouth set in a worried line, she prayed that hadn't been what she thought it was.
Chapter 2

Sam and Dean Winchester, hunters of the supernatural and unwilling pawns in the coming apocalypse, were in a nondescript, ramshackle diner somewhere near the line between Wyoming and Nebraska, eating breakfast. Dean was busy eying his meal and the waitresses, while Sam was reading something on his laptop, perched up beside his plate, with rapt fascination. Sam blinked at the screen and muttered, "Wow."

His brother Dean peered over the top of his brother's computer while cramming a huge fork full of syrup-slathered waffles into his mouth and attempted to speak around them.

"Finally checkin' out Busty Asian Beauties huh? See, I said the premium membership was worth it but, uh, I'm not sure a diner is the best place to be sating your baser nature, somebody might think you're a perv," he managed with minimal loss of syrup drenched waffle from between his teeth despite the cocky grin he gave Sam. Sam cut his eyes at Dean in exasperation.

"It's not porn. I think I hit on something."

"I'd like to hit on something," Dean commented, half-oblivious to the scrutinizing look Sam gave him as he watched the firm, round cheeks of their cute waitress sway by.

"Hit on a case Dean. Are you listening to me?" Sam said when Dean's head stayed swiveled in the opposite direction, still glued to the waitress's rear.

"What? Oh, yeah, of course," Dean insisted finally turning his attention back to his brother, since the waitress had disappeared into the kitchen. Sam just gave him a put upon look and shook his head.

"There have been several headless bodies found in the last week," Sam began to explain. Dean stabbed another bite of waffle and stuffed it in his mouth.

"So?"

"There's a string of them starting in Colorado and stretching all the way to Florida."

"Axe happy serial killer?" Dean suggested, beginning to actually pay attention. Sam shrugged behind his computer screen.

"I don't think so. I guess it could be but every one of them happened the same night as a localized electric storm."

Dean screwed his face up into a disgruntled look; he knew what electric storms meant. Demons usually kept their machinations hidden from the average, run of the mill human, unless it facilitated their means. At the same time, he repressed a latent shiver down his spine as the mental image of a demon carving into someone brought back his own memories of hell in a hot flash. He wondered, sickened, whether the victims had been dead or alive..."
before the demon had done the carving. He hoped they'd been dead.

"Not real modest is he?"

"Guess not. Looks like Ahriman, whoever he is, wants people to know what he's doing."

Dean polished off the last of his meal and wiped his face with the flimsy paper napkin a roadside diner like this provided.

"So, Florida huh?"

"Yep."

Dean grinned, “Tan girls in bikinis, sand, sun. Sounds like a case to me.” Sam could only roll his eyes at his brother.

###

Erin sat at the desk in her office, situated at the back of the building. This was the first floor, above it was her apartment, but this floor housed a bookstore, and not just any bookstore. One that specialized in rare and antique books. Despite the meticulous and stylish design of the store the comforting smell of old parchment and leather permeated the air, but it did little to take the edge off her nerves.

On the desk before her sat a tissue paper wrapped bouquet of roses. They had once been red and lush. Now they were dry and dark, dead. They had been on the doorstep of the shop when she'd come down an hour ago. Atop them sat a card from the giver with a single, simple phrase. 'I'm coming.' No name was signed to it, but then, she didn't need a name to know who they were from.

She'd tried to trace the purchase of the flowers back to their origin in the hopes she might be able to track down her quarry but he was too smart for that. He'd used a credit card under an assumed name, over the phone, from an unknown location. What made it worse was she'd been the one to teach him that trick to him.

"You want a jet on stand by... indefinitely?" asked a voice. Erin was once again on the phone and the person she was talking to was incredulous at her request.

"Yes. Look, if I'm not offering you enough money, name your price and I'll pay it but I need a plane on standby to fly to France until I say otherwise," she explained impatiently.

"Hey lady, money is money. I'm just trying to figure you out."

"You don't need to figure me out."

"Fine, this isn't illegal is it? I'm not going to be transporting drugs or something am I?" the voice asked. Erin sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose; she didn't have time for this.

"No. Look I'll pay extra if you'll stop asking questions."

"I don't know. You're asking for some pretty strange stuff here,” the voice insisted.

"Fifty thousand dollars enough to make you shut up?" Erin asked in a short tone.
"Yes ma'am!" the voice said in happy surprise.

"Good, you'll have the money in a few hours. Make sure that jet is ready for takeoff at a moment's notice."

"Sure thing!" the voice piped, quite happy to oblige for that kind of pay check as Erin hung up. She had known she might have to pay through the nose for this, but money was no object. She was beyond rich. Money didn't matter, she'd pay anything she had to, to see this through.

Putting her head in her hands, she closed her eyes a moment and sighed deeply. "This is insane," she muttered to no one. She'd just booked a jet to fly a possibly demon possessed man half way across the world in the hopes shoving him into a mystic spring would redeem him. Now, she was about to go hunting books on this supposed demon to try and find another way to get rid of it if the spring didn't work. If it was a demon. Erin still wasn't ready to believe it wasn't just a dark quickening.

She believed, Christian, her student, a man she'd known for almost three hundred years, to have become the victim of a dark quickening. Over taken by the evil he'd absorbed over the years, and it had turned him into a stone cold killer, who killed for the sheer pleasure of it. Even now, he might be killing another of her kind in cold blood. Or worse, some innocent, unwitting mortal, who had nothing to do with anything. It had happened to Duncan MacLeod and Methos had been able to save him by forcing him to face the evil at a sacred healing spring. Erin hoped it would be the same for Christian. It had to, the dark quickening would infect anyone who took Christian's head and received his quickening and the process would start all over again. It was the only way to stop the cycle.

Yet, Methos, oldest of the immortals, thought different. He believed it was the demon, Ahriman, returned nearly a thousand years too soon and suddenly capable of things he'd never been able to do before. And he thought what it wanted was revenge on MacLeod for sending him back wherever he came from twelve years ago, by killing everyone he held dear and then killing MacLeod. Erin wasn't particularly religious, hadn't been for so long she couldn't remember when she'd stopped believing but, she did know there were things beyond mortals and immortals in the world. She even knew how to kill or summon one or two of them from her upbringing as a Druid. She knew demons existed but she hadn't a single clue how you fought one. But, it couldn't be the demon Ahriman, these sorts of things had rules, rules you couldn't break. They always had in her experience anyway. Ahriman, was rotting in hell, if that's where he'd come from in the first place. Not walking among them in the guise, or worse the body, of her student. It just didn't work that way.

A buzzing sensation suddenly crept across Erin's brain like static electricity. She was on her feet, the sword she kept close by at all times, in her hand before the knock sounded from across the shop. Thankfully, she'd called last night and told her only employee and mortal friend, Beth Middleton, to take the week off, paid. Then unsubtly suggested she take a vacation anywhere but here, excusing the shop closure by saying she had a family emergency to attend to. Otherwise, Beth would be here, opening up shop like she always did at eight a.m. sharp and if it was Christian on the other side of the door. She'd be dead. Thank God for small miracles.

Quietly, Erin made her way out of her office and crept through the shelves and display cases filled with books for the door. She hid behind it and peered cautiously out the shop windows but nothing was there. Gritting her teeth, she carefully unlocked the door and swung around to ward off any ambush that might lie in wait. Erin stopped dead, her heart seized in her chest and all the air went out of her lungs at once. It wasn't Christian or any other strange immortal on the other side of the door and the one that stood there couldn't be.

"Hello my little bird. It's been such a long time," purred the man, who couldn't possibly be standing there, in a throaty baritone. He looked to be in his forties with medium length dark brown hair, eyes
so dark they were almost black, a neatly trimmed full beard and dressed in a tan trench coat despite the Florida heat. The man smiled at her, flashing a set of perfect white teeth. Erin stood open mouthed and wide eyed in stark terror, her hand clutching the hilt of her sword so hard the knuckles turned white and she shook like a leaf.

"Oh my god," she breathed.

"Yes, yes I am," the man quipped back, his eyes flashing an infernal red.

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Paris, France

Methos stood just out of sight and sensing range of Duncan MacLeod's barge. He'd arrived not ten minutes ago, after having flown from London and thanks to a rather expensive, two hundred dollars expensive, tip. He'd found the answer he'd been expecting. He didn't have to tell Duncan anything, news of the murder spree Christian cum Ahriman had indulged in was spreading like wildfire. Duncan already knew and he was heading straight into the danger zone without a single thought. Typical. Within moments, Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod emerged from his barge *Amadeus*, a satchel flung over his shoulder. Methos stepped from his hiding place, and within the other immortal's sensing range. Duncan's head swiveled around immediately.

"Going somewhere MacLeod?" Methos called, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trench coat and fingerling what he had stashed there.

The black haired Scot blinked at him in surprise. The ancient immortal was the last person he would have been expecting to see. "Methos? What are you doing here?"

Methos shrugged casually as he walked to meet him. "Oh, the usual. The better question is, what are you doing?"

"Oh, uh, I'm going to help a friend with something," Duncan said, thumbing over his shoulder toward his car. Methos nodded as he came into conversation range.

"I bet," Methos said, "Let me guess. You're going to Florida to help Erin Morgan."

"How do you know about that?" Duncan asked in surprise, a line forming between his thick brows in confusion.

"You know me; always have my ear to the ground. You can't go Macleod."

"What do you mean, 'I can't'?" Duncan asked, suddenly defensive.

"It's Ahriman, MacLeod," Methos warned.

"Yeah I know. Why do you think I'm going? He shouldn't be here, I beat him. I'm going to find out what the hell is going on. Erin can't defeat him alone," Duncan explained as if it were obvious.

"Why? So you can kill someone else you care about? So you can lose your head? You barely beat
him last time and not before he tricked you into killing Richie. Do you really think you're going to just swoop in and save the day again?" Methos asked, trying to reason with him.

"I beat him before I can do it again," Duncan said sternly, a well of grief gripping him at the mention of Richie Ryan, his protégé' and his friend.

Ahriman had tricked both him and Richie into going after phantoms, only once the proverbial smoke cleared, Duncan's phantoms had turned out to be real. He'd thought he was fighting Ahriman, pretending to be Richie. He hadn't. He'd taken Richie's head. Now it was happening all over again... to someone else. Someone he'd called a friend for a very long time. Duncan MacLeod never sat on the sidelines when his friends needed him. It just wasn't who he was.

Methos reached out and grabbed Duncan by the front of his leather jacket, forcefully. "It's a trap. Can't you see that? He kills people you care about, has some fun murdering innocent people and taking a few heads along the way, and then he comes for you."

"What do you want me to do Methos? Sit here twiddling my thumbs while Ahriman does whatever he wants? While he does to Erin, the same thing he did to me? Innocent people are dying," Duncan argued angrily. It didn't surprise him that Methos would be arguing for him to sit this one out. It wasn't the first time he'd given the Highlander such advice.

"Let them die. You can't save the world. Erin's a big girl Macleod. She can take care of herself," Methos pleaded.

"She doesn't know what she's facing Methos," Duncan insisted. Methos released his grip on Duncan's coat and sighed heavily.

"Yes she does."

"She can't possibly," Duncan scoffed and started to head for his car. Methos gritted his teeth in frustration. He hadn't wanted to have to explain things this far if he could avoid it. It was only going to set off MacLeod's temper, but he had no choice.

"Erin called me MacLeod. I told her."

Duncan stopped and turned back to face Methos. "She called you? You knew about this and you didn't think it was important enough to tell me about?" he raged, advancing on the elder immortal. Methos backed up a cautious few steps, trying to avoid the Scot's wrath.

"She doesn't believe me I don't think. She thinks it's a dark quickening. But, all the same she doesn't want you there. She's trying to protect you. I'm trying to protect you."

"I don't need protecting!" Duncan railed at the shorter man, furious. Methos stood his ground silently letting Duncan yell if it made him feel better. "She was your student Methos. How can you just stand there knowing she's going to get herself killed?"

"I've known Erin a lot longer than you have MacLeod. If she wanted my help she would have asked for it. She’s a self possessed woman, you know that," Methos insisted, not unaffected by the barb. He and Erin shared a past he wasn’t likely to forget. She had been more than just his student, though now they were only good friends. While what had been between them was ancient history, the teacher and student dynamic still held. He did fear for her, but he knew better than most and certainly more thoroughly than Duncan, what Erin was capable of.

Duncan shook his head in disgust at him then realization dawned on his face.
"A dark quickening? If it's Ahriman how can it be a dark quickening?" he asked.

"It's not. I don't know how. But, he's possessed her student, Christian. I can't convince her not to try and save him. I've tried," Methos explained reluctantly.

"What?" Duncan said aghast, then turned and marched for the car again, "Oh, I am definitely going."

"My god you two are a matched set. You're both fatalistic. Why won't either of you listen to reason?" Methos spat, following Duncan.

"Reason? You call that reason?" Duncan said as he threw his satchel into his car.

"Yes. She kills Christian; you stay here and keep your head." Methos said.

"You suggested she just kill him? She's known him for three hundred years! And what if he kills her? What then?" Duncan spat back, incredulous. Sometimes Methos had such an unscrupulous outlook on things it astounded MacLeod.

"Then someone else kills him. Not you."

Duncan shook his head and opened the driver's side door to get in.

"No. I can't let that happen."

Methos's hand went back into his coat pocket and drew the thing he'd had hidden there. He leveled a gun at his friend and cocked it. "And I can't let you die. You're the best of us. You always were. You're the chosen one MacLeod. Erin knows it, it's her choice. If she has to die so you can live so be it."

Duncan stood stock-still and glared back at him.

"What are you going to do Methos? Shoot me? Put me out of commission a little while so you can lock me up somewhere until this is all over? It won't work and you know it. I'd get out eventually. The only thing that would happen would be Erin would die and I'd like you a whole lot less."

Methos kept the gun leveled at Duncan, contemplating if he should pull the trigger. That's exactly what he'd been planning on doing. Blowing a breath out of his nose and grimacing he uncocked the gun.

"Oh fine then, let's go," he said and made for the passenger's side of the car.

"Excuse me? What do you think you're doing?" Duncan asked.

"What I always do. Saving your neck," Methos explained in annoyance, sliding into the car and slamming the door behind him. Duncan shook his head in disbelief at his friend and just stood there, trying to absorb the sudden shift in his argument.

"You coming or not?" Methos prodded, leaning across the front seat of the car and craning his head to look at Duncan. Duncan blinked and got into the car. Methos shook his head at him as the engine turned over.

"Why are you doing this?" Duncan asked him.

"Because, I'm not going to be the one writing your epitaph." Methos answered. And he wouldn't. If the only way he could keep MacLeod's head attached to his body was to kill Christian himself so be it. Duncan MacLeod was not going to lose his head. He couldn't, he was too important. "And maybe
I can talk sense into Erin before I’m writing hers,” he muttered so softly Duncan didn’t hear him.
Chapter 3

Bald Knob, Arkansas

Dean Winchester, fought the desire to stick his fingers in the collar of his dress shirt and loosen the tie cinched around his neck. He hated suits and ties made him feel like he had a noose around his neck. But if you were going to pretend to be an FBI agent you had to look the part.

This was the third state the brothers had stopped in, in three days. So far, they had found five victims of Ahriman and not a clue as to what the hell was going on. Headless bodies didn’t account for all of the victims. So far only three had been headless, they’d found out there were victims who had been allowed to keep their heads but were still just as dead, with Ahriman's named hacked into their flesh. Things just kept getting weirder and weirder. Bald Knob, puns that begged to be said aside, wasn't even a blip on the map. There were only three thousand residents and nothing else odd had happened here save murders and the electric storm. It had been the same in Rifle, Colorado and Sapula, Oklahoma. Nothing made sense.

"So, the second victim was Angie Clark?" Sam asked the coroner/president of the hospital board of directors/family doctor. God, small towns were so... small. Dean was still keeping himself from pulling at his collar and looking at the body of the first victim for clues.

"Yeah, she was such a sweet girl. Never hurt a fly," answered the aged man in a white lab coat. His hair had long ago gone snow white, his face was lined with the pain and joy of life, and faded blue eyes looked back sorrowfully at Sam through a pair of thick glasses that had gone out of fashion twenty years ago.

"You knew the victim?" Sam pushed gently. The Doctor rubbed his head, making his white hair stand on end like a mad scientist.

"This is a small town Agent Waters. Everybody knows everybody."

"Did Angie have any enemies? Anything like that?" Sam asked. The doctor looked at him askance.

"No, she was a waitress. Everybody loved her."

Sam frowned, this wasn't the first time they'd gotten a similar story, seemed half the victims had no connection to anything that should have gotten them killed like this. This was just bizarre.

"I'm sorry doctor, but I have to ask. We want to be thorough with our investigation."

"Of course. We're all just a little shaken by this, this kind of thing just doesn't happen here." The doctor excused.

"And the first victim, who's he?" Dean asked as he lifted the sheet covering the first body higher and peered at the grotesque remains beneath. Whoever it had been, now the man's head was sitting in a tray, eyes staring blankly, neatly severed from the mutilated body. 'Ahriman' had been slashed across his torso in a diagonal line like some perverse Zorro wanna be had decided to make his fantasies real. Angie Clark had the name etched across her chest but it looked more like someone had decided to carve a name into wood, she, unlike the first victim, still had her head attached. This demon was sick, not that it came as a surprise. Dean knew all about how sick demons could be, more than he ever wanted to.
"We don't know. His driver's license says his name was Robert Malcolm, so does his social security card but his social security number belongs to a child by the same name, who died at birth, forty years ago," the doctor answered with a lost shrug. This was so far outside his field of expertise he was practically drowning.

"Identity theft maybe? Guy looks like he'd have been about that age." Sam suggested looking at Dean for his opinion. Dean shrugged and gave his brother an exasperated glance.

"Don't know. No one around here knows him though." The doctor said.

This wasn't, again, the first headless victim that hadn't been who they appeared to be. Two others had had shady aliases as well and no one in town had known who they were. Dean rubbed the back of his neck in frustration.

"And the first victim was found the same day as the second, on opposite sides of town?" Dean asked.

"Yes. It all seems so random," the doctor said sadly.

"Yeah, yeah it does. Tell me something, the word cut into Angie and headless Bob, was that done before or after they died?" Dean asked. The doctor looked nauseous and Dean didn't have to hear the answer. He'd been right, they'd been turned into living graffiti walls while they were still alive. He winced in sympathy for the girl and the poor bastard who'd been beheaded."

"Well Dr. Johnson. We really appreciate you speaking with us. We'll contact you if we learn anything more," Sam said and he and Dean turned to go.

"Agent Reznor, please... catch whoever did this," the doctor pleaded to Dean. Dean turned to look back at him and the elderly doctor suddenly looked ancient, weighed down by the horror of the murders, murders that made no sense.

Dean felt for the old man, oblivious to what was going on around him and Dean couldn't tell him. He couldn't tell the old man that all the monsters that lurked in the dark places of his nightmares were real, that angels and demons were waging a war that would result in the apocalypse if Dean didn't stop it. Not that Dean knew what was going on here any better than the doctor did. At least he did know what ever had killed these people, if it really was a demon and Dean was beginning to wonder, wasn't human. He couldn't even give the old doctor the solace of that, tell the old guy that he wasn't losing his mind.

"We will," Dean assured him with a fierce look of determination.

Erin's terror almost made her turn and bolt for the back stairs that led up to her apartment and out into the alley behind the building. She was staring into the face of Tiberius Trajan. A fellow immortal and a certified psycho. When he'd been alive he'd fancied himself a god among men. Someone resurrected to rule over puny mortals and immortals alike. As far as he was concerned, he was her god. As far as she was concerned, he was hell in a human body.
Erin, who'd been called Éireann then, sighed in the warm comfort of the furs laid beneath her as flames flickered in the fire pit nearby and curled closer to the body next to her. Her love, Alexander Aurelius, a Roman soldier who'd defected during Rome's excursions into Hibernia because he'd fallen in love with a Celt and she with him, shifted so his body fit more closely to hers and wrapped his battle hardened arms around her. Inside the tent, the flames glinted off his armor and weapons, freshly polished and repaired for battle. Beside them lay her weapons, less ornate but just as deadly. Erin nuzzled into Alexander's chest and he gently lifted her chin. His bright blue eyes sparkled at her from beneath the fringe of his blonde hair.

"We have eaten," he said, leaning in and sensuously nibbling his way up the side of her neck. Erin moaned softly. She could feel his lips form a smile against her skin as he kept going.

"We have drunk," he teased, moving to her lips and kissing her lingeringly.

"We have certainly been merry," he continued, pushing a stray tendril of hair behind her ear, then leaned in to whisper into it.

"What else shall we do? For tomorrow we die."

Erin pulled back from him and frowned, "Don't say that Alexander."

He brushed her off by smiling at her and teasing, "Best not to take any chances though. Wouldn't you say?" To illustrate his point he cupped her buttocks in his hand and pinched playfully. Despite herself, Erin laughed at his antics. Then his face grew serious, "By dawn the legion will have reached the line. Then the battle will begin. You know we might all fall."

"I know," Erin said softly. Alexander sighed. Not wishing to ruin what might be their last night together, he pulled her atop him, smiling again for her. He knew she was doing the same thing for him. Neither doubted the danger morning would bring with it, but for now, they had each other.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," she answered.

A sudden scream in the camp and the clang of bells jerked them violently from their moment of joy. The single screamed turned into many and Alexander and Erin leapt to their feet, throwing on clothing and armor, grabbing weapons and rushing out into the night. Before them was madness, fire swept the east side of their encampment, people fled from the advancing flames and through the flames arrows flew, striking down unarmed men, women and children in their tracks. The Roman legion set on invading what would one day be called Ireland, had made it here much earlier than expected. They'd been ambushed.

Without a moment's hesitation, Alexander and Erin leapt into the fray as the first soldiers broke through the line of fire. The fighting was so fierce, the Roman legion so many more than their own small throng of fighters, the two soon were parted. During a split second break in fighting, as her latest opponent fell to the ground at her feet, Erin spotted Alexander on a small rise. The light from the fire cast him in a golden glow like one of his beloved avenging angels, his sword crossed with a man, who could only be the legion's general and though Erin didn't know it at the time, Tiberius Trajan. Even then he'd looked like one of Alexander's demons, for Erin was not a Christian, she was a Druid. Alexander was. For that alone he'd risked death at the hands of his own people, defecting
to be with and fight beside, the pagan Celt he'd come to love made him an even worse traitor.

Alexander's foot slipped and Trajan took the opening, thrusting his sword down into Alexander's gut and impaling him. Alexander collapsed to his knees, hands around the blade. Erin screamed Alexander's name in anguish and fought to reach him. Even as she struggled to get to him, he pulled the blade from his body and tried to plunge it into Trajan, but he was too weak. His body succumbed to the fatal wound and Alexander crumpled into a heap.

Erin reached them only a second later, enraged and bereft, she flung herself at Trajan. He'd flicked off her advances as if she were a nat buzzing about his head and Erin was an accomplished fighter. Trajan was better. He was better than any swordsmen she'd ever seen. Erin got in one lucky blow, whirling in and striking him across the back of the knees, hamstringing him. Trajan looked shocked as his legs went out from under him.

Erin, heedless of the battle around her or her own safety, rushed to Alexander's side and pulled his limp form into her arms. He was already gone. Tears flooded her eyes as she clutched him to her.

"No, Alexander. Don't leave me. Alexander!" she pleaded, grief stricken. It made her so blind she didn't notice Trajan was, impossibly, back on his feet. He stepped forward and without a thought, plunged his blade through her back, severing her spine.

Erin couldn't even gasp, silently she choked, loosing her grip on Alexander. Trajan hauled back her head by her hair and laughed into her ear as she died, "You belong to me now. My little sparrow." Then she knew nothing.

"Don't look so shocked dear. Didn't I always say you belonged to me? You didn't think it would be that easy to get away from me did you?" Trajan said, pulling Erin back to the present. Erin backed up a pace and Trajan stepped into it. She swung for him with her sword, doing the only thing she knew to do. She fought. The blade passed through him like he wasn't there.

Erin felt the hairs on her arms stand on end. Unconsciously she backed away in fear, how could she fight what she couldn't even hit? "You aren't real. You're dead. I killed you!"

"Yes, you did. But I assure you I'm real enough to teach you one last lesson," Trajan smirked, casually following in her wake, shutting the shop door behind him and locking it. Erin couldn't take it, she knew what his lessons included, torture. She'd suffered five hundred years of it. Refusing to bend and break made his torture methods...creative. Not even a normal person's worst nightmares could begin to match the things he had done. The horror movie industry had nothing on Tiberius Trajan.

Erin turned and ran for the back stairs, if she could get out of the shop and on to holy ground, she'd be safe. She almost made it to the stairs and the back exit, when Trajan just appeared without warning in front of her. Erin backed up in horror.

"Going somewhere?" he asked calmly. Erin turned to run back the way she'd come, but Trajan grabbed her. Shoving her into the wall and thrusting open the door into the storeroom. He smiled evilly and his eyes flashed demonic red.

"Class time."
Between the Lines Rare and Antique Books lay quiet as a grave. Nothing but the tick of a clock on the wall behind the counter could be heard. The door to the storeroom stood open. Trajan was gone. Inside the storeroom lay the remains of several display cases. Antique books that had existed for centuries where torn to bits and scattered like priceless confetti all over. Splintered wood, twisted metal and shattered glass was scattered everywhere and amid the wreckage laid Erin, clothing torn to shreds, covered in blood, staring dead eyed at the ceiling.

Suddenly, she uttered a painful gasp and rolled onto her side as life returned to her. She curled into a ball, coughing and trying to rise to her feet. Coming back was never pleasant, but Trajan had done so much damage to her body it was particularly painful this time. Though whole in body, she was still weak. In spirit... she didn't want to think about that right now. She already felt like she'd lost her mind, that would send her completely over the edge.

Erin struggled to her feet and stumbled out of the storeroom. She needed to make a phone call, right now. Methos had been right. It had to be Ahriman, Trajan had been dead for over a thousand years. There was no way he could have been real. But, if Ahriman was possessing Christian as Methos assumed, how had he made Trajan become flesh and blood, here and now? What the hell was going on?

Making her way across the shop toward her office, she fell down into the chair at her desk and picked up the phone. She dialed Methos's number and waited.

"Hello?" said a gruff voice on the other end, which did not belong to the ancient immortal. Erin's brow furrowed.

"Joe?" Erin asked, befuddled. Why was Joe Dawson, retired member of a secret society called The Watchers, who knew about immortals and recorded their lives but never got involved in their affairs (With the sole exception of Joe. He involved himself in whatever the hell he felt like involving himself in and hang the rules), answering Methos's calls?

"Erin is that you? Hey how's it going?" Joe asked perfectly jovial. Erin blinked and tried to think of how to answer that.

"I've had better days. Why are you answering Methos's phone?"

"Oh, he had to go out of town for a few days. He had his calls forwarded to me." Joe explained.

Erin sighed wearily, "Great."

She knew where Methos was going out of town to. Here. What she didn't know was if he was coming because he’d decided to help or because he’d decided to take care of the problem himself. Either way, no matter what it was Christian was suffering from, demon possession or dark quickening, the last thing she’d let Methos do is kill him. She’d kill Methos first if she had to or die trying. She wouldn't like I and it would wound her soul to have to choose between her student and her teacher, but she would. Christian was the closest thing she had to a brother, save Duncan. Methos fell into another category altogether, their relationship was…complicated. She'd kill who ever she had to, to protect any of them. Problem was, Methos would do the same to protect Duncan and if their methods of protection didn't coincide, if one of them saw the other as a threat, they would try to kill the other.

"Something wrong?" Joe asked concerned. Erin took a moment to look down at herself and consider the ludicrous nature of what was going on. She was sitting blood soaked in her office chair, on the
phone with one of the few mortals that knew what the immortals were, about to ask for help...killing a demon. You just couldn't make this stuff up.

"Yeah, I'm losing my mind, the dead are walking and I'm going to have to re-carpet the store room," Erin mumbled in answer to Joe's question.

"Say again?" Joe asked.

"Nothing," Erin said brushing it off, "Listen this is going to sounds nuts but, uh, you don't happen to know how to off a demon do you?"
Hazelhurst, Mississippi

Dean slammed the door on the Impala and pulled off the obnoxious tie around his neck in one annoyed motion, flinging the offending length of fabric into the back seat as Sam got into the passenger's seat. "This is nuts. None of this makes sense. If this is a demon, it's not like any I've ever seen."

"Well whatever is doing this, it's not human," Sam said in a far less agitated mood than his brother. "Tell me about it." Dean snipped.

He was frustrated they'd been across four states in as many days, found twelve victims of whoever the hell Ahriman was, and were still getting absolutely no where. It was the same thing no matter where they went. If the victim still had a head attached, they seemed like random victims. If they happened to be missing their heads, as often as not, who the victim even was, was in question because, the name they were using turned out to be bogus or stolen.

Their homes were clean of anything supernatural or odd, except the blood and gore saturating the homes of some of the victims unlucky enough to have been killed in their own houses. There was no evidence of sulfur, nothing to suggest any of them might have been possessed at any time before they died, and all but the beheaded ones had died of different causes and not a damn clue as to what was going on. Why were some of the victims headless? Why did some of them have fake names? Were they hunters Sam and Dean didn't know about being offed by their prey? This was beyond annoying.

"We'll find something." Sam assured his brother as Dean threw the Impala in gear and squealed tires peeling out of the parking lot of the sheriff's department, heading for their next destination, Camden, Alabama. Here, they'd found three beheaded victims and two the killer had kindly allowed to keep their heads. How someone hadn't seen whoever this was, was beyond Dean and Sam. How could no one have seen anything, heard anything? But, there were no witnesses.

"I think it's about time we called Bobby. See if he knows anything." Dean suggested. Bobby was an old family friend and a fellow hunter. If anyone human was going to know what they were dealing with it would be Bobby.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Sam agreed, already pulling out his phone and dialing Bobby's number, or one of them, Bobby had numerous phone numbers, all for a unique purpose. The line rung three times before Bobby picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey Bobby, it's Sam. We kinda need your help. We're tracking what we think is a demon, only it doesn't act like a demon." Sam greeted, switching the phone over to speaker so Dean could hear as he drove.

"Oh, hi to you too. I'm fine, just lounging around eatin' bonbons and watching soap operas," Bobby answered back since Sam hadn't bothered with a friendly greeting, instead getting straight to the point.
"Hey watch those bonbons Bobby. You already got a tire around that middle," Dean teased laughing.

"I can still whip your tail Dean," Bobby shot back good-naturedly.

"Bring it on!" Dean scoffed, laughing again.

"Sorry Bobby but we've crossed four states tracking this thing and we're getting nowhere fast," Sam cut in.

"Why not?"

"There's nothing but bodies to track that don't make any sense, victims missing their heads with fake names, some who aren't missing their heads who seem like random attacks. Makes no sense."

"Ahriman? You're tracking him?" Bobby asked incredulous.

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Dean asked.

"It's all over the news Dean, he's racked up a body count of eighteen people from Colorado to Florida in a week. He's bad news, you boys watch yourselves with him. He lives to cause havoc and chaos. He'll kill you for fun and to hell with what anybody else wants. He's a rebel to his own kind. You don't want to piss him off unless you can kill him when you do."

"So what? This Ahriman is the demonic James Dean?" Dean quipped.

"Sorta," Bobby assented.

"Oh great, just what we need." Dean growled, turning onto the interstate leading into Alabama.

"Well what do you know about him? We can't find anything," Sam asked.

"You aren't going to, there's not much out there. Not unless you can get your hands on an original copy of the Gathas or the Yasna. Afraid I don't have a copy of one of those lying around at the moment."

"The what?" Sam asked.

"The Gathas and the Yasna. They're Zoroastrian holy books. If you can call them holy. Hold on a minute, somethin's on the news," Bobby said. There was the sound of the TV's volume rising on the other end of the phone and they could faintly hear the sound of a reporter saying something in an orator's solemn voice. Long moments passed in silence before Bobby came back to the phone.

"You boys may have just lucked out. The last place this guy hit, West Palm Beach Florida, there's a man saying he saw the whole thing. The authorities have put him in a psych ward because he keeps saying it was a demon who... get this... was struck by lightning. Guy's named Phil Webber, reporter managed to interview him as they were taking him into the loony bin... in chains."

"Struck by lightning?" Dean asked in confusion.

"Hey that's what the guy said. I haven't got a clue. Doesn't fit what I know about Ahriman anyway, but those books might be able to help you find out more."

"Yeah and where exactly do we find a copy of 'em?" Sam asked.

"Ya know what... Atlantic University has a campus in West Palm Beach. They have one of the best
archeology departments in the country. I'd be willing to bet, if you are going to be able to find a
copy, that'd be the place to look."

"Thanks Bobby." Sam said.

"No problem. You two be careful." Bobby told them both.

"We will," Sam promised as he hung up then looked at Dean.

"So, uh, what do you say we skip Alabama and Georgia and just go straight to Florida?" Dean
suggested.

"Sounds like a plan to me, we aren't getting anywhere looking at the bodies he's left behind and I
don't think we're going to," Sam agreed.

Hands on the wheel, Dean shook his head as he drove down the interstate, "What the hell is going
on?"

###

**St, Mary's Institute for Mental Health, West Palm Beach, Florida**

Phil Webber, a balding man in his forties, stood at the locked door of his hospital room and yelled
again to anyone who'd listen.

"I'm not crazy! A demon murdered that man!"

The cops had locked him up as soon as he'd walked into the police station, drunk and raving about
lightning struck demons. They thought he'd lost his mind, but Phil knew what he saw. He knew it
hadn't been a drunken hallucination or post traumatic stress because he'd been witness to a murder or
any other mental disorder the shrinks at this place could think up. Phillip Webber C.P.A wasn't even
religious. He hadn't been to church since he was ten, unless you counted his wedding. But he knew
he'd really, truly, seen a demon. And no one would listen.

"Please! You have to believe me!" Phil pleaded, banging on the door and peering through the tiny
window that gave him a very limited view of the hallway.

"Settle down Webber, or I'll do it for you," the muffled voice of the annoyed orderly on duty called
back. Phil, craned his head awkwardly so he could see where the orderly was. He was at the end of
the hall, sitting behind the nurse's station, flipping through a motorcycle magazine and utterly
ignoring Phil's pleas to listen.

"Please!" Phil begged desperately.

"You know, you seeing me is an incredible inconvenience."

Phil froze, turning with white rimmed eyes toward the sound of the tenor voice. Behind him, sitting
on his pathetic excuse for a hospital bed and casually inspecting his fingernails was the black haired
man from the alley. He didn't look a day over twenty, his dark curls cut and combed into a carefully
maintained style that set off his piercing blue eyes to good effect.

"Help!" Phil screamed frantically. The man looked nonplussed by Phil's cry for assistance and after Phil had clawed at the door for a moment screaming for someone to save him, he calmly spoke, "Scream all you want. They can't hear you. It's just you and me buddy boy."

"Get thee behind me Satan!" Phil declared in a terror-fueled panic. The man laughed out right.

"Funny. But I'm afraid that won't work. Wrong guy. But I'll take it as a compliment," he said rising to his feet. Phil began pleading for help again, too frightened to do otherwise, screaming to the top of his lungs, despite the man saying no one could hear him. Outside the room, nurses, doctors and orderlies passed by as if nothing at all were going on.

"Really? Don't you listen? No one can hear you." The man reiterated as he meandered toward Phil.

"Please, please," Phil pleaded with the demon.

"You shouldn't have taken a short cut home the other night. You know they say drinking will kill you," the man teased.

"No one believes me. Please. No one will ever know," Phil begged, shaking like a mass of jelly.

"Of course they don't. A drunk accountant raving about seeing demons. How very ludicrous. That's not the point. The point is, I can't leave any witnesses. Cops and doctors I could care less about. But the Winchesters, now they could be a problem and you see... I know they're following me. Planned it that way actually, but they can't find me until I want them to. So, I'm afraid you're just going to have to die," the man explained as if Phil weren't plastered, back to the wall, his nails dug into the painted cement brick in utter terror.

"Now, let's see. What would be the best method?" the man went on tapping his finger on his chin in contemplation as he paced around the small room.

"Flagellation? No, too old school. Burning alive? Nah, too run of the mill. Oh, I know. How about your worst fear?" he asked advancing on Phil, stopping a pace away. Phil was so scared he couldn't move.

"What's your worst fear Phil? Bankruptcy? Drowning?" the man asked Phil. Phil whimpered, unable to get words to come out.

"How about snakes?" the man broached. Phil sobbed in horror. He loathed snakes, was horrified of them. He'd had reoccurring nightmares as a child of being eaten alive by them. The man smiled brightly at him.

"Snakes it is!" he declared and suddenly to Phil's complete despair, the room was filled with them. Every kind you could imagine, big, small, constrictors, venomous. All of them.

"Please just kill me and get it over with," Phil begged. The man grinned wickedly, pinning Phil firmly to the wall with his hand to his chest. Beneath it the first letter of Ahriman's name carved itself into his flesh. Phil screamed in agony.

Ahriman's eyes burned blood red, his grin broadening. "What would be the fun in that?"

###
Dean and Sam rolled into West Palm Beach, Florida via Interstate 95 with the radio blaring Queen's 'Princes of the Universe'. Dean, much to Sam's displeasure, was belting out the tune at the top of his lungs.

"Can you please turn that down?" Sam asked his brother with a put upon look.

"What? Queen is classic dude," Dean insisted. Sam only gave him an unblinking glare. Dean's nose wrinkled but he turned down the radio. "You're a buzz kill." Sam just shook his head at his brother.

"Whatever, anyway, the nut job is at St. Mary's Institute for Mental Health. So, I'll go see what he has to say and you go have a look at the body at the coroner's office. Sound good?" Sam suggested.

"Why do I have to be the one to go check out the dead body?" Dean complained.

"Because you're curt and brash and I don't think a guy who's lost his marbles because he thinks he saw a demon is going to respond real well to your brand of bedside manner."

"Curt and brash? What? Have you been reading Webster's Dictionary for fun or something?"

"Dean..." Sam began to argue.

"Alright, fine. We get a room then, you go grill Girl Interrupted and I'll go play Columbo at the morgue," Dean assented with reluctance.

"It's not fair," Dean mumbled to no one, though Sam heard every word. "We're in Florida, hot women in bikinis, South Beach is right down the road and we gotta find a demon who's hell bent on whacking people's heads off."

"Tell me about it," Sam agreed.

###

An hour later Sam and Dean had checked into the Deer Motel off Dixie Highway in Lake Worth, Florida, which more or less served as a suburb of the Palm Beach County area. West Palm Beach was ten minutes away. They had split up in order to cover as much ground as possible in the shortest time frame. Dean, of course, had kept the Impala, leaving Sam at St. Mary's Institute for Mental Health.

Sam walked through the doors in perfect FBI agent form. He made his way across the lobby to the reception desk, flashing his fake badge at the receptionist, a thirty something soccer mom type, whose head was buried in a ream of paperwork.

"Excuse me. I'm Agent Waters. I'm here to speak with a man brought in yesterday. Phil Webber? He witnessed a murder a few nights ago."

The receptionist's head came up and she looked at him blankly for a moment before what he'd said registered.

"Oh, you mean the guy who claims he saw a demon hack a guy's head off in an alley on Clematis?" she asked.
"That would be the guy," Sam confirmed. The receptionist favored him with an amused expression.

"It wouldn't have done you any good to talk to him. He was completely crazy."

"Was?" Sam asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, you're about twelve hours too late. He's dead," the receptionist answered deadpan. Sam boggled.

"Dead? How?" Sam asked. The receptionist shrugged.

"Suicide as far as anyone can tell. Somehow managed to choke himself to death, even carved the name they've found on all the bodies into himself. Guy really lost it."

"How do you know it was a suicide?" Sam pushed.

"Had to be, there was no one else in the room with him, no signs of forced entry and there was an orderly on duty when it happened," the receptionist said offhand as if this sort of thing happened every day.

"And this orderly, they didn't see anything?"

"Nope."

"Can I see the body?" Sam asked, fighting the desire to point out how callus the woman was.

"Sorry, it's already been sent to the county morgue."

"Great, okay well thank you for your time," Sam said in frustration. The receptionist didn't even bother with a farewell, she just went back to her paper work. Sam shook his head at her and exited the building, already dialing Dean's number. It rang twice and Dean picked up.

"Yeah?" Dean said.

"Get this, Phil Webber's dead," Sam said, stepping out onto the sidewalk and looking for a taxi to drive by.

"What?" Dean asked surprised.

"Yeah, apparently he choked himself to death and hacked Ahriman's name into himself before he did it," Sam explained, waving at a yellow taxi as it approached. The taxi changed lanes to pull over for him.

"Yeah right," Dean said, "You get a look at the body?"

"No, they already sent it down to the county morgue. They didn't mention that to you?" Sam said.

"Uh, no they didn't," Dean answered annoyed.

Sam, stepped up to the taxi as it slowed to a stop, the phone still attached to his ear.

"Well, I'll be there in a minute. Whatever this is apparently doesn't want any living witnesses," he said as he climbed into the taxi and shut the door.
Dean hung up his phone and glared at the coroner. Between them was the body of one, Dennis Hill, a Tennessee native who, according to his personal effects, had been here on vacation. Cause of death, beheading and a nifty name carved in his ribcage. Other than that, there was nothing different about him from any of the other victims. Which gave them nada to go on.

"That was my partner. When were you going to mention the guy who saw this guy murdered came in a few hours ago?" Dean asked hotly. The coroner, a late forties man, with a neatly trimmed goatee and a pristine white lab coat, blinked at him.

"I didn't think it was relevant Agent Reznor. He claimed it was a demon that killed this guy and then committed suicide after he'd cut the same name into himself. He was crazy. Demons," the coroner scoffed.

"How about you let me decide what's relevant," Dean snapped. "Now, where is he?"

The coroner blanched and moved down a couple of drawers, pulling out the body of Phil Webber alongside the other. It was immediately obvious to Dean that Phil Webber had not choked himself to death. The man's neck bore no marks; he'd have passed out before he could do it with his own hands. There was no way he could have choked himself to death.

"How did he choke himself to death? There's no marks," Dean pointed out. The coroner turned red.

"It's the only reasonable cause of death," he argued.

"Were you even going to do an autopsy?" Dean asked.

"Well... no. It's an obvious suicide," the coroner admitted. Dean rolled his eyes.

"You know this is why we got sent down here in the first place. How did you even get this job? Hanging chads?" Dean snarked. The coroner's face darkened in anger, but he didn't dare to say anything to someone he thought was a federal agent.

"Hey? Find anything?" Sam asked, his head popping around the door.

"Other than that this guy is incompetent? No," Dean answered. The coroner's face contorted and he gritted his teeth. Sam, stepped in before his brother could turn their clue hunting into a fiasco.

"Hi, Agent Waters. I'm Agent Reznor's partner. We're going to need a better look at that body so why don't you take a coffee break or something?" Sam suggested, flashing his badge at the infuriated coroner. The man looked undecided for a moment, cutting Dean angry looks. Finally, he stomped out without a word.

"Making friends I see," Sam said as soon as the coroner was out of earshot.

"Yeah well, he's an idiot," Dean bit.

"Headless guy give us any clues?" Sam asked.

Dean shook his head, "Nope, same as all the others."

Both took a long, knowing moment to look at the body of Phil Webber. Since the autopsy hadn't been performed yet, they were going to have to do it.

###

They'd been at this for hours, both Dean and Sam were covered to their rubber sheathed elbows in gore and had come up with nothing. They'd examined every organ poor Phil Webber had. They couldn't find a single reason for him to be dead and according to Sam, 'Ahriman' had been cut into him before he died, but it hadn't been self induced. That came as no surprise. The demon hadn't removed any organs he'd simply killed poor Phil Webber and left his body to be found by the orderlies. There was no trace of sulfur, there wasn't anything. Dean stripped the gloves from his hands and chunked them into a biological waste bin.

"This is really pissing me off. How can you have this many dead bodies and not a clue anywhere?"

Sam was scrutinizing Phil's kidney at eye level, moving it from hand to hand with intense attention. It made Dean nauseous.

"You enjoy that way too much."

"I'm just trying to be thorough," Sam defended.

"Yeah, okay Dr. Giggles," Dean teased, looking over the body for anything they might have missed on the skin. He stopped; something on the man's hand caught his eye. He snagged a pair of tweezers off the instrument tray and leaned in to pick it up. He carefully gripped it and pulled. A diamond shaped, greenish brown piece of something came loose from under the man's nails. It was tiny, not even as big as Dean's little fingernail.

"Hey, look at this," he said, pulling Sam's attention away from the kidney he'd been fondling. Sam stashed the kidney in a organ tray and came around the table to look at what Dean had found.

"I think it's a scale," Dean said. Sam looked hard at it.

"It is. It's a python scale."

"You're such a geek. And?" Dean pressed.

"Pythons are constrictors, one could have choked Phil to death but there's no evidence of it," Sam pointed out.

"So what? A phantom snake that just happened to leave behind a scale killed him? What kind of demon uses snakes to kill people?" Dean asked.

"You're guess is as good as mine, but I don't think we're gonna find anything else here," Sam answered, as at a loss as his brother.

"Guess it's time to hit the library then," Dean said, sticking the scale in an evidence bag and pocketing it. It was the first piece of evidence they'd come across. He wasn't about to leave it behind.

As Dean and Sam wrapped up and left the coroner called out to them from where he was standing beside a rack of files.

"Did you find anything Agents?"
"Yeah, he was choked to death by an invisible snake," Dean snipped. The coroner could only look confused by his answer.
Chapter 5

Castiel stood, hands in his trench coat pockets and contemplated Zachariah blankly. Zachariah gazed back at him expectant, his balding head shining in the incandescent light of the heaven they'd "borrowed" for this meeting. They were standing in a huge amphitheater while on the stage in the distance the completely oblivious soprano occupant of this self generated paradise sang 'The Flower Duet' to an equally oblivious audience.

"This is the only way?" Cass asked, his voice lacking any intonation. He had yet to master the subtle inflections humans used to convey emotion.

"Yes," Zachariah said slightly annoyed Castiel was questioning him. He'd just given him a direct order, one that had been given to him by Michael. Questions meant doubt, doubt meant dissent eventually. You didn't question an order from on high, you just did it.

Cass shook his head and turned away from Zachariah considering what he'd just been told."I don't like it." It seemed off somehow. But, Castiel was a loyal angel. He loved his Father. He would do as he was told. Surely, Michael wouldn't order something like this if there was any other way, he wouldn't ask this of Dean and Sam again if God had not said it was necessary.

"It doesn't matter if you like it. We need information about which seal Lilith intends to break next if we want to get a step ahead of her and he knows," Zachariah explained sternly.

"To ask this of Dean again. It's too much Zachariah," Cass insisted, his brows pulling together in deep concern. What he was being told to do, to ask Dean to do, was abhorrent at best. Dean had already suffered so much, done things he reviled, in the name of fending off the Apocalypse and he was about to ask him to do it again.

"He has a part to play and so do you," Zachariah countered becoming angry.

Castiel turned back to Zachariah ponderous. "But why them? They have their own part to play. Why bring them into this so early?"

"Who are you to question God?" Zachariah snapped. Castiel's face fell and turned back to the elder angel, nodding.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"You'll need these," Zachariah said holding out the implements he'd been holding during the entire conversation, disregarding Castiel's apology. He didn't care what the subordinate angel thought, one way or the other, as long as he did his job. No matter who the orders had come from.

Castiel reached for the objects, a small silver toned band covered in filigreed Old Enochian writing, a crystal vial etched with similar markings and a dagger that was a close match for the one Dean and Sam possessed to kill demon's with. Unlike the demon killing one, the blade was straight edged and the handle was made of metal not antler or bone, but the glyphs along the blade were very similar. He already knew their use. Gingerly he took them, turning them over in his hands, his lips taut.

"Do I tell her?" he asked Zachariah.

"If it's necessary to accomplish our goal."

Cass nodded his understanding and disappeared, the sound of beating wings the only thing to note.
his passage. Zachariah, smiled in approval. Things were going just as he wished them to. He took a seat and propped his feet up as the opera singer below, belted out her aria.

"Darlene Koldenhoven and Lynn Davis did it better," he commented to no one.

###

Erin Morgan, lifted the trunk lid of her ’68 Mustang and tried to find space amid all the other paraphernalia, to shove in the Albertson's bag full of supplies she was holding. It was stuffed to bursting with salt and extra virgin olive oil. She and Joe Dawson had talked out every story they'd ever heard, myths, legends and movie plot devices included, on how you got rid of a demon and now Erin was on a supply run to get anything that even hinted it might work. Joe, of course, was concerned when she'd admitted the reason she wanted to know how to excommunicate a demon was because Ahriman had possessed Christian. Concerned she'd gone off the deep end. He, unlike Methos, insisted Ahriman had been defeated twelve years ago by Duncan MacLeod, that it couldn't be Ahriman. He agreed with her initial assumption that what plagued Christian was a dark quickening... or that he'd just gone bad, despite Erin's protestations to the contrary.

Perhaps if she'd admitted that an immortal she'd killed over a thousand years ago had waltzed into her shop and tortured her he might have rethought his worry about her mental state, then again...maybe not. She hadn't been able to tell him, it just brought up too many memories she kept buried and tried to ignore, tore scabs off wounds she'd thought long healed. It was painful just to think about it let alone tell anyone about it.

Frankly, Erin didn't know what to think but she wasn't taking any chances. She'd begged Joe not to involve Duncan, to which he'd reluctantly agreed for the moment, and suggested he ask his contacts to pull her Watcher, a man she hadn't known until today was named Michael Edwards, off her case, for his own safety. It was his job to watch and record everything she did that was relevant to what she was. She wasn't particularly fond of the practice but she tolerated it, since the Watchers as a whole simply wanted to record the immortals lives for historical reasons and because Joe had been a help to more immortals than she could count over the past years. But this was dangerous, she had no idea who Christian might target, it was best if her Watcher was as far away as possible until this was over. Because Joe was retired and wasn't exactly on the Watcher's Christmas List for his repeated and deliberate interference with immortals, they might not listen but it was the best either of them could do.

Moving over a box full of gallon jugs filled with Holy Water she'd bought off a Priest at a nearby Catholic Church, who didn't think a little entrepreneurial spirit was a sin, a gift bag of crucifixes she'd bought at a local Christian store, and three super soaker water guns, she managed to make room for the bag of oil and salt. She wedged it into the space and started to close the trunk when that crawling feeling crept over her brain again. An immortal was near. She put her hand on the hilt of her sword, laid just under the front edge of the trunk and turned to face in the direction the internal warning system all immortals had said it came from.

Coming toward her was Christian, his five foot ten form clad in a tuxedo that was out of place in a grocery store parking lot, black hair combed back neatly as if he were going to a black tie affair. He looked dashing; he certainly didn't look like he was suffering the effects of demon possession or a dark quickening. He walked with a self-confident swagger, the Christian she knew had never possessed, sky blue eyes glinted malevolently in the afternoon sunlight. Erin felt her heart pound in her chest torn between abject fear of the demon that was, presumably, hitching a ride inside him and
fear for the well-being of the man she'd called brother for three hundred years. He smiled at her. It was normally a charming smile, capable of wooing any woman he wanted right off her feet and into his bed but now, it just sent a chill down Erin's spine.

"Did you like the gifts I sent you?" he asked in a perfectly innocent tone.

Erin's hand wrapped around the hilt of her sword until her fingers turned white. She couldn't think of what to say to that.

"Not even a thank you? Bit ungrateful don't you think? Sent you roses, had your teacher drop by for a visit. I thought you'd be more appreciative," Christian said, leaning eloquently on the bumper of the Toyota parked beside Erin's Mustang.

"Gifts? You sent me dead flowers and sicced a monster on me," Erin snarled.

"Oh my, family reunion didn't go so well then?" Christian said, his hand to his chest in feigned shock.

"Christian, let me help you," Erin pleaded after a deep breath, acutely aware that passers by were looking at them both askance. There was nothing she could do but talk here and he knew it. Any move she made in public would expose her and him. It was a risk neither could afford.

"Christian? Sorry wrong number," Christian said. Erin gritted her teeth, so Christian wasn't in any control at all, he was at the complete mercy of the demon who'd possessed him.

"Ahriman," she snipped. Ahriman held a finger to his lips in a mocking gesture to be quiet.

"Shhhh, wouldn't want to scare the mortals now would we?"

"Get out of him you son of a bitch," Erin threatened. It was an empty threat, she couldn't kill him, she didn't know how yet and he knew it. A soccer mom passing by looked at them quizzically and herded her gaggle of offspring closer to her, shooing them ahead at a faster pace.

"Now why would I do that? I'm having way too much fun to stop now. Thirty-two dead and counting and that's just the beginning," Ahriman mocked standing up, but he came no closer. Perhaps there was something in her trunk he was afraid of after all. Now, if she only knew what it was.

"Why Christian?" Erin asked in a hard tone. Ahriman threw his hands up and shrugged.


"If you want my head why don't you just come for it? Why possess Christian? I know Duncan's the one you really want," Erin said. Ahriman applauded her.

"Bravo, someone's been doing their homework. You've got it half right. Duncan Macleod will die, I promise you that, so will Christian, so will you and so will anyone else connected to that bastard, MacLeod. But what fun would revenge be if I just cut to the chase?" Ahriman mocked then sighed gleefully, "There is so much more you don't know. Oh but this is going to be so much fun."

"You listen to me you demonic piece of shit. You'll never kill Duncan or Christian. I will find a way to get you out of Christian and I will kill you," Erin seethed, barely fighting off the urge to pull the concealed sword from its hiding place and attack him as a young couple, pushing their full cart past, saw them and quickly exchanged glances of disbelief before hastening on. Ahriman watched them with a broad grin on his face.
"Look at you. So self-righteous. So protective. Such a hypocrite after all you've done," Ahriman ridiculed. Erin blanched. He couldn't possibly know, no one but Methos knew and he would take the secret to his grave. He would never have told anyone. Erin had a dark past she'd rather forget, one she'd been trying to atone for, for centuries. She'd never even told Christian about it. How could he possibly know?

"Oh I know all about those first five hundred years Erin. I know exactly what you did. Now, I wonder why you never told you're beloved Christian or the saintly MacLeod about that? Feeling guilty maybe? Thought they'd see you for exactly what you are?"

"Shut up," Erin barked. A bag boy took off at a trot to avoid them, casting odd looks back over his shoulder as he went. Ahriman gave a deep laugh.

"Touched a nerve did I?" he taunted, then he grew serious again, his face hardened and his eyes blazed red. "If anyone is going to be doing any killing it's going to be me. You can't win. And things are going to get so very much worse before I kill you."

Erin's temper got the better of her and she lunged for him, leaving the sword behind and opting for her bare hands. As if that might work, she knew better but she'd been pushed to the edge and snapped. As soon as she swung Ahriman disappear into thin air, reappearing behind her laughing bawdily.

"Oh you're making this too easy really. I think I'll go... for now." He said turning to walk off, he paused a moment watching as a young woman walked by staring at them and grinned. "And just so you know. All the people staring? They're staring at you. They think you're crazy because you're talking to yourself. They can't see me."

Ahriman laughed once more and was gone as if he'd never been there. Erin gaped and raged at the same time, frozen in place. The young woman braved her fear of Erin talking to thin air, touching her elbow. Erin jumped.

"Are you alright ma'am?" she asked. Erin took a moment to compose herself and it didn't work. Running a hand through her hair, she walked away from the woman, slamming the trunk of her car. The woman looked torn between concern and fear of her.

"I don't know anymore," she answered, pausing briefly before getting in the car and throwing it in gear. Maybe she was losing her mind after all. But crazy or not she had a list of books to pick up from the Atlantic University Campus that might help. Crazy or not, she wasn't just going to lay down and die.

###

Ruby, leaned against a large concrete pillar her arms crossed over her chest causally, legs hooked at the ankles in a lazy prop, stayed underneath the overhang that covered the entrance into Albertson's, her long wavy black hair sticking to her neck in the humid weather, despite the fact it was April, and watched the whole thing. She watched the dark blonde haired woman, called Erin Morgan she knew now, fume and sputter uselessly at the black haired man Ahriman had possessed. Christian, she'd found out he was called. Interesting people those two, even for her. Not demon, not exactly angel, not entirely human. They were something unique unto themselves. She'd followed Dean and Sam down here without them ever knowing. Of course, she already knew more about what was going on
than anyone else involved did. Ahriman had done all but stick up blood painted signs declaring "I'm here come get me" for Sam and Dean to follow. They'd responded exactly as he wanted them too following in his wake of bodies. They were walking right into a trap and when the time came, she'd pop in to offer her miraculously timed assistance. If Dean bought it, she'd be pleased as a cat with cream, but Sam, he was too important to lose. Him she'd keep alive. Ahriman had other ideas entirely.

The demons, of which she was one, couldn't have Ahriman accomplishing what he'd set out to do. Or at least half of it anyway and that meant the other half couldn't come to pass either since one hinged on the other. Ahriman was a loose cannon. A demon like any other demon, but of the highest order more in keeping with the now dead Azazel or Alastair than her, who unlike his brethren, wasn't on board with bringing about the Apocalypse. The only thing Ahriman was on board with was whatever struck his fancy at a given moment. Right now that was revenge on the immortal, or that's what they called themselves, demons and angels knew them by a different name, who'd sent him back to hell twelve years ago and, just because it would play merry hell with their plans, causing the demons plans for the apocalypse to go drastically wrong.

If Ahriman had his way, he'd kill both Sam and Dean and piss off both sides of the warring factions. That's what he did, that's what he was. Ahriman wasn't just a demon. He was chaos and havoc incarnate and he didn't care whose plans his interfered with. Not even his own kinds'. Ahriman was the red headed stepchild everybody tried to pretend didn't exist but every thousand years he got a free pass. That's how the rules went. Problem was when the Devil's Gate had been opened he'd been one of the ones to get out, much earlier than he was supposed to be allowed topside and now capable of possession (something he hadn't been able to do before due to the "rules") among other things, some of which could be a pain.

Like his ability to manifest things physically that mimicked what he wanted without it ever actually being real in the strongest sense of the word. It was real for whoever he wanted it to be real for and then it...wasn't. A hallucination on steroids. There was no other way to explain it and that just broke the surface of what he was able to do. It was limited though, he wasn't omnipotent but he was powerful enough to be a real problem especially considering who he'd decided to possess, it made him everything but impossible to kill or even exorcise. That had been a lucky break. If Christian hadn't fallen victim to a dark quickening Ahriman would never have been able to do it. He'd spent months following leads on immortals that had a dark quickening, tracking them until he'd found one and then been blessed by the fact the immortal who'd taken that one's head and thus the dark quickening, had been a direct line to Duncan MacLeod.

Once every thousand years one of the immortals was chosen as a champion, if that immortal could manage to defeat Ahriman the world went back normal without so much as a whisper. If they didn't, then Ahriman was free to wreak as much havoc, chaos, and carnage on the world as he liked if or until someone figured out how to stop him. So far, no immortal had ever lost. The last immortal to send him back to hell had been Duncan MacLeod and Ahriman was determined to pick the man apart piece by piece by destroying everything and everyone the immortal held dear (up to and including anything MacLeod's loved ones held dear) before he finally killed him. Of course, Ahriman knew he was throwing a wrench in an entirely different, but not unrelated plan, the angels had for the immortals. That was just a nifty side bonus Ruby supposed.

Looking on as Ahriman taunted his prey into an enraged froth and then disappear, Ruby sighed. She had numerous, deliberately, missed calls on her cell phone from Sam. Something she was doing to nudge him down the path she wanted him to go down. It was such fun to watch him squirm. She had to wait until just the right moment to stick her nose openly into the Ahriman situation and all the while, she knew the angels would stick their nose in at some point too. They'd probably put Castiel, the patron saint of the Winchester Brothers, on it. They had as much if not more at stake here than
the demons did. Then she'd have them to contend with too.

She'd much rather be twisting Sam Winchester around her little finger without his even realizing it or maybe running some other juicy little errand for Lilith. But no, she was stuck cleaning up after her rebellious kin. Some days it just didn't pay to get out of bed.

###

Erin sat in her car, parked in the spacious parking lot nearest the Archeology Department of Atlantic University for at least fifteen minutes, radio blaring a song she didn't even register was playing, hands rigidly clutching the steering wheel and staring out the windshield like a zombie. She'd driven here in a blind miasma of anguish, rage and fear, the full weight of what was going on slamming down on her like a tidal wave. She couldn't even remember which route she'd taken to get here.

Christian was possessed by a demon and she had no idea how to save him, she had no idea who could help without them thinking she'd lost her mind or exposing what she and Christian were, and she couldn't risk involving anyone to help even if she did know who to go to without putting them in danger's path. Furthermore, the demon using Christian as his Sunday best was bent on getting revenge on the only other person in the world she called family because he'd sent the bastard back to hell. Sure Beth was a good friend, a cherished one and Erin would be heartbroken if something happened to her but no one meant as much to her as Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod and Christian Roberts.

Erin couldn't understand how Ahriman had even come back. He was supposed to only return every thousand years and it was always an immortal he faced to stop him rising to unleash chaos and anarchy on the world. Why head hunt as if he were an immortal? Why all the innocent victims that had nothing to do with Duncan or anyone he knew? For the first time since she'd killed Trajan, Erin was at a loss. She was in over her head and she knew it.

Despite that, Erin had never given up on anything, not since she'd overcome her fear of Trajan's tyranny and taken his head. In over her head or not, she'd try anything to save Christian and in the long run Duncan from Ahriman.

Taking a deep breath, Erin checked her reflection in her rear view mirror, making sure she looked like her usual put together, stylish self. She could get away with looking like someone had dragged her over the coals at a grocery store. Here, where people knew her, they would notice immediately if she looked as shaken as she felt. She didn't need questions and they'd ask if she wasn't herself. She needed answers.

Erin stepped out of the car, smoothed the creases from her button down shirt, flipped her wavy dark blonde hair behind her shoulders and took a deep breath before she strode purposefully for the entrance doors that led to the archeology department’s private library.

She hadn't gotten four feet into the beige stuccoed building before she ran into the first person to recognize her. Professor Dr. Martin Wallace with his thin glasses and lean frame waved at her on his way to the elevator just inside the doors. Erin waved cordially and kept on her way, business as usual. It wasn't uncommon to see her here. She did deal in rare and antique books and they often consulted her to authenticate new volumes they obtained or she checked new acquisitions against their inventory since she knew they had already been verified as real.
Erin's booted heels clicked on the tiled floor in the expansive entry way as she swerved right and passed through the large glass doors emblazoned with 'Archaeological Text: Private Collection'. Inside there were a number of people milling around, librarians reshelving books, students hidden behind tall stacks of books, their pencils and pens making soft scratching noises as they took notes or the rhythmic tick tick as they typed away on their lap tops writing essays and thesis papers.

Behind the half moon circulation desk, sat Maggie Sanford, the head librarian reading a copy of the latest Sherrilyn Kenyon novel. The book's colorful cover stood out among the leather bound and faded volumes stacked behind the desk. For a librarian with a specialty in ancient bibliography Maggie had a penchant for supernatural romance novels. Erin still hadn't figured out the appeal in all the years she'd known her. Then again, since Erin's life wasn't exactly something out of 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and more properly would be shelved in the fantasy or horror sections if anyone bothered to write it down for public consumption (someone had, more or less, put things out there about immortals in the guise of fiction but that was another story altogether), maybe there was some mysterious appeal to fantasizing about running off on supernatural adventures with some hunky man, when the most exciting thing in your life was cataloging books no one born in the last century could read without a PH.d. She could have told anyone that it wasn't romantic or entertaining, not even a little bit.

Erin worked her way to the desk and peered over it at Maggie. The woman didn't even notice she was there, her eyes were roving back and forth over the pages of her book like a hungry animal. Apparently, she'd gotten to the good part. Erin cleared her throat softly and Maggie's head snapped up startled.

"Erin! I didn't even see you!" she proclaimed in a loud whisper, her head of short curly gray hair bouncing. Once that hair had been black as a raven's wing and had fallen to her knees in a silken sheet. Erin knew that from personal experience. Maggie was in her seventies now, but Erin had known her when she wasn't more than twelve years old. A pretty little girl destined to become a beautiful woman that men had surely fought over once upon a time. Maggie didn't know that of course, she had no idea the twenty something standing in front of her she'd 'known' for three years had known her for sixty.

"Sorry to drag you from the muscled arms of your latest paramour," Erin laughed at her and waved at the book. Maggie, without a single bit of shame, smiled broadly, as she turned the novel face down, keeping her place.

"He'll wait for me. He's a demon he's got all the time in the world."

Erin had to bite her tongue until it nearly bled, forcing herself to chuckle and shake her head, making herself act normal when she really wanted to haul Maggie up by the collar and tell her that no matter what that author had conjured up in that book demons were not sexy lovers. They possessed your loved ones and then left you without a single clue as how to save them while they sadistically boasted about planning to murder you and anyone you cared about.

Her forced expression must not have been good enough because Maggie's brows pulled together and she frowned.

"Erin are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

That turn of phrase wasn't any better than the revelation that the fictional lover boy in Maggie's novel was a demon. She'd been seeing ghosts alright. Bad ones.

"Erin?" Maggie prompted when she didn't say anything.
"No, I'm fine, just had a long night last night," Erin brushed off and smiled. Maggie didn't looked convinced. Damn it, why couldn't the woman stop being motherly? Erin had known her since before she could date. This was very inconvenient and awkward.

"Are you sure?" Maggie prodded, leaning forward a bit and adding in a softer whisper, "One of the students saw you at the grocery story earlier and recognized you. Said you were talking to yourself." Erin wanted to hit something; this was just getting worse by the moment.

The student in question happened to be passing by at that moment and over heard, he immediately clutched the book he was holding to his chest, ducked his head and speed walked out of the library took a sharp left and disappeared as if his feet were on fire. With a sigh, Erin tried not to just blurt out what was really going on.

"Bluetooth ear piece. Argument with a friend is all," Erin excused. The fact was she didn't even own an ear piece. She had a cell phone, but she preferred the simpler ones. Who needed a phone that flew at the speed of a NASA computer when you just wanted to make a phone call? Maggie nodded in acceptance but she still didn't look convinced.

"Well then, what brings you here today?"

Thankful for the change in subject Erin nearly drooped with relief. "I just came by to borrow a few books. I've got a client who collects antique occult and religious books. He brought me some to authenticate but it's possible they are antique forgeries. I wanted to check them against the copies you have. I know those are authentic," she lied in explanation, handing over a list of books she wanted. Maggie read over it and her eyes widened.

"He's serious huh? The Books of Solomon, King James and Catholic translations of the bible, the Koran, the Torah, the Gathas, the Yasna and the Grimorie of Honorius. That's some heavy reading.

Erin shrugged as if to say, "What can I say?" Maggie gave her a soft smile and got up.

"Give me just a minute and I'll get them for you. I'm guessing you want the 1611 King James?" She asked already on her way to the locked back room where the most valuable texts were kept.

"Preferably," Erin called after her, leaning on the circulation desk and waiting impatiently. It only took Maggie ten minutes to locate and pull the books for her but Erin felt like it took hours. She'd begun drumming her fingers lightly on the desk and was looking around the library in an attempt to keep her mind occupied with something other than her predicament while she was pretending to be perfectly okay. It didn't work.

"Here we go," Maggie said coming back with the books on a trolley and helping her arrange half of them into a manageable stack then opened the doors for her to get back out. It was going to take two trips to get all these to the car. Erin hefted up the first load and clunked her way less than gracefully out the door. At least now, she might find something to save Christian.

###

Duncan was furious. He and Methos managed to make it from Paris to their connecting flight in Iceland to Boston Massachusetts only to find out their last connecting flight was being delayed by bad weather, specifically a raging thunderstorm, and no one could give them a concrete answer on when the flight would be able to depart.
"Mr. MacLeod. I promise we'll update the departure schedule as soon as we know more," insisted the brunette woman behind the airline's ticket counter.

"I'm trying to get to Florida because of a family emergency. Can I switch flights?" Duncan asked. Methos, who was taking everything in stride and didn't seem to be in any particular hurry to get where they were going despite the weight of the situation, was sitting somewhere behind him in the waiting area, his feet kicked up on a bench back, slumped half in his seat while reading a copy of Vogue. Why Methos was even interested in a fashion magazine stumped Duncan but right now, he didn't care what Methos read. He just wanted to get on a flight to Florida as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry Mr. MacLeod. All flights have been grounded until further notice," the woman said and shook her head. Duncan groaned.

"Might as well give it up MacLeod. You've been trying that for four hours. Not even you can control the weather," Methos quipped. Duncan shot him a hot glance over his shoulder. The ticket seller shrugged in apology but there was nothing she could do. Crestfallen Duncan gave up for the moment and shuffled his way over to Methos. The elder immortal cast a look up at him as he peered over his shoulder.

"Did you know Beyonce is a size two?" he commented casually, holding up the magazine so Duncan could see the photo spread of the popstar. Duncan didn't even look at it.

"You're awfully relaxed about all this considering," Duncan remarked. Methos rolled his eyes, pulled his lankly legs down off the bench in front of him and got up with a weary sigh. Duncan had been wound like a spring since they'd set foot on the first flight out of Paris. Nothing short of instant teleportation was going to satisfy him.

"I'm not belittling it MacLeod. But what can we do? You think we could drive to Florida from here faster than we can get a flight? Or maybe we should walk? It is what it is and worrying yourself into a bundle of nerves isn't going to change that. Erin isn't stupid and she's good, very good, at surviving. We will get there," he reasoned with his friend. Duncan didn't look even the least bit assuaged by his words but he did relent, his shoulders sagging with the weight of his worry.

That was the core of Duncan MacLeod. He always worried about his friends and family. He always rushed in to save the day and anything that got in his way that he couldn't remove from his path made him feel helpless. He did not take being helpless well, up to and including endangering his own life over something Methos felt was pointless on more than one occasion. But there was more to it than that, Methos knew Duncan knew that if Erin found out he was rushing in to save her, she'd tell him to keep his nose out of it, in order to protect him. Duncan was feeling just a little guilty for doing the exact thing he knew Erin would be angry with him for doing.

"I notice you haven't called to check on her," Methos broached. Duncan sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair, then turned and shook his head, hands on his hips in a display of annoyance.

"You just won't let it go will you?"

"Let what go? The fact you are endangering your life when Erin is perfectly capable of handling this on her own? She doesn't want you there MacLeod don't you get it? She knows what's going on and she knows you're the one he's really after. You think Ahriman is doing this just for fun? No. He's pissed you defeated him and he wants revenge. It's a trap and you will not listen."

"That's not the point!" Duncan argued again. At every single stop they'd made Methos had attempted in vain to talk him out of this. To convince him to turn around and go back. All because Methos was convinced, that Duncan was the top contender to win the Prize one day; because he thought Duncan
should be the one. Duncan didn't care if he won the Prize or not, he just wanted to live and let live. To enjoy his life and his friends, his family. Power held no temptation for him, it never had. Methos had reiterated repeatedly that was the very reason he should be the one. All it did was annoy Duncan.

"What's not? The fact you're walking right into a trap and you know it? Or that you can't let Erin fight her own battles because you think you're better equipped for the job? She's older than you and she just might be better than you. Did that ever occur to you? I was her teacher. Or maybe it's the fact that you just have to be the hero, riding in to save the day?" Methos bit back.

"She's family Methos. She can't do this alone. She shouldn't have to."

"I know she is. Why do you think she's trying to stop this from getting to you? But no, you have to barge in and do things your way. You are never going to get it are you MacLeod? Life's not fair. If she didn't give a damn she wouldn't have left you out of this but you can't respect that."

"Shut up Methos," Duncan barked in anger. Partly because some of what Methos had said had hit home. Not that Duncan was about to admit it. First and foremost, Duncan protected friends and family, that's what he did. He stood up for what he believed was right no matter the cost and letting Erin fight this battle alone was not right as far as he was concerned.

"Fine, have it your way. But don't say I didn't warn you when this backfires in your face," Methos snipped back, then dropped the conversation like they'd never had it, his eyes sliding in the direction of a restaurant and bar across the airport.

"Might as well have a beer while I'm stuck babysitting you," he quipped.

"You aren't babysitting anybody," Duncan snorted, following him, since right about now, despite being angry with Methos, that beer sounded like a good idea.

"You're buying." Methos said bluntly. Duncan rolled his eyes. Leave it to Methos to berate him then make him pay for the beer.

###

Dean pulled the Impala along the sidewalk beside a four story, beige stuccoed, building with huge glass doors and let it idle while he tried to discern if this was the building they wanted. The sign that denoted what the building was for was mounted on a matching low block on the grass a few feet from the entrance. He was about to announce they'd found the Archeology department of Atlantic University but Sam beat him to it.

"This is it."

Dean couldn't help himself, he'd spouted off before he'd even finished thinking what he was tempted to say.

"No shit Sherlock."

Sam cast him a put upon look. "That makes you Watson. What's your problem anyway?"

Dean, loosened a couple more buttons on his shirt, having cast off his tie and opened the suit jacket
he was wearing the second he got into the car. Sam had done the same thing since they didn't want to look like government agents at a college. Here they'd just be nice archeology students trying to research a thesis paper.

"Watson was always the brains of the operation anyway," Dean snarked, then added, "What's bothering me is the same thing that was bothering me two states ago. We have a trail of bodies, a demon on a killing spree and no idea how to find or catch him. We don't even know why he's doing it. Unless you think you can track him by python scale."

"Well find him Dean. Hopefully these books Bobby's sent us after will have an answer," Sam said. Dean had an exceedingly short temper where things like this were concerned. He hated researching and following leads that went nowhere while people he was supposed to be saving were dying. Every second they had to spend trying to find what they were hunting was another second whatever it was might be killing someone else. That was on his head. Sam felt the same way, but he'd always been more pragmatic about it than his older brother. If they didn't know how to get rid of the thing they were after, fighting it wouldn't do anything but get them both killed. Dean knew that it just drove him nuts. He wanted to get in, kill the monster and get out. Unfortunately, it rarely worked out that way.

"Yeah right," Dean muttered. Sam heard him but said nothing in response. When Dean was like this arguing with him was pointless.

"You go in and do your thing. You're better at the whole academic Ivy league crap anyway. Go make eyes at the librarian or whatever it is you do. I'll wait here and hurry up I'm starving," Dean said disgruntled. Sam sighed at his brother and shook his head, shoving open the car door with a creak of metal.

Sam started toward the building, and Dean pulled away from the curb to find a parking spot where he wouldn't get hassled for blocking a fire lane by the campus cops. Just as Sam reached the huge doors that led into the entryway, a tall blonde woman reached the opposite side, trying to maneuver her way out the door with an armload of ancient books. Sam, politely opened the door and held it for her.

"Thank you," she said cordially and hastened on without looking back at him, purposefully striding off somewhere, with her age-old stash of knowledge, not even giving Sam time to say 'You're welcome.'

He went on inside and looked around for the "Private collection" the guy they'd stopped on the way onto the campus had said was here. He didn't have to look far, it was emblazoned on the glass doors on the right side of the entrance hall, beside it was a black plastic announcement board with white snap on letters proclaiming that Professor Dr. Martin Wallace would be giving a seminar about world religions on the next Monday. Sam pushed through the doors to the hush all libraries had accompanied by the soft thrum of whispered voices with the scratching of pens and ticking of laptop keys. The place was moderately full. As many tables as not had students busy studying at them and behind the front circulation desk, a woman in her seventies was just sitting down at the seat behind it, one hand already on the down turned novel she must have left there to mark her place.

"Uh, pardon me," Sam said pausing long enough to note the name on her name tag and the lack of a wedding ring so he could address her, "Ms, Sanford. I'm John Deacon. I'm a student here. I was wondering if you could point me in the direction of a couple of books I need for a paper?"

Maggie looked up at him and smiled, though she cast the book she'd been reading a forlorn look.

"Certainly. What were you looking for?" Never questioning for a second his credentials. Sam had that way with people. Dean said it was the sincere face. He looked like a harmless puppy so
everyone just assumed he was. Sam preferred to think, at least in this instance, it was because he looked like he was a college student, and preppy one at that with the suit on.

He had been a college student at Stanford, Pre-Law when his brother had pulled him back into life as a Hunter because their father had gone missing and look where that had led. He'd left college behind to try and save the world from the impending apocalypse. He supposed that was more important than a law degree, though sometimes he still wished fervently that he was back at Stanford, that Jess his girlfriend then, was still alive, and he was still living the normal life he'd run away from his family to find.

"The Gathas and the Yasna, they're Zoroastrian holy books," Sam answered. Maggie’s face slid into one of apology right away.

"I'm very sorry Mr. Deacon, but they are both on loan right now. If you'd been here fifteen minutes ago you might have gotten them, but I'm afraid a book dealer who works with the college on occasion has taken them out to help authenticate copies she has," she explained.

"Fifteen minutes ago?" Sam asked jumping on how long ago the woman the librarian was talking about had left. There might still be a chance he could catch her. Then it hit him, who she probably was. The woman he'd opened the door for. "She wasn't a tall blonde was she? Had a large stack of books?"

"Yes, that's her. Erin Morgan. She runs Between the Lines on Flagler Drive. It's really too bad for her. Such a nice girl," Maggie answered him with a sorry shake of her head. Sam's brow furrowed. What was too bad for Erin Morgan? That might be a lead, since she'd just walked out of here with the books they needed. In an awful hurry too.

"What's too bad?" he asked then rethought his plan, he needed to catch her so he and Dean could get their hands on those books, then he'd find out what the librarian meant. Maggie had opened her mouth to answer him, but Sam held up a finger in pause.

"Can you hold that thought just a minute?" he asked. The librarian shrugged a bit.

"Thanks," Sam said, pulling his cell phone out and walking just outside the doors into the entrance hall to call Dean. He couldn't see the Impala or the woman from here but the parking lot was rather large. He had to hope Dean could catch her.

Dean had found a parking space, half way around the building. Either the Archeology department was a happening place or everybody parked here because they couldn't find a place elsewhere and walked the rest of the way to their destination. He had knocked back the driver's seat in a reclined position and was busy half dozing when he saw the same tall blonde Sam had politely opened the door for. Of course, Dean didn't see "dutiful scholar with an arm load of knowledge" he saw "hot woman". She was heading straight for a blue 1968 Ford Mustang Fastback with rear window louvres. Okay, make that hot woman with great taste in cars. It wasn't an Impala but you could never go wrong with a classic muscle car.

He couldn't see much of her, obscured as she was by the stack of books she was carrying but what he could see was great. She had wavy blonde hair that fell to the middle of her back, probably about five foot eight, a lithe form and an ass you could fit on a nickel encased in a pair of khaki slacks that showed it off nicely. He couldn't tell what her rack was like for the books but he'd be willing to bet it was just as nice as the rest of her. Dean was no longer reclined in the driver's seat impatiently waiting on his brother, now he was upright drooling over the hot blonde.
His phone rang, the guitar rift of "Smoke on the Water" vibrating his pants pocket, Dean fished it out without taking his lust filled eyes off the blonde, who was juggling the stack of books to retrieve her keys and open her car door. He silently hoped she dropped the books or the keys so she'd have to bend over to get them, hopefully facing away from him.

"What?" Dean answered the phone. He could tell by the caller ID that it was Sam.

"Somebody already got the books we need. She just left, I opened the door for her and didn't even realize she had them," Sam explained.

"Okay, so?" Dean said oblivious to where Sam was going with this.

"She just left. You might be able to catch her. Tall blonde woman, she was wearing a black button down and khaki slacks," Sam explained irritated. Dean perked up immediately.

"Carrying a stack of books, got an ass you could fit on a nickel?"

"Carrying books yeah," Sam said. Dean didn't miss the fact he hadn't remarked on the woman's lovely rear. He probably hadn't even bothered to look.

"You gotta learn to appreciate the finer things in life Sammy," Dean admonished.

"What?" Sam asked, confused.

"Never mind. I'm on it. Boy am I on it," Dean said and hung up, getting out of the car and heading in the woman's direction. Things were starting to look up. Wasn't every day the person with the information you needed just happened to be sex on legs. Time to turn on that patented Dean Winchester charm.

Sam looked at his phone for a second and shook his head. He hadn't understood half that conversation. It didn't matter as long as Dean caught up to the woman and bribed the books off her. Knowing Dean, he'd flirt his way to victory on that one. Sam went back inside the library and returned to the circulation desk.

"I know this is probably none of my business but what did you mean by it was too bad for, Erin, I think you said her name was?"

Maggie had resumed reading her book while Sam had been on the phone with Dean and this time she set it aside without regret. She leaned forward, looked around to see if anyone was watching. Apparently, Sam was going to be lucky with this. Looked like Ms. Sanford liked to gossip.

"Erin was seen talking to herself in the Albertson's parking lot. Fierce argument with thin air. She denied it but she's such a nice girl and her family has owned that book store for decades. She inherited it from her Great Aunt, spitting image of her too. It's really too bad she's going loony."

"So her family has lived here for a long time?" Sam asked. The woman talking to seemingly no one didn't strike him as the least bit odd. Not with all he'd seen and it was too much of a coincidence. It had to be linked someway to the job they were working.

"Not really. Her Great Aunt opened Between the Lines back in the 40s but after she died, it stayed closed until a few years ago when Erin moved down here and reopened it. The resemblance is amazing between them. I knew her Great Aunt when I was a little girl," Maggie explained getting up from her chair and fetching an old framed picture on the wall behind the circulation desk.
"See? That's her Great Aunt, Marie Read. She helped the university with authentication of ancient
texts too, just like Erin does now," Maggie told him, pointing out a figure in the picture.

The picture was a black and white; it depicted a cluster of academic types posed for a group photo. All of them dressed neatly, some of the men in stereotypical oxford jackets with elbow patches. The woman in question was near the outside of the group, a taller black haired young man with his hand on the small of her back smiled along side. She stood out because of her dress. She wore a pencil skirt and a peplum jacket that were fitted to within an inch of her life, showing off every curve she had. Her hair was dark brown and styled in a finger wave bob, but the woman was an exact duplicate of the blonde he'd seen a few minutes ago. Right down to a prominent freckle on her right cheekbone. Sam didn't think this was a coincidence either, Erin Morgan looked too much like her Great Aunt. Something was definitely going on here.

"I can see the resemblance. Who's the man with her?" Sam said.

"Her younger brother, Andrew Kidd."

"Read was a married name then?"

"No, I don't think Marie was married but I was a kid when she died. Maybe I just never noticed. She got caught in a rip tide on the beach, drowned. Terrible." Maggie said with a sorrowful shake of her head. Her eyes glistened a little behind the narrow lensed glasses she wore in remembrance.

"She'd always gave me candy. Always seemed to have a pocket full of it."

"That's a horrible way to go. I'm sorry did you know her well?" Sam said genuinely sorry for the woman.

"No, but she was always the nicest person."

Sam let a moment of silence pass as the old woman collected herself before he went on. Eventually she was going to call him on his sudden interest in Erin Morgan's life and he wanted as much information as he could get from her before she did it.

"Has anything happened to Erin to make her start talking to herself in public?"

"Not that I know of. Erin has always been a private person though. Hasn't got very many friends. Keeps to herself mostly. Maybe it finally got to her. You certainly are curious about Erin's family," Maggie said.

"No not really, I just find family histories fascinating," Sam excused. "Thanks for your help," He added stopping before the woman got suspicious.

"No problem, I hope you find some other way to get your paper written," Maggie said as Sam exited the library.

Meanwhile, the woman Sam wanted Dean to catch, had managed to get her keys out of her pocket, but was having issues juggling the books and getting the key into the lock at the same time. Dean swooped in to save the day.

"Hey let me give you a hand with those," he offered. Erin nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard his voice. She hadn't heard him walk up. She turned to see who the voice belonged to and set eyes on a gorgeous man, probably in his mid to late twenties with short-cropped light brown hair and
green eyes. He had a military build, clothed in a disassembled suit and a dashing smile he was flashing at her; his voice had a deep tone to it that added to his appeal.

"Thank you," Erin said and he took it as acceptance of his offer to help. He scooped several books off the stack and took the keys she was holding, opening the door for her and letting down the front seat so they could get the books in the back. Erin couldn't help but smile at his actions. You didn't see many men who offered to assist a woman anymore. Not with the feminist movement.

"So chivalry isn't dead," she joked. He leaned into the car and set the books he had in the back seat giving her a delicious view of his backside. Erin had never been what you would call chaste. She avoided serious relationships because to become involved meant to endanger whoever you were involved with in her world. But that didn't mean she didn't seriously appreciate a good looking man when she saw one. If she weren't in the middle of trying save Christian from Ahriman, she'd happily have flirted her way into drinks with him or maybe dinner.

"Nope, not dead. Just seriously wounded," he joked back, ducking out of the car, to take the books she was holding. She let him; it meant she'd have a nice view again.

"Nice car," he remarked as he took them from her arms. He leaned back inside and set the books on the seat alongside the others. This had been her second trip to the car and he lingered a moment over two of the books, the Gathas and the Yasna. Erin instantly went on guard. Why those two? Did he have a connection to Ahriman? Worse, was Ahriman screwing with her mind again?

"I think so," Erin said watching him like a hawk, the fact he was drop dead gorgeous no longer a distraction. Now he was a possible enemy.

"Oh man," the man said as he slid out of the car again, the books in his hands. "You have the books I need for a paper. They don't have a second copy in there do they?"

Erin's wariness dropped minutely. It made sense that an archeology student might need those books for an essay. She was jumping at shadows she thought, not everyone was wrapped up in the same disaster she was. She was at a university, maybe he really was just a student who happened to be writing a paper on the same subject she needed information on.

"Sorry. Those are the only copies," Erin said reaching for the books. He looked reluctant to let her have them.

"I don't suppose I could persuade you to let me borrow them? I gotta get this paper done by Monday," he asked flashing her another winning smile.

"I'm afraid not," Erin said and took the books. He looked disappointed she hadn't agreed to his request. Erin had seen guys like him before, they flashed a smile, acted dashing and the girl they were applying their skills to melted into a puddle. Erin wasn't a girl and unlike some college student he might have been able to charm, she needed the books for something a whole lot more important than an essay.

"You writing an essay on Zoroastrian religion too?" he asked.

"Something like that," Erin said sticking the books in the car and standing in front of the open door in case he got any ideas about snatching them. She was probably just being paranoid but she couldn't take any chances. As she turned back she noticed his head was canted slightly sideways and his gaze was aimed low. He'd been checking out her butt. Maybe if she called him on it, it would embarrass him too much to continue his attempt at charming her out of the books.
"You know, if you are going to stare at my ass, you might want to be a little more subtle about it. Some women are offended by that sort of thing."

The man's eyes went wide for a moment in surprise that he'd been caught at it and he chuckled weakly. Erin grinned; he wasn't used to being called out over something like this by the woman he was doing it to. But he recovered fast, turning it to his own advantage.

"But not you?"

Erin laughed at him and he grinned back, all charm again.

"No not me," she admitted turning to end the whole conversation and get in her car. He rushed to try again before she could get away.

"Listen, I'm Roger Daltrey. How about we go for drinks and study those books together? Huh? Ya know sort of a study session? I really need those books for that essay," he broached. He was getting desperate Erin could tell.

"Roger Daltrey? As in The Who, Roger Daltrey?" Erin asked as she sat down in the driver's seat.

"Uh, yeah," the man stuttered, "Parents were huge fans."

"Uh huh," Erin responded. She didn't buy it for a second. She'd spent too much time in situations where you had to read people or end up dead and he'd been too startled by her reaction to it, for it to really be his name. "You don't look like a Roger," she said casually. He shrugged sheepishly. Erin stuck the key in the ignition and he moved to keep her from shutting the door. Erin pulled it shut with a bang before he could. He leaned on the open window seal of the door and pleaded again.

"Come on, my Professor is going to fail me if I don't get that paper in on schedule. I'll buy the drinks."

"I'm sorry. Some other time," Erin said, firmly believing her initial paranoia had been right. He wasn't a student. He was too desperate for those books. She kicked the engine over with a roar and the stereo blared the last track that had been playing when she cut off the car. She threw the car in gear and hit the gas, with Darren Hayes' "Darkness" filtering from her car's speakers, leaving Mr. Roger Daltrey staring after her forlornly.

"I didn't even get your name!" he called after her. Erin never looked back.
Chapter 6

Seconds after Erin had pulled away, leaving Dean behind without so much as a backward glance, Sam came jogging up having spotted them from across the parking lot. It was obvious Dean had failed miserably at getting her to let him have the books.

"You didn't get them," Sam said pointing out the obvious. Dean shot him an irritated glare for it.

"What's the matter? Didn't she fall for the Dean Winchester charm?"

"Shut up Sammy," Dean complained, stalking back in the direction of the Impala. He didn't know if he hated the woman for seeing right through him or if it just made her more intriguing. Sam gave Dean an intolerant look as he walked along side.

"We needed those books Dean."

"I know that!" Dean snapped. He despised when his brother got on his ass because he'd screwed up. That was his job. Didn't help the woman with the books they needed, had just shot him down without even blinking. "Damn she was hot," Dean muttered to no one. He yanked open the car door and flung himself in the driver's seat in irritation. It was not cool to have been caught by your baby brother just as you'd had the rug pulled out from you. Not cool!

"I think she's involved with this somehow," Sam said as he got in beside him.

"Why?" Dean asked his voice still rather short from his bruised ego.

"I found out some things from the librarian about her. I just don't know what to make of it yet."

Dean grimaced; he didn't want to hear this. Every single time there was a hot woman involved it seemed they turned out to be the big bad in disguise. Just once he would have liked it if the woman in question was the damsel in distress so they could appropriately thank him when he saved her or their seemed connection was just a coincidence.

"Don't tell me you think she's Ahriman?"

"No, but something’s going on," Sam said, "Come on let’s get something to eat and I'll tell you about it."

Dean started the car and put it in reverse, turning so he could see to back out of the parking space.

"Just once, I'd like the hot chick not to be a friggin' monster. Just once!"

###

Dean and Sam ended up back on the same highway their hotel was on at a restaurant called "Farmer Girl" that from the outside looked like a dive and from the inside looked like a mom and pop diner and, inexplicably given the name, served primarily Greek food. Luckily, they also served traditional fare.

Dean had a bite of his bacon cheeseburger shoved in the side of his mouth, talking to Sam, who was
busy eating the Gyro he'd ordered while working on his laptop, trying to make what he had learned about Erin Morgan make sense so he could then explain it to Dean.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I think the girl in the picture was Erin Morgan," Sam explained, not looking up from his laptop. He'd pulled up the university's website and was perusing it for the same photograph Maggie Sanford had shown him.

"Her name's Erin Morgan?" Dean said, completely jumping over the significance of what Sam had told him.

"Yeah now it is. Then she went by Marie Read if it's the same person. She has a younger brother named Andrew Kidd, he's the guy beside her in the picture. Runs a bookstore called Between the Lines over on Flagler Drive, according to the librarian." Sam suddenly turned the laptop around to face Dean, he'd found the picture in the pages chronicling the history of the university. "Look at the woman second from the end on the right."

Dean leaned forward and did as he was told and stopped chewing. He saw the same thing Sam had. In fact, because he'd spent a few more minutes with her in closer proximity, he saw it better. The woman in the picture didn't just look like Erin Morgan it was Erin Morgan.

"Whoa. That picture's gotta be sixty years old."

"Yep. Something's bugging me about her and her brother's last names too. Seems like I should know them," Sam said swiveling the laptop back around to figure out that part of the equation.

"Witch maybe? Maybe she summoned this Ahriman and he went HAL 9000 on her?" Dean asked. He really hated the idea that Erin might be a witch. He hated witches. Sam shook his head, typing in the term 'Morgan, Read and Kidd surname' in a search engine.

"I don't think so. If she did, why would she need the books? She'd have already known anything they could tell her," Sam said, reading through the search results. The second result hit him immediately. All three names belonged to infamous pirates. "Oh here's something. All three last names, Morgan, Read and Kidd, are all the last names of famous pirates. That's where I knew them from."

Dean laughed around a mouth full of burger. "Well at least she's got style," then added, "If she didn't bring the demon here then what do you think she has to do with it?"

Sam kept working, moving from the last names on to the woman's current identity, seeing if he could track down anything that might give them a lead. "Could be Ahriman's after her, she figured it out and now she's trying to find a way to get rid of him."

"Okay, but then how do you explain that, if it is the same woman, why she hasn't aged in sixty years?"

"I have no idea," Sam admitted. Dean sat for a long while, chewing that one over literally and figuratively as Sam worked.

He backtracked and found that everything Maggie Sanford had told him was absolutely true. Marie Read, a rare and antique books dealer, was assumed to have been caught in a rip tide off Singer Island while swimming at night. Her body had washed up on shore the following morning, cause of death, drowning. The death certificate was exactly as it should be. Her brother had claimed the body and had it cremated so there was no way they could check for a body.
Further searching proved Andrew Kidd, listed as Marie Read's half brother and thus explaining the difference in last names, had died forty-seven years later in California. His cause of death was listed as severe internal trauma due to a car accident. His body had been claimed and cremated, by his niece, Claire O'Malley. Again, the last name proved to belong to an infamous pirate. Claire O'Malley had died seven years ago in a mugging in Arizona. Christian Roberts (again with the pirate related last names) listed as her nephew and Erin Morgan's half brother, had been the one to claim and cremate the body. All of this, he found readily available from obituaries. Not a thing looked suspicious. He might have been able to find out more if they dug into the actual death certificates but it wasn't something they had time to do if his suggestion about Erin Morgan being the next target was right. He knew something wasn't right here, where was the immediate family, why always more distant relatives? But, just like with Ahriman he'd hit a dead end.

"I got nothin','" Sam declared throwing up his hands and shutting the laptop. "Everything looks exactly like it should on the surface." Dean had finished his meal and was busy building a tower out of toothpicks, while he waited on his brother.

"Maybe she really does just look that much like her Great Aunt," Dean said with a shrug.

"Maybe," Sam agreed with little conviction. "At any rate we have got to find a way to get our hands on those books and see if she is Ahriman's next target."

"You said you know where her shop is. What about where she lives?" Dean asked, mulling over a plan. Sam thought a minute and opened his laptop again, "Hold on I'll find out" he plugged in the name of Erin's bookstore and her name. A few clicks and he hit pay dirt.

"Two birds, one stone, the shop is on Flagler and her home address is the same as the shop. I bet she lives above it."

"Then what do you say to a little B and E?" Dean suggested.

"Why don't we just go talk to her? If I'm right she already knows half of what's going on. She'll probably listen."

"What? You want to just waltz in there and tell her we're hunters who just happen to be after the same demon that's after her? Has that ever worked out in our favor before Sam? She was real keen on keeping those books for herself, she's not going to ask us in for dinner when she finds out what we are. Besides we still don't know if she's even human," Dean said.

"You've got a point but if her apartment is above the book shop she's going to be there when we break in," Sam countered.

"Then, we tell her if we have to but let's not go all taxi cab confessions just yet."

###

Ahriman, looked down at the case in his hands gleefully. It contained a Desert Eagle that he had "bought" from a gun shop owner a few blocks away, only half an hour ago. The gun shop owner was very dead.

Tonight, the real fun would begin. Soon the Winchesters would surely be here on his trail and that trail would lead them straight to Erin. He'd certainly been putting up enough signs for them to follow,
just not enough for them to figure out what it was he was up to, other than a seemingly random killing spree. Sure some of it had been for plain fun, but the immortals he'd beheaded, those had a purpose and soon enough all of them would know about it, too late to stop him.

Tonight, he'd make life a little harder for Erin Morgan. Tonight, she'd die in plain sight. Wouldn't that be a sticky wicket to explain when she didn't stay dead?

###

Erin had dropped her facade of normalcy as soon as she'd gotten home. After she'd left "Roger Daltrey" wondering where he'd stepped wrong at the university she'd swung back by the church and had the Father bless the olive oil and salt just to be sure. He'd balked at first, thinking the request more than a little odd. Holy water he got, salt and oil, not so much, but a hundred dollar bill and suddenly he didn't think it odd at all. So much for the incorruptible clergy. If she'd been bothering to think straight she'd have taken the salt and oil to him and gotten the holy water all at the same time but she wasn't.

Erin had to get her head in the game. She was better than this, rare and antique books dealer was just a past time. She was an immortal and immortals were warriors. She had Christian to save and Ahriman to kill before he could work his way through her to Duncan. Her entire family's lives were dependent on her succeeding. Then there was the added problem of "Roger Daltrey" she didn't know what he wanted with the books but she knew from centuries experience he wasn't the student he'd claimed. He'd seemed... good somehow. It was possible, especially given the fact Ahriman had been advertising his presence to all and sundry, that the man knew what Ahriman was and was after him, but he was mortal. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. He'd only get himself killed. That was assuming he wasn't on Ahriman's side somehow and Erin couldn't risk that. There was too much at stake.

She set to work. Within forty minutes she'd locked every opening, poured salt around every crevice, entrance, door frame and window the building possessed, from the store downstairs, through her apartment, to the glass enclosed roof. To that, she added holy water and the oil, running it around the edges of them and on every door and window she marked a cross. She hung crucifixes everywhere upstairs and down.

Then she armed herself, filling the super soakers with salt, holy water and oil, keeping one slung on its cord across her chest and positioning the others around the building for easy access in case she lost the one she had, and then coated the blade of her sword with the mixture. Finally, she went into her bedroom and opened the closet door. From the back wall, she removed a large portion of wood that she'd fitted there years ago as a hidden storage place and pulled out a trunk.

It had been kept there for years, but Erin had meticulously kept its contents cleaned and in good repair against need. Relics of a past life. She, unlike Duncan MacLeod, was not above using mundane weaponry if the situation called for it. Duncan stuck by his sword, never resorting to firearms with another immortal. He thought it was cheating and dishonorable. Normally she would have agreed, but there were some immortals who didn't know the definition of honor and they would resort to other methods to kill you. Some of them used it as a first line of attack. It wasn't strictly against the rules of the Game but it was severely frowned upon. Of course if you were dead, what good would frowning on it do?

She did not intend to let them get the upper hand and so she had this. A trunk full of lock picks, a
multitude of other gadgets that had allowed her to profit from the illicit life she’d once led, knives, swords, daggers, hand guns, a machine gun or two, ammunition for all of them, whet stones and cleaning kits. All of it she knew how to use and all of it was battle ready. Erin had not spent the long length of her life dealing in antique books. She'd been a thief and a spy. For centuries she'd fought, been a soldier in wars no one was still living to remember. You could not be an immortal and not be a warrior. If you weren't you didn't live very long.

She'd thought she'd never have to use them again. She'd removed herself from the Game three years ago wanting out. The constant killing, the hunting, grew wearying. She was tired of the bloodshed. This wasn't the first time she'd tried to get out of it. She'd tried multiple times before and always the Game found her. It always did. No matter how hard you tried, eventually, it would find you. The best she had hoped for was a few years of relative peace, now it was over.

Now, not only had the Game found her again in the form of her own student, something every immortal dreaded, he was possessed by a demon. This was the Game, as she'd never played it. She had to face the fact that she might not be able to save him. That if it came down to the line she would have to take his head or lose her own. It was unthinkable. She refused to allow herself to believe that it would get that far. There was no way in hell she could kill Christian; she would find a way to save him. Come hell or high water.

Erin spent the next half an hour checking over her weapons, she kept a Colt 1911 on her, tucking it in the waistband of her pants at the small of her back and stuck a knife in the top of the low boots she was wearing. The building was secured as she could get it with what little knowledge she had, accurate or inaccurate. Last, she set up in her apartment living room with the books.

She spread them out over the surface of the coffee table, collected a pad of paper and a pencil, and her laptop and began to try to decipher the Gathas and the Yasna. Both were written in Avestan, a language that had been used before she was born and she was old by anyone's standards. She might look like a twenty six year old, that didn't mean she was one or to be more accurate she'd been stuck at twenty six for centuries. The Avestan language was only used for Zoroastrian religious writing, it had never been found anywhere else. It wasn't easy transcribing one word at a time, cross referencing each letter and hoping she was getting the translation right.

Erin could have tried a different plan, but it seemed pointless. She'd considered holy ground. No immortal could fight on holy ground without dire consequences, if they could fight at all. Legend held that Mount Vesuvius erupting had been the result of two immortals fighting on holy ground. It was their sanctuary and it made sense that a demon might be just as helpless on it. But, what good would it have done?

She could have holed up on holy ground, but even if Ahriman was helpless there, all he'd have to do was wait. She couldn't stay there forever. He might have decided to forgo her completely if she did run for holy ground and go after Duncan ahead of his schedule. The point was to save Christian and Duncan. Keeping her own hide in tact by cowering on holy ground wasn't an option, even if it was viable and she didn't know it was. Here, she hoped she was marginally safe, at least until she found a way to deal with Ahriman. Then she'd lay a trap for him if she could. Or go after him outright if she had to. This was just a temporary foxhole while she did figure out what to do.

###

Dean and Sam pulled up across the street from Between the Lines Rare and Antique Books seventeen
minutes after midnight. They hoped that would mean that Erin Morgan, whatever she was, would be asleep and that the traffic would be light. Giving them a little more time to carry off their heist. The building was two stories of older brick, standing in contrast to the newer buildings around it and from the ground they could see the roof had been enclosed with glass, a little like a greenhouse. The entire street was that way, a conglomeration of new and old structures mixed between commercial and residential apartment buildings. The name of the shop was etched in the glass on the huge front window in true old timey fashion. When it had been new, the building had probably been state of the art.

Inside the lights were off in the shop, but they couldn't tell if any of the upstairs lights were on, all the shades had been pulled, blocking any chance they had of telling from the street. They'd have to take their chances. The preliminary scouting down, Dean turned the Impala onto the street running alongside the shop and pulled into the alley behind it. There wasn't much to see, a dumpster, no lighting, and Erin's Mustang parked near the back door under the fire escape.

Silently, they got out of the car checking pockets and waistbands for what they needed and moved for the side of the building that was braced against the next, keeping them out of sight of the street. They peered through a window to the store inside and Dean groaned.

"Guess we get to play Mission Impossible," Sam snarked seeing the same thing Dean did.

Erin was no idiot. The place was protected by a security system. No state of the art lasers laced over the room but there were two control panels. One in the front and one in the back, cameras were mounted on the walls and ceilings, held inside black globes so you couldn't tell when one was pointing at you and Dean would bet money every display case inside was wired too. That wouldn't be an issue, Erin had wanted the books for herself, she wouldn't have put them in a display case but the rest was going to be a bitch.

Dean and Sam went back around to the back of the building to formulate a plan.

"That alarm system has got to have a delay for the owner to enter a security code," Dean said.

"Probably thirty seconds give or take. If we can get inside the panels before then and disable them, it will bypass the system but what do we do about the cameras? Much less the fact Erin Morgan is probably upstairs?"

"Cameras, let them do their thing until we get what we came for then find where they're recorded and steal the recordings? Erin, hope she's a heavy sleeper. We're winging it man, we don't have a choice. Without those books we haven't got a chance," Dean said. Sam gave him a look of trepidation and Dean returned it with a helpless shrug. He didn't like this any better than Sam did but they had to have those books. They'd just have to hope that Erin really was just a dead ringer for her Great Aunt or that whatever she was, they could handle it on the fly.

Sam sighed and motioned for the door, pulling out a small flashlight and flicking it on so Dean could see to pick the lock. Dean took out his lock picks kneeling in the dark alley. He worked on the deadbolt first. This was going to be a real pain he had to pick the doorknob and the dead bolt before the alarm went off then he and Sam had to disable both control pads. They had thirty seconds from the time the first lock was sprung to do it in. Ethan Hunt had it easy.

In less than two minutes Dean heard the sound of the dead bolt retracting and moved to the doorknob, Sam stood behind him holding the flashlight steady and keeping an eye out for anyone that might see them. It took ten seconds to pick the doorknob and they were through. What they saw on the other side proved that Erin had at least some working knowledge of what was going on but was otherwise misinformed. They'd worry about that in a minute. Sam swung around the door for
the control panel there and Dean dashed for the front door's panel.

Stashing his lock picks in his pocket he traded them for a screwdriver and removed the faceplate, fifteen seconds left. Using the same method he'd seen Sam use, he disconnected two of the wires and crossed them, the small LED display went from "Armed" to "Unarmed" and Dean turned to see if Sam had been as lucky as he was. He had, Sam gave his brother a thumbs up and Dean returned to the back door taking a look at his surroundings.

A now broken line of salt lay at the bottom of the door, the frame had been coated around the edges with oil and in the center of it a cross had been drawn. Dean pushed the disarrayed salt line back into place, just in case. Every window and the front door was the same and around the room, crucifixes were hung. She'd gotten part of the solution right anyway. The oil would do nothing, neither would the crosses or crucifixes but the salt would keep a demon from entering.

"She definitely thinks she has a demon problem," Dean breathed.

Erin rubbed her eyes and put her head in her hands, tossing the pen she'd been writing with onto the coffee table in frustration. She'd been at this for hours, the sun had long since gone down and she'd found nothing that made any sense. She knew what Ahriman was now but neither book had anything in them that said how to get rid of him. Right the opposite in fact, if the books were to be believed you couldn't get rid of him, he just was and the only thing capable of defeating him was the Zoroastrians' opposite good power. Their God.

Erin was no God, so where did that leave her? If the books were right, how had Duncan been able to send the bastard back to hell in the first place? Had he or had it all been a ruse? She wished she dared to call him and ask but she couldn't. If he knew, he'd insist on coming here to help her and that would only put him in danger. She was on her own and growing more despondent by the minute. She couldn't lose either of them. They meant too much to her. Immortals didn't have the luxury of being born into families. All immortals were foundlings and incapable of bearing children. Their families were what they made them.

She'd moved on to the bibles in the hopes that maybe they might offer something, but so far the only things she could find were the same things she already knew. Demons possessed people, they could be exorcised, and there were passages to do it but you had to capture the possessed first. Oh and then there was the whole apocalypse thing which did nothing for her situation. She had hoped older translations might have something the more modern didn't but no, nothing she could use.

She was about to get into the Books of Solomon, hoping the man who'd written them might have had some idea about Ahriman among the ancient pages, when static buzzed in her brain making the hairs on her body stand on end like she was too close to a live wire. Immortal. Instinctively, Erin's hand closed on the hilt of her sword propped against the coffee table and she was on her feet moving for the front door. Easing the door open and pushing aside the salt line there at the same time, she peered down the short hallway that led to the stairs. Nothing.

Moving on cat's paws, back to the wall she darted down the hall and started down the stairs. A beam of light flashed at the foot of the stairwell. Someone was definitely inside the building. If the immortal she was feeling was Christian and he'd been able to enter, then the myths had all been wrong and her safe guards were for nothing. Cursing silently, she crept down the stairs careful to put
her feet down so they wouldn't creak and give her away. She could hear the faint sound of whispered voices coming toward her. More than one? Erin quickened her pace, it wouldn't do to be caught in the stairwell with no way out but up.

###

Dean and Sam moved like the ghosts they hunted through the straight-laced shelves and minimalist display cases containing volumes that no one but collectors and scholars even knew existed. First editions of Edgar Allan Poe, the collected works of Shakespeare in their first run, Lord Byron, Niccolo Machiavelli. All originals, some of the price tags made Dean choke. Twenty Five Thousand dollars for an original printing of Don Quixote? He didn't even know who the hell Don Quixote was. He thought it might be the crazy guy who tried to fight windmills from a book he'd partially read in one of the many schools he'd gone to as a child but twenty five thousand dollars? Who paid that much for a book that didn't do anything useful but sit there and maybe waste a few hours while you read it?

All these apparently priceless volumes and they hadn't come across either book they needed. They hadn't expected them to be in the cases or on the shelves but they had to be sure. They'd picked their way into the storage room thinking perhaps she'd keep them there for safety but all they'd found were more of the same. But they both noticed there were several gapes in the arrangement of the furniture and boxes approximately the size of display cases and the carpeting had been ripped up leaving bare concrete beneath, leaving what, to Dean and Sam's trained eyes, looked like the remnants of blood. With how neat and precise the rest of the shop was they both thought something had happened in here that had caused damage to both property and body and been cleaned up, very recently. Question was, whose body?

Warily they’d crept out of the storage room and finagled their way into a back room that proved to be the shop's office. They searched all the drawers and file cabinets and found nothing. Silently they closed the office back up and looked at each other knowingly.

"We're going to have to go up stairs, the books aren't down here," Sam whispered.

"I don't imagine Erin's going to be very happy about that," Dean answered. Both of them just stood there a moment contemplating what a mess this was. Finally, Dean gritted his teeth and drew his mother of pearl gripped gun. Sam did the same.

"Come on. Let's get it over with."

Walking on tiptoes they headed for the stairs, flashlights illuminating their way.

###

Erin crept down the stairs, below her Sam and Dean crept toward them. All three reached the stairwell at the same time. Dean and Sam stood there, guns drawn aimed at the first thing they saw, Erin. She faced them sword up, the super soaker at the ready. All of them just stared at each other for a split second in surprise. Erin because they weren't who she was expecting to find, them because
they hadn't expected her to come wielding a sword and a water gun down the stairs.

Erin looked at them blankly and moved to go between them. Neither of them were immortal she had bigger problems and so did they if they only knew it. But they wouldn't let her pass closing the space, guns leveled. Erin stopped short but she didn't lower her weapons.

"What are you supposed to be? Xena Warrior Princess?" Dean snipped. It was ludicrous, who fought off burglars with a water gun and a friggin' sword? Sam was too struck for words by how outrageous it was.

"More She-ra Princess of Power, get out of the way," Erin bit back and tried to move again. They inched closer. She was pinned unless she wanted to fight her way out. She figured "Roger Daltrey" and his sidekick, the guy who'd so politely held the door for her, were here after the books. She didn't want to hurt either of them if she didn't have to.

"Uh uh sweetheart. You're the one wielding a friggin' sword and a super soaker. Here's a tip, oil doesn't work against demons, salt does. I'm guessing that water gun is full of holy water right? Been reading up on some myths and legends since you have a demon problem? That'll work too, burns the hell out of 'em. The crucifixes all over won't do crap. You are in over your head," Dean said tense. This was getting way too weird, even for him.

"So are you, we aren't the only ones here. Now move," Erin growled, she could still feel the immortal she knew they were still here somewhere. She hoped to god if it was Ahriman he was still trapped outside. Sam, more diplomatic than his brother, tried a different tactic.

"He's after you isn't he? Ahriman? Ms. Morgan we know you're in trouble. That's why we're here, to help. If you'll just let us have the Gathas and the Yasna we can get rid of the demon and it will all be over."

Erin was too shocked for words. They did know, she'd been right about that but they wanted to help her? Them? Two mortals against a demon possessed immortal? They were both nuts. She couldn't dally around anymore, now their lives were at stake as well as hers. If Ahriman was out there he'd kill them all. Dean shot his brother an exasperated look and Erin used the distraction to lunge, both were forced to jump back to avoid the blade of her sword and she got past them. They were hot on her tail.

Erin hadn't taken more than four steps out into the open when she saw Ahriman through the window with a gun pointed right at them. Sam and Dean saw him too but they saw the man from the photograph.

"Get down!" Erin shouted and ducked just as Ahriman fired the Desert Eagle, punching through the reinforced glass of the shop with ease. Sam and Dean hit the ground to avoid being hit. The glass stayed intact, spider webbing, but it couldn't stop a bullet with that much force. Erin scrambled on hands and knees behind a bookcase and Sam and Dean followed. Sam and Erin peered around the ends of the bookcases trying to see Ahriman but he was nowhere they could see.

"He's gone," Sam said.

"No he's not," Erin countered letting the super soaker hang on her hip and pulling her gun, she knew he wasn't she could still feel him.

Dean peered around his brother and agreed with Sam. "Don't see him." He was glad the woman wasn't a complete idiot and had the forethought to actually have a gun on her that didn't just shoot holy water. He didn't know what use she thought a sword was going to be.
"He's there. Trust me."

"How about you tell us what the hell is going on? Isn't that supposed to be your brother?"

"How about you tell me who the hell you are?" Erin said, looking for Ahriman. Dean and Sam were doing the same and from the way they moved, she could tell both were very experienced fighters. She wasn't sure if that made her feel better or worse.

"My name's Sam Winchester, that's my brother Dean," Sam offered, because if he didn't Dean would just spout off some other smart ass remark and get them nowhere. To Dean's annoyance she responded to Sam when she wouldn't answer Dean.

"Erin Morgan, But I'm guessing you already knew that since you know the guy outside is my brother. Or was." "I knew you didn't look like a Roger," she chided Dean.

Just as she said it, Ahriman appeared in front of another window in line with their position, Dean saw him first.

"Move!" he ordered shoving Erin to get her to go whether he needed to or not, She bolted, placing her back flat against the end of a book case. Dean got a shot off at Ahriman, so did Sam, but where it should have hit, there was nothing, he'd disappeared again. Ahriman's shot had been too late, shattering a display case into gleaming shards. Bullets wouldn't kill him, assuming they could hit him but they would slow him down. All of them stood tense, trying to figure out where Ahriman was going to appear next and how to get out of this without ending up shot or worse.

"How's he doing that?" Erin breathed.

"Demon mojo that's how. Your brother's possessed," Dean said.

"Figured that part out already," Erin answered.

"And you thought you could take him out alone? Without any idea how to do it?" Sam asked.

"Still working on that part."

Ahriman appeared at another window and fired, "Look out!" Sam yelled and they jumped out of the way as another shot barely missed them, zipping past them close enough they could feel the breeze of its passing. It ricocheted off a steel bookshelf breaking another display case. Erin tucked and rolled coming up in a spin on her knees and fired back the way the shot had come, but Ahriman had already turned into a phantom again.

The three of them huddled behind another bookcase in a knot, automatically placing themselves in an out-facing pattern. They hadn't fought together before but battle tactics were the same no matter who you were. What surprised Dean and Sam was that Erin seemed to know what she was doing. Why would a book dealer know anything about battle tactics? They had been raised to be fighters, but as far as they knew, she hadn't been. Even if she was the same woman as in the photograph, she'd been a book dealer then too. It didn't make sense.

"We can't keep doing this. The shots are going to bring the cops and that's the last thing I need," Erin said.

"We aren't too fond of them either. He has to know that the cops are going to come, why would he keep this up knowing the cops will be here any second?" Sam reasoned.

"Doesn't make a lick of sense," Dean agreed. To Erin it made perfect sense. Shoot her in the shop
knowing the cops would show up and find her dead. Only she wouldn't stay dead and that would cause her a whole mess of trouble she couldn't afford right now. Ahriman was trying to run her to ground. What he probably hadn't been counting on was these two or the fact he couldn't get through the door now.

"Yes it does," she said as all three of them saw Ahriman appear again and ducked for cover. Sam tried to hit him to no avail. Panting Erin peered around yet another bookcase.

"We can't get a shot at him with him appearing and disappearing like that," Dean said.

"Yeah and we're exposed here. He could still kill us before the cops can get here," Sam added.

"We could try to get into my office, there's no windows in there. But you probably already know that too since you've both been skulking around down here for those books," Erin said. Dean shot her a dirty look and Erin flashed him a smug grin in response.

Despite the circumstance, he was starting to like the girl. She knew how to handle herself in a fight and she hadn't freaked out like a sissy at the first sign of trouble like many people did, male or female. She had a sharp tongue to match his own and she had a killer body. Now if she was just human he'd be in heaven.

"Good idea but there's a big space between here and there. We'll be open targets," Sam said.

"You got a better idea?" Erin asked. Sam didn't and inclined his head admitting it.

"Okay then on three," Dean said taking the lead, Erin behind him and Sam behind her, it was automatic. He and Sam were protecting her from gunfire. "One..." Dean counted looking for any sign of Ahriman. "Two..." He couldn't see the demon anywhere. "Three!" he barked and then shot for the office. Ahriman appeared out of know where and had a bead on Dean. Erin saw it. There was no way Dean could avoid the shot. She did the only thing she could that would keep him from being killed.

"Shit!" she bit and tackled him. Dean stumbled and fell as she hit him, the bullet missing him, but the path down meant Erin was in the line of fire. She felt the bullet impact, passing through her back and out of her chest. She collapsed on top of Dean, who struggled to get out from under her. Sam had jumped backward out of the path of the bullet, safe.

Ahriman gave a triumphant smirk, his eyes flashing red and disappeared. His task accomplished.

Sam scrambled for where they'd fallen, rolling Erin's limp form off of Dean and Dean righted himself. Erin laid there, gasping in short bursts, blood quickly pooling on the floor. The shot had passed through her heart.

"Oh God," Sam exclaimed horrified. kneeling beside them. They had meant to save her and hadn't, she'd jumped in front of a bullet to save Dean instead. Dean's jaw was tense as he pulled off his jacket and balled it up; trying to apply pressure to the wound, even though he knew it was pointless. He still had to try, this was his fault. He should have led her through first instead of bracketing her between him and Sam, and then he'd have taken the bullet.

"Call 911," Dean ordered and looked down at Erin. She was trying to speak but she couldn't get words out, only a horribly sick, wet, clicking sound. His face softened and he tried to comfort her, keep her calm until the cops and the paramedics could get here.

"Yes, I need an ambulance at 1540 Flagler Drive," he heard Sam say into his cell phone.
"Sh, take it easy. You're gonna be okay. Just hold on Erin."

But it was useless, her eyes went blank, sliding shut even as he said it and her body relaxed in death. Dean checked her neck for a pulse just to be sure but there was none. He hung his head and balled up his fist, hitting the floor beside her body in anger.

"Damn it!"

"Someone's been shot," Sam continued his conversation with the 911 operator.

"She's dead Sammy," Dean said looking at his brother. Sam winced sadly. Both of them hated it when they failed to save someone. That's what they were supposed to do, save the world and when they didn't they took it personally. Especially Dean, every single person he hadn't been able to save was imprinted on his brain like a branding iron had put it there. Whoever or whatever Erin had been she'd died to keep Dean alive and she didn't even know him.

Suddenly, Erin gasped and her hand shot up snatching the phone from Sam's hand. Sam was so surprised he scrambled away from what was supposed to be a dead body. Dean was right behind him.

"No paramedics." Erin rasped, still getting her senses back as she started to get up. Dean reacted on pure instinct, he had his gun leveled at her head in a heartbeat. Not human after all. Not human meant evil except in the case of angels and that was debatable. Sam followed his example. Erin stayed down but pulled her gun up and they were in a standoff with the sound of police sirens in the distance coming ever closer.

"What are you?" Dean asked darkly.

Erin couldn't be a demon, not with the haphazard but still effective demon proofing she'd done. Dean didn't think she was an angel, if she was, the demon wouldn't have been an issue for her to defeat. She wasn't a zombie so what was she?

Erin licked her lips in apprehension. This wasn't exactly what Ahriman had, had in mind she was sure, but this was still a bad situation. She had two choices, let them shoot her again or try to salvage the situation before it got worse.

"I'm an Immortal."

"We figured that part out by you not staying dead, thanks," Sam said with biting sarcasm.

"No, no. I am an Immortal. Capital "I". Like the TV show," Erin confessed.

"What show?" Sam asked.

"Wait, wait. Like ‘There can be only one’ immortal? Highlander?" Dean said in petulant disbelief.

"Yes."

"Oh yeah, right. Come on, you don't really expect us to believe that?" Dean said incredulous.
"Highlander? What is she talking about?" Sam asked confused.

"You know, Immortals, Highlander, quickenings?" Dean explained.

"What?" Sam said still confused.

"Don't you watch TV dude?" Dean asked his brother in exasperation before turning his attention back to Erin. "Now, what are you really? I'm only giving you one chance before I put a hole in your head."

"She's telling the truth."

Dean and Sam stood stock still for a moment before they looked behind them at the source of the flat, emotionless voice. Erin just stared, one second it had just been them, now a man with black hair in a tan trench coat had appeared out of thin air.

"Cass?" Dean and Sam said at the same time.

"Who the hell is he?" Erin spat.


"You have got to be kidding me. An angel?" Erin said in as much disbelief as Dean had, had the first time he'd met one.

"I am not... kidding you," Cass said without a hint of humor in his voice, a huge pair of shadowy spectral feathered wings rising from behind him to illustrate his point, the overhead lights flickered madly and thunder clapped out of nowhere at the display of heavenly power.

"Yeah, that's not ominous or anything," Erin muttered.

"So, Erin's really an Immortal? Head chopping, quickenings and all?" Dean asked.

"Yes. That is what they call themselves. She is one of the," Cass paused looking for the right human phrase," good guys Dean."

Dean's mouth opened once or twice but he had nothing he could say to that. Instead, he uncocked his gun and offered Erin his hand. She looked at him warily before taking it. He helped her to her feet offering a weak, "Sorry about that. But in our line of work you can never be too careful."

"Don't worry about it. Isn't the first time someone freaked out when I didn't stay dead," Erin said.

"What are you doing here?" Sam asked Cass.

"I was sent. We have work to do to stop Ahriman," Cass said blankly.

"You knew about this?" Dean snapped.

"All will be explained in time," Cass assured him again. It incensed Dean. This entire mess could have been avoided if Cass had bothered to let them in on what was going on. He was so sick and tired of angels and their schemes, dragging him and Sam and anyone else that fit what they needed into it without so much as a "Thank you ma'am."

"Screw that. I want to know what's going on right now!"
In the distance, the sirens rang closer. The cops and probably the paramedics, couldn't be but a few blocks away and they didn't exactly have a kosher explanation for why the shop was ridden with bullet holes, Erin was not dead but her shirt was covered in blood and the interior was in shambles.

"I hate to intrude, but the cops will be here in a second and we're gonna have a hell of a time explaining this," Sam said.

"He's right, We've gotta cover our tracks," Erin agreed.

"How are we going to do that?" Dean said, waving his open arms at the disaster around them.

"Follow my lead, I've done this before. Watch for the cops," Erin said picking up her fallen sword and Dean's now bloody jacket and shot off upstairs, leaving them to wait for her.

She raced through the door of her apartment to the bedroom and grabbed a clean shirt, stripping off the blood soaked one as she went, wiping off the blood it left behind. She tossed the ruined shirt on the floor and raced back down stairs, pulling the shirt on over her head just before hitting the base of the stairs and barreled back in.

"Help me shove over this bookcase so it covers the blood," she said and Dean and Sam did it without question, moving to help her, still shell shocked by all this. Who would have believed Immortals were real? Castiel beat them to it though; flitting from where he was to the bookcase and tipping it over like it were nothing. It landed with a tremendous bang, scattering the incredibly expensive tomes inside, everywhere. Erin blinked.

"Is that good?" he asked deadpan.

"Yeah, that works," Erin agreed.

"Here they come," Sam announced as blue and red lights whipped into view.

"Okay, just... play along," Erin said, trying to figure out where to stash her gun. Dean offered the solution; he took it and shoved it in his pocket along with his own. Sam had already done the same thing with his. Erin ruffled up her hair and took a deep breath, the take charge immortal disappeared and was replaced by an emotionally shaken young woman who was barely holding it together as a cop banged loudly on the door.

"Police open up!"

Erin moved forward and unlocked the door, trembling just like she should have been if she had been the victim of a violent and nearly deadly robbery.

Sam, Dean and Cass took a backseat until they knew where this was going and what part they were supposed to play.

"I'm Officer Ford, Is everyone alright? We received reports of gun fire," the cop asked looking around at the mess. Right on cue, Erin began babbling in a shaky voice.

"Burglars! These men saved me! Thank god!" she wailed distraught.

"Everyone is alright aren't they?" the officer asked.

"Yeah, yeah everybody's fine. No one was hit. They were pretty bad shots," Sam said noticing Erin's use of, burglars, plural.
"Don't thank...," Cass began to say but Dean elbowed him in the ribs to make him shut up. Cass gave Dean a confused look, he'd only been going to tell the truth, he couldn't understand what the problem was but he shut up just the same. Human customs confused him to no end. So lengthy and pointless with no rhyme or reason.

The officer squeezed Erin's shoulder consolingly. "It's alright. The burglars are gone, everyone is alright. It's going to be fine. Why don't all of you step outside and we'll get a report from you."

Erin sniffed as if she might burst into tears and her bottom lip poked out like a frightened child. "O-okay." She was doing such a good impression of a kicked puppy it was all Sam and Dean could do not to laugh. They all filtered outside, in the diffuse light of the cop cars and the just arriving ambulance and began the lengthy process of explaining a very different version of what had happened to the police.

By the time things were wrapped up, the police believed this is what had happened: Two men armed with guns and wearing ski masks had tried to commit an armed robbery of Between the Lines. Erin had screamed and Dean, Sam, and Cass (aliases Crosby, Stills and Nash) driving by with the windows down, had heard the gunfire and screams as they passed and checked it out. Luckily, the assailants had been scared off at the arrival of three men and fled the scene without any merchandise or money. The security cameras would reveal nothing since they were dummies only made to look like the real thing.

"You're very lucky these men stopped Ms. Morgan," the officer said as Erin signed the report for him. "You're all three heroes. Not many would have done what you did."

Dean smiled at the cop in faked humility, "We're just glad we got here before anything happened to the lady here," fighting the urge to add under his breath, "we do more than this every day."

"I think that's all we need. You folks have a nice night," the officer said, stepping off the sidewalk and going to his car. He waved off the ambulance and the group waited for them all to depart. When the street was clear, Erin sighed and looked over at Dean.

"I don't suppose that offer for drinks is still open?"
Chapter 7

Upstairs in Erin's apartment, the group gathered in the living room after having ensured the salt lines were intact and repairing them if they weren't. The apartment was spacious and luxuriant. The furnishings were of modern design, all form and straight lines colored in complimentary neutrals with a few brighter colors thrown in as accents. They were an odd contrast to the decorative pieces, which were antiques, some of them ancient. Dean wouldn't recognize most of them but Sam noted an ancient Roman vase, a stand held a two thousand year old pure gold torc, on the wall hung a painting by Rembrandt that Sam would have bet dollars to donuts was an original. Somehow, the room worked, modern and ancient, coming together for an interesting atmosphere.

Erin went to a liquor cabinet on one wall as Dean and Sam sat down on the couch and pulled down a bottle of Pyrat Cask 23 rum. Cass was still standing up; he saw no point in sitting down. He wasn't tired. "What's your poison?" Erin asked.

"Uh, whiskey if you've got it," Dean said looking over the jumble of books, notepads and laptop on the coffee table in front of him.

Erin, took a bottle of Maker's Mark down and glasses. "That work for everybody else?"

"Yeah," Sam answered, turning over covers on the books and quirking his eyebrows at the volumes she'd chosen. All good choices, though most weren't going to be useful against a demon.

"I don't drink," Cass answered, wooden.

Erin shook her head and laughed sardonically. "'Course not. Angel and all that. Wouldn't want you to stoop to the indulgences of us earthbound sinners," she said pouring drinks. "I would have expected feathery white wings and halos from an angel. You know, the whole 'Touched by an Angel', guardian of the meek thing," she added, handing out the glasses and taking a seat in an armchair adjacent to the couch.

"That is a human concept," Cass pointed out.

"Apparently. Instead, it's more 'Christopher Walken in The Prophecy'. Now, why doesn't that make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside?" Erin said with a sharp edge to her voice as she drank. Dean and Sam exchanged bemused glances but said nothing. Looked like Erin wasn't all that pleased with the idea angels were real. Dean couldn't blame her, they were a royal pain in the ass but he had to wonder what was behind that little bit of venom.

"You lack faith," Cass observed.

"Oh yeah that's an understatement. I've seen ghosts, pagan gods, vampires, witches, banshees, kelpies. I even know demons are real but in all my considerable life I have never seen an angel."

"If you know these other creatures to be real, what is so hard about believing in angels?" Cass countered. Dean was beginning to think there was something going on, he and Sam weren't aware of, some argument between immortal and angel that they understood and he and his brother hadn't a clue about.

"Oh let me see. The only thing all the others have in common is that they are all evil bastards. Angels are supposed to be guardians of the light, protectors of the weak. So where the hell were you two thousand years ago? Where were you when the whole world was falling down around my ears and I hadn't done a damn thing to deserve it?"
Dean and Sam looked a little surprised by that turn of conversation. Apparently, Erin felt betrayed by what was supposed to be the greatest force of good in the universe, if you believed all the stories. Both brothers could relate to that implicitly.

"The will of God cannot be tampered with. It was his will," was Cass's response. Erin scoffed. She'd spent five hundred years in the clutches of an immortal madman, she'd done things to survive that she would be trying to atone for, things that haunted her, until the day she lost her head, lost anything she ever cared about and was on the brink of it happening again and it was God's will?

"God's will? The benevolent and loving creator. Yeah right. God can kiss my ass."

"I don't think she likes you Cass," Dean observed lightly to try to break the building tension. If this kept going, somebody was going to end up in a fight.

"It seems not."

"Uh, what's this you're an immortal thing?" Sam broached following his brother's example. Erin sighed and downed the last of her drink, rising to refill her glass.

"He's never watched the series," Dean offered, "popular culture wasn't his strong point as a kid."

At that, Erin gave a little laugh. "Then I'll give him the abridged version," she said returning with her glass and reclaiming her seat. "Immortals are just like regular humans, until they die the first time. The potential to be an immortal is always there, but if that death isn't violent nothing happens. They live and die as a mortal. We cannot have children and we aren't susceptible to sickness or disease. But we can be killed temporarily by anything that would kill a mortal we just don't stay dead as you saw. I was trying to tell you not to call an ambulance when I was shot for obvious reasons.

The only way to truly kill an immortal is to take their head, and if the one doing the head taking is immortal, their quickening. A quickening is the accumulated knowledge and power of every immortal that immortal has ever killed. When it's released by a beheading it manifests like an electrical storm or strike focused on the immortal doing the beheading. The immortal absorbs it so to speak."

"Well that explains the electrical storms we were wondering about. But why? I mean where do you come from?" Sam asked curious.

"All immortals are foundlings, we have no birth parents, we just are. None of us knows where we came from or why."

"That's not entirely true..." began Cass. Erin shot him a dirty look.

"I'm telling this story. If you want to stick your angelic two cents worth in when I'm done, fine. Until then let me do the explaining."

Cass looked put off by the sharp remark but he subsided with his interruption. He would correct her version when she was done. Humans were easy to confuse, it might be best that he wait.

"But why? Why kill each other?" Sam asked. He couldn't phantom it. It made no sense to just kill each other for no reason. Not that he and Dean hadn't seen senseless killing before but Cass said Erin was supposed to be one of the good guys. So far, immortals just sounded like a bloodthirsty lot intent on killing one another.

"Oh I know this one!," Dean said. He'd learned all about this part watching the show from time to time. "They have this thing called the Game. That's the part where they run around hunting each
other down and hacking off heads to get quickenings. That leads to the Gathering, this point in time when they are all supposed to have this urge to gank each other until there's only one left who wins the Prize. That one is supposed to gain all the knowledge and power of all the immortals who ever lived but if that one happens to be evil the rest of the planet is supposed to be in for a world of hurt. So, all the good immortals try to off all the bad ones so the one who wins the Prize is a good guy."

Erin snickered at Dean's impromptu explanation, “That’s the gist of it yes. But that’s only what we think the Prize is, no one really knows. On the chance, we’re right the good guys can't exactly sit by and watch while the world is turned to ruins by some immortal who's gone to the dark side.

The whole thing is governed by the Rules. No immortal can fight on holy ground, it's sanctuary. I mean literally cannot fight on it, bad crap happens if they try. Legend has it the last time someone did, Mount Vesuvius annihilated Pompeii and both the offending immortals. All fights between immortals have to be one on one, no ganging up on each other and no use of anything but blades. Thus, why I was wielding a sword and a super soaker," Erin said shooting Dean a look. He had the humility to look a little embarrassed in hindsight.

"But that rule is often broken. Some immortals have no sense of honor. Once a challenge has been made or a fight started, no one can interfere, it has to play itself out. That one gets thrown out the window pretty often too. Fights can't take place where mortals can see them, it's too large a risk to keeping our existence secret. And the ultimate rule, there can be only one."

"Again that's only half right," Cass put in. This time Dean shot him a look.

"Cass, you just pop in here and say you knew about this the whole time we were floundering our asses off but just happened not to tell us. You've got plenty of explaining of your own to do. Let the woman tell her side of it before you go blowing it all to hell okay?"

"Fine but I don't see how this is helping," Cass began to protest.

"Cass, we're not you. We're human, or human and immortal. We need to connect the dots one at a time or our brains go into overload," Sam added.

"I find that to be an inconvenient trait,” Cass remarked without an ounce of sarcasm. It made Sam and Dean wonder if the angel could ever grasp human humor.

"Yeah well, inconvenient or not you're just going to have to deal with it," said Dean then asked Erin, "If mortals finding out about immortals is such a big deal then why is there a TV show about it?"

"I don't know Dean. We've got an entire book series written about us we didn't know about until just recently. Doesn't sound all that odd really."

"That was not our idea. I don't know, maybe the guy who started the whole thing was psychic or some Watcher got too drunk and told him about us but by the time we caught wind of it we all kind of decided to let it ride. What better way to hide than in plain sight? No one would ever believe something they saw on a TV show was real and a lot of what he portrayed was wrong. For one thing, the second movie had us coming from some planet called Zeist. We were aliens," Erin said shaking her head, "No idea where they got that one. None of that was true. There's a lot more but I think that gives you the basic idea. You two have a book series?"

"Not our idea either. Whole word of God thing. Don't read them, they're horrible," Dean said.

"So, immortals are sort of like Hunters. Just hunting each other instead of everything else that goes bump in the dark," Sam said summing it up for himself. Erin's eyes went stone cold and she
stiffened, for no apparent reason.

"You're Hunters?" she said, her voice dropping low and angry. Sam, oblivious to what that meant to an immortal went on.

"Yeah, that's how we found out about you. We track down and kill demons, ghosts and any number of other monsters that prey on mankind."

"We're not that kind of Hunter. None of us even knew you existed until today," Dean assured Erin realizing where Sam had stepped wrong. He'd seen the series, he knew what Hunters meant to an immortal.

"Not what kind? We're the only kind of Hunter there is Dean."

"No you aren't. Immortals have their own Hunters. Rogue members of a society called the Watchers. A group of mortals that know about immortals, they just sort of figured it out on their own. They record our lives, watching us, but they never get involved. Well, all but Joe Dawson, but Joe's...Joe," Erin explained tense.

"The guys with the wrist tattoos," Dean noted, exposing his own and showing her he didn't have one and motioning at Sam to do the same. "See, no tattoo." Erin seemed to relax a little seeing they didn't have them.

"They help keep what we are secret from the public; if people knew we were real it would cause a lot of problems on both sides. It's happened before, a random mortal finding out we were real. It didn't go well. We're very selective about who we tell. The Watchers are why you normally don't have a string of headless bodies turning up when we take heads, they clean up behind us when we can't. But some of them get rather pissed off about immortals and living forever and become Hunters. Some of them want to be immortal, they're jealous, but you can't just become one, either you are or you aren't. Others think we're abominations. Then they track down and kill us whether we deserve it or not."

"Oh, that sucks," Sam said.

"Hey, can I get another one of these. That stuff's awesome," Dean asked holding up his empty glass.

"Sure," Erin said, fetching the bottles and pouring them all a refill. She set the bottles on the coffee table, eliminating the need to run back and forth.

"So, something I don't get. If these Watchers cover your tracks and immortals can't have children and don't have birth parents. Why all the headless bodies we've been following around and how can the guy Ahriman is possessing be your brother?" Sam asked.

"That brings us full circle then doesn't it? The reason you've even had headless bodies to find is because he's been killing so many the Watchers can't keep up. He's killed thirty two people. Twenty immortals and twelve mortals. The ones you know about are the ones they couldn't get to before the authorities found them. As for how the guy Ahriman is possessing, his name is Christian Roberts, is my brother. He's not. He's actually my student. All immortals have a teacher, another immortal who finds them after their first death, usually by chance, and teaches them the ropes. But at some point you've taught them all you can. Then, if hasn't happened already, a student might become a lover or a dear friend, sometimes the bond is so close they might as well be family. Christian and I have known each other for three hundred years, he's the closest thing I have to a real brother. For immortals, family is what you make it."
"You guys don't have it easy huh?" Sam said.

"No, we don't," Erin said, but she didn't look at Sam. It was Castiel she gave a bitter look. For a brief moment, he looked down at his shoes as if he might have been ashamed of something. Dean and Sam didn't know why what Erin had said, had caused the reaction. Castiel was always...stoic. It wasn't like him.

"Okay I gotta ask. What's with all the pirate related names you and Christian have been using?" Sam asked. Erin favored him with a slightly ironic grin.

"It's a running joke. We used to be pirates back in the 17th century. It's how we met. He hadn't died his first death yet and the ship I was serving on –read press ganged–seized his. He was given the option to either join our crew or die. He refused and the captain keelhauled him. Knowing what he was, I jumped overboard and pulled his body to shore on a nearby island. From that point on, we've been together until a few months ago when he went to visit a friend in Colorado. That's when he was possessed."

"That's freakin’ awesome!" Dean gushed. Hot, immortal, pirate chick. Erin gave him an odd look for it. "The fact you were pirates not the whole possession thing. How does an immortal even get possessed anyway? I mean, you're not exactly a normal human," Dean said.

"You never saw the end of season five did you?" Erin said, "Ahriman's been here before. Every thousand years he comes back and every time a champion is chosen to defeat him. An immortal. If they don't then Ahriman is free to wreak havoc and chaos over the entire planet, presumably until someone figures out how to stop him. That's what he is, he's fear, chaos and havoc incarnate. Luckily, every champion has always defeated him. Duncan was the last champion, in 1997."

"Duncan MacLeod? He's real?" Dean interrupted unable to hide just a shade of excitement over the prospect. It wasn't everyday TV characters turned out to be real.

"Yes, all of them are. So were the stories on the series. The movies are hit and miss," Erin answered.

"So Methos and Amanda...," Dean enthused.

"Yes."

"Oh she was one hot chick."

Erin quirked her lips in amusement and Dean saw it. Embarrassed he tried to deflect it.

"Ya know for an immortal." Dean could have kicked himself for that blunder. "That... didn't come out right," he excused. Sam was biting his lip in an effort not to laugh as his brother stepped all over himself twice in a row.

"Amanda has that effect on men," Erin said, showing Dean the first real smile he'd seen since they'd arrived. "Anyway, Duncan sent him back to hell. Now, somehow, he's back way before he should be and he's possessed Christian. He could never do anything like that before. He could make you see things, hallucinations. But now, they're real. I've seen them, I've," Erin paused looking for a word to describe it that wasn't as sick as the actual thing, "experienced them. He couldn't possess someone before. At first I thought it was a dark quickening but," Erin explained trailing off and shaking her head, looking down into her second glass of rum instead of at them.

"Dark quickening?" Sam asked.

"It's when an immortal takes one too many heads from evil immortals. The evil we absorb, it
accumulates and sometimes the next head they take is too much. The evil overwhelms them, turns them as evil as the those they killed or worse. Anyone who takes their head is infected too, it's like a disease. They're rare and there is a cure. A spring in France. I even arranged it so I could take Christian there if I could catch him, save him. But now, now I don't know what to do," Erin explained her voice faltering, wavering between anger and anguish. The glass shook in her hand and now Dean knew why she wouldn't look up at them. She was bordering on tears. He could hear it in her voice. "I can't just let Ahriman have him. I can't let him win. I can't let him kill my brother."

Dean leaned down so he could see beneath the fall of her hair. He empathized. Hadn't he sold his soul to bring Sam back? Hadn't Sam tried to do the same for him to no avail? Hadn't their father done it to save him? It was practically a family tradition. "Hey. This is what we do. We'll figure out something."

She looked up at him and for just a moment, he didn't see an immortal that had probably seen more lifetimes than he could count, he didn't see the fighter that had willingly taken a bullet for him down stairs or the hot chick trying to get a stack of books into her car. He saw a sister trying desperately to find a way to save her brother. You didn't get more real or simple than that. In the end it all came down to family.

Sam saw it too, his lips tightening with sympathy. Erin looked both full of desperate hope and tormented disbelief, then it was gone and she pulled herself together, buried her sorrow. Dean looked at her and saw himself, how many times had he done the same thing? Stomped on his guilt and pain just so he could keep going. Ignored it because facing it hurt too much. He understood her.

"I believe this is the part where I tell my side. It will help," Cass announced. Dean snorted at it. Cass was never diplomatic about things. He just said it.

"By all means let's hear it," Dean snarked.

"Ahriman should never have been able to possess an immortal, as you call yourselves. It was a dark quickening that allowed it to happen. When the Devil's Gate opened, Ahriman must have been one of the demons that got out. No one knew. Even the demons would not want him free to do as he wishes. He is not well liked even by his own kind, a pariah. Ahriman does not obey; he does what he wants no matter who it effects. Ahriman is a liability to both sides of this war."

"So Ahriman's a demonic red headed step child," Dean remarked sarcastically.

"I do not understand that reference." Cass said, annoyed that yet again humans insisted on using idioms to which he had no basis for comparison.

"I'm sorry. Devil's gate? War?" Erin asked, now the confused one.

"It's a gate into hell. We tried to stop it from being opened but we were too late. An army of demons got out before we could get it closed," Sam admitted shamefaced. They really had tried but not a day went by he and Dean didn't feel guilty that they hadn't been able to prevent it.

"When the demons were released. It began the countdown to the apocalypse. Ahriman will destroy any plans either side has to win just because he can. If he destroys ours the apocalypse will come and mankind will suffer greatly," Cass finished.

"The apocalypse?" Erin said in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Our plans. Wait, wait what plans is he planning on screwing up?" Dean asked.
"If he can, he will kill you and your brother but not until he has had his revenge on the one who sent him to hell."

"And you didn't think this was worth mentioning before now?" Dean raged, on his feet in an instant railing at the angel. Sam was right behind him, gaping in surprise.

"I could not come any sooner. I was busy finding a way to stop him," Cass said sternly.

"Okay great so how do we kill the bastard? Exorcism? The demon killing knife?" Dean demanded. Nothing, got him more upset than the prospect of someone killing his brother. It was the only thing that ever sent him careening over the edge without a parachute.

"No. Possessing an immortal has made him invulnerable to anything you know," Cass answered. Dean went into a complete mental spiral.

"Oh great. Great Cass. So what will kill him?"

"These," Cass said pulling out the vial, the silver ring and the knife and setting them on the coffee table.

"Okay, so we track him down, use those things on him and poof, no more problems for anybody right? Christian's fine, we don't die and he stops coming after Erin? Wait, if Ahriman wants to kill the one who sent him back to hell first, why isn't he going after this Duncan MacLeod instead of Erin?" Sam asked.

"Because I know Duncan. I've known him longer than I have Christian, he's a very dear friend. My best friend besides Christian. Ahriman doesn't just want to kill Duncan, he wants to destroy everyone he cares about and everything they care about before he has his final revenge. He wants him to suffer. I've already had a run in with him twice before you guys showed up, in one form or another. Christian and I are just the first in a long line he intends to kill. He took a lot of pleasure in taunting me with that," Erin said.

"He's one sick son of a bitch." Dean observed.

"There is more," Cass said. All of them looked at him expectantly.

"Erin is mistaken about what her kind is. Her version of things is only what they think they are. They call themselves immortals. Angels and demons know them by a different name. Nephilim."

"What?" Erin barked

"Nepha what?" Dean said at the same time.

"Nephilim. Before the great flood when God purged the Earth of wickedness because man displeased him, saving only Noah and his family, a group of angels rebelled against God. Intending to have what only humans had been allowed, they took human vessels and fathered children with human women. Those children were nephilim. The angels who fathered them intended to use them to aid Lucifer in defying God even after he had been bound in his cage. But God would not let them, the angels who sired the nephilim were destroyed. When God flooded the earth, in his benevolence he allowed ten percent of the nephilim to live. Ever since, not knowing what they are, they have called themselves immortals."

Erin was too stunned to speak, she simply stared trying to absorb what Castiel had just said.

"I thought all of you were junkless?" Dean asked.
"A human vessel is not...junkless. We are genderless in our true forms."

"So immortals are what? Half angel?" Sam asked.

"Yes. That is why it is impossible to kill Ahriman like you would another demon. The angelic qualities they possess make him nearly invulnerable."

"Angelic qualities? What qualities?" Dean asked.

Erin, still unable to wrap her head around the sudden flood of information she was getting, muttered, "I need another drink," picking up her glass to fill it and then deciding the whole bottle looked like a better option and turned it up on her lips. Dean couldn't blame her one bit. If it were him he'd probably be doing the same thing. Her whole existence was being rewritten, her world set on its ear, all while balancing on the brink of losing the people she called family. It was a familiar sensation.

"Their immortality. Their ability to resurrect. Unlike angels, because they are half human they have souls, very powerful souls. What Erin calls a quickening is the process by which a soul is transferred to another when one is truly killed. It is what they were built for," Cass explained.

"So the Game, the Gathering, the Prize is all a crock? We've been killing each other for centuries for nothing?" Erin asked in pained awe.

"No. I am not finished," Cass admonished. "We could not change what the ones who sired you made you. The demons wanted you for their own purposes but God kept them from you. So we did the best we could with what we had. Instead God gave you a purpose, similar to what you were intended for but for good instead of evil. It is complicated. Because you have souls, you have free will, just as full humans do. This made things...difficult. You were free to chose to be good or evil, but the power your souls contain is more than any human soul could ever be. That could be useful. So it was decided it would be best if none of you knew your origins and rules established. The Game, the Gathering, the Prize are all real. But they aren't what you believe," Cass said, speaking directly to Erin, his voice was less authoritative almost apologetic as if he were sorry for having to tell her this. Erin just listened, her face a mix of confused emotions.

"The nature of what you are is why you cannot fight on holy ground. The Game narrows the field; it condenses the players, collecting the souls within those who survive. Most have already chosen the righteous path, even you, for all that you regret. You eliminate those who have chosen evil, striving to ensure that only the good are left. The Gathering is here, now. It has begun. When there is only one left, all of the souls will be within that one. They will hold more power than you can imagine. If the last one is evil or can be turned, they will be as much a plague on the earth as Lucifer himself. It is a risk but one that couldn't be avoided without destroying all of you. God in his mercy chose not to destroy you because of the sins of your fathers. That is the Prize. To be a weapon of God. The nephilim are our last defense against Lucifer if we fail to stop the apocalypse."

"And what happens after that? If the last immortal is good what happens after you use them?" Erin asked, her voice deadly calm.

"They will be... sundered. The souls within them used as a weapon. They cease to be."

"That's the Prize? You just kill them? Destroy their souls?" Dean said in shock. "Oh I really have to hand it to you Cass. You angels know how to screw somebody's life up royally. I thought what you did to me and Sam was bad. You let them kill each other until there's only one left and then you just gank them so you can what? Throw a soul bomb at Satan? All because your kin screwed the pooch and couldn't figure out what to do with the kids that got left behind? Do you even know how screwed up that is?" Dean spat. He wasn't even an immortal and it was repulsive, he couldn't
imagine how Erin was feeling right now.

"They will die in the service of God. It is a great honor," Cass said not understanding why Dean was so upset.

"Cass, they're half angel. You and all the angels think of each other as family right? Calling each other brother and sister? Doesn't that make them your nieces and nephews? You're talking about offing your family to win a war! I'd say that's kind of counterproductive wouldn't you?"

"It is God's will Dean," Cass insisted. But Dean's words had hit home. Was it right? Castiel's time around the Winchesters had begun to affect him. He no longer thought of things in terms of God's will or not God's will. He'd really begun to question. Weren't the immortals his family just as the other angels were? Was sacrificing them as a last line of defense just? Wasn't Erin, above all the other immortals, the one he should feel the most wrong about doing this too?

"We've always wondered why we exist, where we come from. And now you're telling me we're just your unwanted, illegitimate children? A goddamn failsafe in your war? You screw up so this is what you use us for? Players in God's Nintendo Game? Soul jars?" Erin breathed, she wasn't looking at them. She had set the bottle of rum down on the coffee table and was staring at the floor with barely contained rage.

"I am sorry if this news upsets you," Cass said and to Dean it sounded like he really was. But Erin had just had everything she'd ever believed in ripped apart only to find out the only thing any of her kind were worth was as cannon fodder. She moved so fast neither Dean nor Sam could stop her. She was up across the room, sword in hand, from where Dean didn't have a clue.

Cass could have stopped her but he didn't, he stood his ground. She rushed him, shoving him with enough force against the wall to cause anyone else a considerable amount of pain, the blade of her sword held to his throat. Cass could have swatted her like a fly if he had wanted to. He was letting her do it. To Dean that said something about how Cass felt. You didn't move an angel unless it wanted to be moved.

"I'm right there with you Erin but that won't do you any good. You can't kill an angel like that. Hell, you can't even hurt the bastards," Dean told her but she either didn't hear him she was so angry or she ignored him for the same reason.

"You and your kind do this and all you can say is you're sorry if this news upsets me? SORRY!?!" Erin screamed, trailing off into the maniacal laugh of someone near the breaking point. Cass, perfectly calm responded, "Yes. I am."

"What happens if the last immortal is evil?" Erin asked gruffly.

"Then they will be ripped apart, the souls they harbor sent to perdition in the service of the devil."

Dean felt all the blood drain out of his face. He'd been to hell he knew what happened to souls there, what they became, what he'd been on the path to becoming.

"Cass, souls that are sent to hell become demons. I know, I was there. If immortal souls are as powerful as you say they are you're talking about some pretty bad ass demons."

"As I said. If an evil immortal wins the Prize, they will be as much a plague on the earth as Lucifer himself."

"Oh, this just gets better and better," Sam said.
"Unbelievable," Erin hissed, releasing her hold on Cass and backing away in disgust.

Cass straightened his clothing and cast them all an abashed but certain look, "That is why Ahriman must be destroyed at all cost. Duncan MacLeod is the one. He cannot be allowed to die. Neither can Dean and Sam."

Erin looked at Cass for a moment and then she walked away, heading straight for the door. Dean intercepted her.

"Whoa, where do you think you're going? You can't leave you'll be a walking target for Ahriman." Erin tried to step around him and Dean stepped with her.

"I know that. I salt lined the roof too, it's enclosed. I need to wrap my head around this. I need some time to think," Erin said and darted around him and out the door, slamming it behind her, sword still in hand. Dean heard her rapid foot falls pelt up the stairs, heading for the roof.

"Great," Dean grumbled throwing up his hands.

"You want me to go up and get her?" Sam asked.

"No, let her go. A few minutes won't make a difference," Dean said.

"We don't have time for this," Cass complained.

"Yeah well, you're just going to have to make time. You're the one who thought it'd be a good idea to dump all that on her head. What did you expect? For her to throw herself into your arms for a hallmark homecoming?" Dean bit. Above them, they could hear the creak of the roof access door and then a bang as it closed behind Erin. Cass rolled his eyes in exasperation, human emotions were so complex, so time consuming and unnecessary.

"I thought it would help prepare her if she knew the truth. There is more I must tell all of you."

"How much more can there be Cass? I mean, you've pretty much turned the world upside down here."

"Prepare her for what?" Sam asked. Cass looked down at his shoes for a moment and then back up. "In order to destroy Ahriman," he said pausing to take a deep breath, knowing the brothers were not going to like this, "Erin has to die."

###

The night hadn't gone exactly as planned, but Ahriman was none the less, pleased. The Winchesters had arrived ahead of schedule and while he had intended for Erin to die and be found by the police, thus ruining her current life and forcing her to run because her identity had been compromised, it was enough for the moment that he had revealed what she was to the Winchesters. They would not take well to her being supernatural, being akin to what they hunted.

He had more plans. This was only part of a greater whole. Compromises could be made as long as the result was the same he thought, as he watched an older gentleman across the street get into an old Lincoln Town Car.
In the light of the street lamp, Ahriman could see the tattoo on his wrist for just a moment. A dark blue double circle, filled with small dots and within it, a stylized 'Y'. A Watcher. Erin's Watcher, Michael Edwards.

He was on his way out of town, ordered by his superiors to clear the area until 'an unknown but dangerous threat' was gone. He was never going to make it to the airport. Ahriman's eyes flashed and his laugh echoed off the walls of buildings as Michael Edwards pulled out onto the street and headed for the airport.

###

Just as Ruby had suspected, Castiel had arrived to do the angels' bidding. She watched the whole fire fight from a dark secluded corner down the street, careful to stay out of the glow of the streetlights so she wouldn't be seen. She'd managed to ferret out, through some rather arcane and perverse workings, what the angels were planning and for once, what the demons and angels wanted were the same. For entirely different reasons.

The angels knew there was a different way to go about this to reach the same outcome but Ruby seriously doubted the higher ups had let Castiel in on it. If he had known, his sympathies with the Winchesters might work against them. He might decide another course of action was more appropriate.

Zachariah didn't want that. He wanted Dean cowed into subservience and he wanted a possible threat to his and Michael's use of the immortals out of the way. Erin was that threat. So Zachariah had conveniently neglected to tell Castiel there was another way to defeat Ahriman. Instead telling him only one way and then embellishing it with a bit more than the act required, in the name of breaking Dean Winchester down and making Castiel believe it was a necessary evil.

The demons, well they wanted her dead right along with Zachariah. If she survived, she would be a threat to them possibly gaining control of the immortals. It wouldn't be all that hard to get rid of the angels' chosen favorite to win the prize. Duncan MacLeod could be dealt with easily enough with the number of demons they had topside now, as long as Erin Morgan didn't survive. Ahriman would be destroyed either way, so he wouldn't be an issue as long as things kept on their current course. Ruby was just going to ensure it stayed that way.

Satisfied at the night's events, she smiled to herself and disappeared into the shadows.

###

"Flight 714 is now boarding at Gate 3. Flight 714 is now boarding at Gate 3" droned a woman's voice over the intercom system of Logan International Airport. Duncan looked up from the dregs of his third beer and sighed with relief.

"About time," he muttered sliding off the barstool.

"I know this is pointless but why not just go home?" Methos asked again of his friend.
"Not a chance. Quit asking," Duncan shot heading off in the direction of the gate. Methos followed after him, sullen.

"Fine. It's pointless trying to reason with you."

"Thought you would have figured that out by now," MacLeod quipped, weaving his way through people heading for their own flights now that the storms had subsided.

"I don't even know why I bother," Methos complained irritably.

"Methos, I appreciate what you are trying to do, but it's not going to work. So drop it," Duncan said dismissing the elder immortal. Methos could only shake his head.

"I should have just shot you. You are such a pain in the ass."
Sam and Dean both gaped at Cass. Of all the things they could have imagined he would say, that hadn't been it.

"Oh no, no absolutely not. There has to be another way," Dean insisted angrily.

"There isn't." Cass said. He had known this would upset the boys. They were not always, pragmatic, when it came to things such as this.

"You just destroyed her whole belief system because you thought that would make it easier for her to die for you?" Sam asked in absolute astonishment.

"I thought if she knew what she was, why she existed, it would make the transition...easier."

"Congratulations Cass, you just won the award for the worst easy let down in history," Dean growled.

"Why? Why does she have to die for Ahriman to be destroyed?" Sam asked.

"The nephilim," Cass began. Sam and Dean both gave him a hard glare for the use of the term and he reconsidered. "Ahriman cannot be exorcised or killed in the body of the immortal he currently possesses. He is bound to it and cannot be forced out unless he chooses to leave it. It is why he chose an immortal in the first place. So he could not be stopped. The knife," Cass said picking it up and turning it over, watching light play over the edge of the blade, "will allow her to injury him and the body he has taken but it won't force him out and it won't kill him. However, once he has been wounded with the knife she will be able to take Christian's head. The ring," He said picking it up in place of the knife, "will force Ahriman to possess her body but he will be vulnerable. Unable to escape of his own will, fused with Erin's essence but not yet able to be killed. Then, when she is killed her soul and all the souls she carries along with Ahriman will be forced into this," Cass went on picking up the crystal vial.

"And then what?" Sam pushed.

Cass hesitated a moment before he went on. The more he explained the less they would like what must be done. "Everything in the vial will be taken to heaven and destroyed."

"Oh my god," Dean breathed, rubbing an exasperated hand over his face as he paced in a tight circle.

"You want her to kill her brother so you can turn her into a devil's trap so then, you can rip out her soul, stick it in a jar and obliterate it? No heaven, no hell, just gone, nothing?"

"Yes. It is a better fate than letting her live after she's taken Christian's head. She will be overwhelmed by the dark quickening the same as he was. Ahriman will be bound to her soul by the ring; once it has been done, it can't be undone. Even if her death was not required to destroy him, even if the dark quickening could be healed, she would be... broken. A soul shattered into a million pieces."

"She said there's a cure for a dark quickening Cass. What, you're supporting assisted euthanasia now? You want her to be a sacrificial lion?" Dean argued.

"How do you know this is the only way?" Sam asked.
"Zachariah has looked," Cass began to tell them.

"Zachariah? That ass hole is behind this? I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him. No, we're not doing this. Not until we've tried to find another way. It's wrong Cass. And you know it," Dean said shaking his head vehemently.

Cass took a deep breath, his face in its mask of no emotion though within him he felt... regret, sorrow, guilt; he wasn't sure what it was. Sam and Dean were in turmoil enough as it was and now he must strike the final blow. It tore at him, Dean had been asked for so much already. He feared this would break him completely.

"It gets worse."

"Worse? How can it possibly get worse? Alright hit us with it," Dean fumed.

"Erin must consent for it to work and... Ahriman has information about the seals. He knows which seals Lilith will break next. Before he is destroyed, you must get that information."

"Get information... you don't mean...," Dean breathed in horror his eyes going wide. Castiel wanted him to torture Ahriman while he possessed Erin to retrieve the information he had about the seals. Dean couldn't do it. He'd done it in hell, tortured so many souls he'd lost count to get his own off the demon, Alastair's, rack. Broken and bowed under the torture he'd suffered. The angels had asked it of him once before and he'd agreed. God help him, he hadn't wanted to, but he had. All in the service of heaven. It had done nothing but tear apart what was left of his soul and nearly get him killed.

"Yes," Cass said softly, his gaze sliding away from Dean's.

"You can't possibly... Cass you can't ask this. Not again. I won't do it. I can't," Dean said with a shake of his head, reeling.

"I do not want to," Cass admitted.

"Then don't. We've found a way around things harder than this," Sam said. Cass didn't reply, instead only his eyes betrayed the shame he felt.

"We will find another way to do this. You hear me?" Dean growled, his voice shaking with his conviction and anger. "Now, you are going to go up there and talk to her. You owe her that much. But if she throws you off the roof, I wouldn't blame her, not a bit. And when I say talk, I don't mean, 'I'm sorry' and then disappear. You get me?"

"Yes... okay," Cass agreed, uncharacteristically humble in the face of the news he'd bore and how much more it had affected all of them than he had expected.

"Me and Sam are going to start looking for a way to fix this whole screwed up mess," Dean grumbled sitting down on the couch again and pulling the Gathas into his lap.

"What do I say?"

"You broke it, you fix it," Dean snapped. Cass looked at a loss and began to disappear into thin air to the roof.

"Walk Cass. People don't like angels popping up under their ass."
Cass eased open the roof access door and looked around. He could see Erin, perched on a huge futon, many plush pillows propped around and behind her so it looked like an elevated lounger large enough to fit five people. She had her legs pulled up, her sword balanced on her knee as she cleaned the blade with an oilcloth. Beside her set a whetstone. A grill and patio table with chairs was pushed into the corner adjacent to the futon and between Cass and where Erin was sitting was an empty expanse of roof, perimetered with gym equipment, the rest serving as a practice area for sword work. A thick line of salt ran along the inside edge of the roof and another had been poured along the first set of glass panes enclosing it. He could see why, the panes could be opened out like windows if someone wanted to. On the glass were Erin's oily misguided attempts at demon repellent, marring the view between the roof and the shoreline a stone's throw away.

Feeling hesitant, he walked slowly toward her but his footsteps were so quiet she could not hear him approach. He stopped beside the futon and waited, knowing she knew he was there, trying to figure out what to do. He didn't understand what Dean meant him to say. He had already told her what she really was, why she existed. He could tell her how to kill Ahriman but he didn't think it would make her any happier than it had Dean and Sam. What did Dean think he could say that would 'fix it'.

"What do you want? Come to tell me some more about God's plans for the immortals? Oh, excuse me, nephilim?" she bit without looking up from her work.

"Dean says I should talk to you. I don't know what to say."

Erin shook her head and gave a bitter chuckle, "Imagine that."

"Erin, I am not human. I find all the intricacies of human social interactions tedious and confusing. But, Dean seems to think this is what I should do," Cass explained a bit coarsely.

"And you care what a human thinks you should do?" Erin said pausing in caring for her sword and folding her arms over one knee, the sword dangling from one hand, the oilcloth from the other. Cass shifted from one foot to another. He was unsure how to segue from that.

"Dean was more speculative when he met me. You both lack faith but you are more... accepting," he said walking around the futon to face her.

"Yeah, well when you've just had demons and angels shoved down your throat in the span of a couple of days you don't really have much choice do you?"

"You harbor much anger," Cass remarked.

"Damn right. Two thousand years of nothing but one 'screw you' after another," Erin said, shaking her head. "I just wanted out of the Game. I'm tired of the killing, the bloodshed. I'm tired of losing anyone I ever cared about. All for what? Do you know how many times I prayed for some higher power to tell me why? To save me from the wholesale slaughter and torture Trajan, my teacher, rained down on anyone he felt like doing it to? Three hundred years I prayed and no one answered. So I stopped asking. For three hundred years I fought but then I just couldn't do it anymore. And now, finally, you show up, holiest of holies, and tell me the only thing I'm worth, any immortal is worth, is as heaven's own personal weapon of mass destruction. Guess that's why you never answered, a misbegotten wretch doesn't really deserve to be saved do they?"

"The immortals are not, you are not, misbegotten," Cass said beginning to see the nuances within the
"Could have fooled me," Erin said giving him a long look and then picked her sword back up and began to sharpen the blade.

"Do not confuse your own guilt with the truth. To everything there is a reason, a purpose," he advised. Erin looked up at him sharply.

"Don't you dare say it was all God's plan or so help me I will run you through," she hissed.

"Dean was mistaken. I can't 'fix it since I broke it' if you will not listen," Cass muttered in frustration. He walked away from her but before he could reach the door he heard her call after him.

"Why? Why didn't you just kill us all? Why give us a chance at a mortal life at all, if all you wanted was a weapon? Some cruel angelic joke?"

Cass stopped. "It was considered," he confessed. "Many thought you should be destroyed, that nothing good could come of your existence, but others argued against it. They said it did not seem right to destroy what our brothers had wrought. They argued that you should be given the same chance as full humans, because you have souls."

There was a long moment of quiet before Erin said anything, but Cass could feel her watching him, thinking. He waited.

"And which side were you on?"

"Does it matter?" Cass countered turning back around. She was no longer sharpening her sword, she had her full attention on him.

"No, I suppose it doesn't," Erin said, her shoulders slumped a little and her voice soft. As if she'd hoped for a different answer. He knew then what she wanted, she needed desperately to believe that someone, someone she could hear and see, not just something larger than herself she could barely phantom, cared what happened to her kind, to her. He could give her that. For all their differences, immortals seemed to favor their human sides. Infinitely fallible despite their origins, they needed to believe in something larger than themselves.

"I believed you should be given a chance to prove yourselves."

Erin nodded, pensive and melancholy but she seemed more receptive now than she had been. Perhaps Dean had been right.

"Something I don't understand. If all the immortals, nephilim, were born at the same time. Where do new immortals come from?"

That hadn't been the next thing he'd expected her to say.

"Now you want me to tell you your origin story?" Cass asked in disbelief.

"I need to understand."

Cass considered for a moment, walking back to where she sat and sitting down. He didn't understand but neither did he understand half of what humans did. Humans were so... complex.

"If it will give you peace."

Erin canted her head in gesture of doubt, "I don't know about peace but I need to make sense of it
"Immortals were only born once. When we decided you should not know what you were, your memories were taken. Every time an immortal loses their head without another taking the quickening, their soul and all the souls they hold are returned to the Guff. The well of souls. Then, when it is time, those souls are returned to Earth, to start again with no memory of who or what they were."

Erin's brow crinkled and she looked further confused. "I thought the Guff of souls was supposed to hold all the human souls that would ever exist and when it runs out that Christ would return."

"Each human soul is created uniquely. The Guff was built to hold the souls of nephilim. The Tanakh was incorrect. Human religious texts get more wrong than they do right."

"And when the Guff is empty?"

"Then all the immortals' souls will be on Earth, fighting, until there is only one left."

"Is it empty?"

"No. Not yet."

Erin nodded, "Then there's still a chance."


"To stop the Gathering."

"You cannot stop the Gathering."

"I can try. The rest of us have a right to decide if we want to be God missiles. At the very least I can try to give them a choice or make damn sure the one who wins isn't an evil son of a bitch."

"You can't fight destiny Erin," Cass insisted.

"Watch me," Erin said with conviction.

Cass shook his head in exasperation. "You and Dean Winchester should get along well. He's as determined to stop the apocalypse against impossible odds."

"Then he's a brave man."

"He is that," Cass conceded, "Or a foolish one."

"Well they say fools rush in where angels fear to tread," Erin said. Cass could think of nothing to say to that, not that wouldn't upset her again. Her wish to stop the Gathering would never happen because she had to die to stop Ahriman. Dean and Sam wanted there to be another way but why would Zachariah tell him anything else but the only way to accomplish the task? He wanted Ahriman out of the way, as much as anyone did. They dropped into silence again for a few moments.

"If immortals are not born. Then how do we get here? It's not like we had mothers to carry us for nine months. Most of us just seem to turn up newborn infants, naked in the middle of nowhere, lucky if we don't die of exposure before someone finds us." Erin asked.

"You weren't," Cass said without thinking. Erin gave him a hard look and he realized he had given
himself away and now he couldn't take it back.

"How do you know that? Do you have an encyclopedia of Erin or something?" Erin asked. She only knew how she had been found as a baby because the people who had raised her, the people she had called mother and father had told her, surprised by the care that had been taken for an abandoned infant.

Cass chose to ignore that particular question and answered her first one instead.

"You are," Cass said looking for a term that came close to approximating what he meant to say, "created. When an immortal is to be born, an angel is sent and they pluck the soul from the Guff bringing it to Earth. A fully realized being," he said with awe in his voice.

"Sounds like the voice of experience," Erin said with a heavy note of suspicion. He should have known if he slipped, she would catch it. Erin had always been observant.

"You've done it. Brought down one of us from the Guff. Who was it?" Erin pushed. Cass couldn't lie it wasn't in his nature. He turned his head and looked her firmly in the eye, bright blue eyes vibrant in the moonlight and incandescent lamps of the rooftop.

"You."

Erin looked like someone had slapped her. Eyes wide, mouth slightly slack with surprise. Apparently, she hadn't expected him to say it had been her.

"You put me there? You're the one who wrapped me in blankets and put me in a basket on a doorstep just before dawn?"

Cass felt suddenly uncomfortable, she didn't say it with vehemence she said it with wonder and that unsettled him more than if she had just become angry with him again.

"It was wet outside. It seemed wrong to leave something so helpless without some sort of shelter," he excused looking away, but he could see her smile faintly out of the corner of his eye. It just unnerved him more. That had been a moment of weakness, of emotion he wasn't supposed to have.

"You knocked on the door," Erin pointed out.

"It was cold," Cass excused again. "You like it up here," Cass said changing the subject. It was a statement of fact but Erin took it as a question.

"It's quiet. I can think," she said, watching him with uncomfortable scrutiny now. He just gave up on it. What was the point in denying it? He'd done it, he'd done more than that. What harm would it cause if she knew? It seemed to be what she was looking for.

"No it's more than that. It reminds you of the place you used to go when you were a child. You went there to think too. They call them the Cliffs of Moher now, but then they had no name. You would walk, balanced as close to the edge as you could, certain you would come to no harm but it terrified the man you called father. He feared you would fall and be killed," Cass said with absolute certainty.

"How do you know that?"

"I am an angel of the lord. I know everything there is to know about you," he explained. That wasn't why he knew everything about her but it came close enough. He knew more than just her. He also knew what he couldn't bring himself to tell her. It would only dispirit her further. Christian wasn't just a surrogate brother. Two hundred thirty angels had rebelled and fathered the Immortals with
human women. All of them had sired multiple children. Christian was her little brother, albeit only her half one by way of Gadreel.

Cass wondered if his weakness was why Zachariah had sent him on this particular mission. There were the Winchesters of course, so likely he would have been sent no matter what the mission had been since it involved them. But perhaps, it was also because he knew Erin so very well. She still looked at him with suspicion and a good dose of skepticism.

"You were born on a Thursday. Your favorite color is purple because it reminds you of lavender flowers. You like classic rock music. You sing to it in the shower where no one can hear you, badly. Your favorite poets are Robert Frost and Walt Whitman. You didn't fall from the cliffs of Moher because I was there and you believe that you can never be redeemed for what you did in the service of Tiberius Trajan. That you are a damned soul."

Erin’s face clenched with seventeen hundred years of guilt, her eyes a little glassy with tears that didn’t fall.

"I thought you just dropped us and ran? None of that can make a difference in the grand scheme of God's Immortal super bomb plan. So why would you bother to know about it?" Cass’s eyes shut briefly. It was all or nothing now. He'd have to tell her the truth.

"I walked with you, for a time. I kept you from harm's path when you danced along the Cliffs of Moher. I felt someone should watch over you, at least for a while. You are, in some way, kin. And it would have been me who saved you from Trajan had I known. I would have spared you the pain. I would take the burden from you now if I could," he confessed. He felt, pain and regret that he hadn't been able to do it. That he couldn't now. He hated it when Dean was right.

"Why couldn't you?" Erin asked.

"We have a chain of command. They don't tell me much, Erin. They give the orders, I follow them. It was forbidden."

"Why?" she asked desperately and this question he couldn't answer.

"I don't know."

Cass expected her to become angry again but to his surprise she didn't. She nodded solemnly in acceptance. "You tried. I can't ask more than that."

"I am sorry." Cass said, his brows pulling together. He hadn't expected her to understand. Perhaps he should have. She'd been a soldier, she'd tried and failed to save people she'd cared about in the past. Apparently, it was enough to know someone had wanted to spare her, even if they could not.

"He came for me a few days ago. Trajan. Ahriman sent him as a way of saying hello," Erin said in a quiet voice. Now they were both staring out over the skyline, watching as ships drifted by lazily on the ocean beyond.

"He was not real. You can't raise the spirit of an immortal, their souls are trapped in the immortal who took their head. It was an illusion." Cass offered in solace.

"Yeah? Well he was real enough to make me remember in excruciating detail what my life used to be like. Everything I'd done." Cass winced in sympathy.

"He tortured you. Ahriman wants you to break, to doubt yourself. It will make it easier for him to kill you," he said. His voice was dead pan but he regretted more now than ever what it was he must ask
of her. He still must tell her she had to die and that Dean would have to torture her before she did. He
couldn't. Not right now. Maybe Dean and Sam would find something.

"I never wanted to live forever."

"I know." Cass nodded. "I'm sorry Erin. I'm sorry for all of it," Cass said turning to look at her.

"This doesn't make us friends," Erin said in truce.

"I understand."

"I'm not calling you Uncle." She insisted. Cass looked at her in amusement, though it didn't show in
more than the dance of light in his eyes.

"I suppose that would be awkward."

She smiled at him then and he knew what he must do. What he had to give her. "You have been
awake for days. You need rest," he told her and quick as a thought he reached out with two fingers
and touched her forehead. She slumped onto his shoulder, asleep. He picked her up in his arms as if
she weighted nothing and began the trek back down stairs. Tonight at least, he could give her peace.

###

As Cass pushed through the door of the apartment, Erin's head on his shoulder, Dean and Sam
looked over the back of the couch at him. Sam looked worried and Dean looked smug.

"She tried to throw you off the roof after all?" Dean asked thinking Erin had been too angry to listen
to Castiel's attempts at repairing the rift he'd created and had tried to attack him again, so Cass had
put her to sleep to subdue her.

"No. She needed... peace." Cass said simply and started for the master bedroom. Dean and Sam
looked at each other oddly, as he passed through the door into the bedroom and shut it behind him
with a thought.

"That sounded dirty," he heard Dean snark as he did.

Silently, Cass placed Erin's sleeping form into the king sized bed she loved, with its plush comforter
and soft cotton sheets. He removed her shoes, pulled the covers up over her and watched her a
moment, history repeating itself, for hadn't he done the same thing once before? Then, he left her to
her dreams. For once, they would not plague her; she would sleep soundly in a state of true peace. It
was all he could offer her.

As he came back into the living room, Dean cleared his throat.

"So, uh, is there something you want to tell us or are you just sending hot immortal chicks nite-nite
and then tucking them in for kicks?"

"You have to find another way to kill Ahriman," Cass said sternly, looking at everything but them.

"We're working on it. Wait, why are you suddenly so up for finding another way? I thought you said
there wasn't one?" Sam asked setting aside the Yasna he'd been reading and getting nowhere with.
"We have to try," Cass reaffirmed.

"Had a change of heart Cass?" Dean asked.

"You could call it that," Cass admitted, torn. Again, he was defying orders. Anytime the Winchesters were involved, he questioned himself. Zachariah would not be pleased. Dean looked deeply thoughtful for a moment and then got up from the couch coming around it to face him.

"I can't believe I'm asking you this but, are you okay?"

Cass fought with what to say. He didn't like to appear fallible in the Winchesters' eyes.

"I'm fine. Find another way," he said again headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Dean asked.

"To stand watch," Cass said and disappeared.

"Did we miss something?" Sam asked Dean as they exchanged a confused look.

"Guess so."
Erin rolled over and snuggled deeper into the covers, waking slowly as warm sunlight pouring through her bedroom window warmed her face. She opened her eyes and stretched languidly. She hadn't slept so well in years she thought, maybe centuries, unplagued by dreams that swam with memories of all she hated about herself, all she mourned. Not wanting to lose the feeling of serenity she found herself in Erin wrapped her arms around the pillows and thought she could sleep in for a little while.

She'd had the strangest dream though. Christian possessed by a demon, angels on the doorstep telling her she wasn't what she thought she was, in the company of two men calling themselves hunters. She figured she should have been unsettled by a dream like that but somehow, she wasn't. Very weird dream. One of the hunters had been very handsome though. She wouldn't mind him showing up in another of her dreams as long as it wasn't as odd as this one had been.

Erin was just about to shut her eyes again and see if the good-looking hunter might show up in her next dream as say, a hot car mechanic who'd help her change her spark plugs, when she noticed the clock on her bedside table.

Twelve thirty showed on its digital face. It was a lot later than she thought. With a disgruntled sigh, Erin decided that she really would have to get up. Beth was probably downstairs wondering where she was, having opened the store hours ago, and somehow Erin had managed to sleep through her alarm. She wondered why Beth hadn't called or come knocking when she hadn't turned up but maybe the shop was having one of its rare busy days.

Reluctantly, Erin threw back the covers and sat up, running a hand through her hair. She looked down at herself and saw she was still clothed, in the same clothes she'd worn in her dream. Why was she still dressed? Where were her pajamas? Erin immediately looked around on all her bedroom surfaces for a collection of empty rum bottles. Had she been on a bender last night and forgotten about it? Maybe Christian had been right when he told her, her habit of indulging in too much rum a little too often would take its toll one day. Her gaze landed on the sill of her window and the salt that had been poured there and it hit her.

"On no," she breathed in dread as it came flooding back with terrible clarity. She hadn't been dreaming after all. Automatically, she checked for her sword beside her bed but it wasn't there where she usually kept it as she slept. Erin got up and padded for the door, taking a deep breath and opened it. Maybe she'd be wrong and it would still all be a dream.

"Good afternoon sunshine. We were beginning to think you were going to sleep all day," Dean greeted perched in the same chair Erin had sat in the night before, a gun field stripped on the end table beside him as he cleaned it. The room was strewn with equipment and weapons in various states of readiness. They were getting ready for a fight.

"Sorry about the mess, brought our gear up," Dean added.

Cass stood over Sam's shoulder reading along, hands in his coat pockets as Sam poured over the Gathas she'd borrowed from the university library. Sam looked up from his work a moment to acknowledge her.

"Hey. There's coffee in the kitchen."

"Damn it," she cursed bitterly.
"Well, aren't you a grouch when you wake up," Dean quipped reassembling the gun.

"Something wrong Erin?" Sam asked concerned.

"I was hoping I dreamed you," she grumbled.

"You did not dream us," Cass promised her, with his usual stoic facade back in place.

"Speak for yourself Cass, she can dream about me all she wants," Dean joked with a sly smile.

Erin arched a brow and scoffed in amusement at the older hunter's not so subtle innuendo. She appreciated his bold approach for some reason and his infectious smile didn't hurt. She liked a man who could find humor in even the most dire situation. Of course, she also enjoyed giving as good as she got and you took what you could where you found it when the world was falling down around you.

"Oh? But would the dream compare to the real thing?" Erin cracked back with a sly grin of her own. Dean's eyebrows went up. The girl had a quick tongue, he liked that.

"Ow," Sam said laughing at his brother's failed flirting. Cass watched in mild confusion, once again mystified by the double entendre and hidden meanings of human social dances. Dean shot Sam a dirty look for his trouble and replaced the last piece of the gun, Erin's. He'd cleaned it along with their weapons while she slept, since he still had it stashed in his pocket. He slid off the arm of the chair and swaggered over to Erin, holding it out for her.

"Thought you might want that back," he said. As soon as she put her hand on it he used it as an excuse to step forward and whisper loudly in her ear. "We could always find out." When he stepped back, she had a satisfyingly intrigued but slightly bashful expression on her face.

Erin looked him up and down once appraisingly and smiled, then lost her nerve to quip back. "You said there was coffee?" she said nonchalantly, but Dean had a self-satisfied smirk on as she made for the kitchen before she could turned red. Dean had won that tête-à-tête hands down and he knew it. She'd set herself up for that one.

Sam shook his head and laughed, "Unbelievable."

Still confused by what had just happened Cass asked him, "What do they want to find out?"

"They don't...," Sam said trying to phrase it so the still socially awkward angel would get it, "They like each other."

"I'm right here dude," Dean complained as he resumed his seat in the chair.

"That is good. They will work better together if they are comfortable in each others company," Cass observed.

"Oh, I bet we could get real comfortable together," Dean muttered to himself. Sam choked on the mouthful of coffee he had just taken and forced himself not to laugh. Sometimes Cass just didn't get things.

"They like like each other," Sam tried to explain again.

"That makes no sense, it's redundant."

"Biblically Cass," Sam elaborated.
"Guys I am right here," Dean stressed again, picking up a sawed off to clean.

Cass could only raise his eyebrows slightly in surprise at Sam's revelation, "I understand now."

###

A few minutes later Erin came back with a large mug of coffee and a bagel slathered with cream cheese. "I see you found your way around the kitchen," she observed as she took a seat on the end of the couch opposite Sam and sipped the coffee.

"I hope you don't mind, you were asleep and the stuff to make coffee was just sitting there in the open," Sam began to apologize realizing she might see it as impolite to have helped themselves.

"No, no. It's fine. Make yourselves at home. Who am I to refuse food and drink to people who are trying to help me save my brother from a demon?" Erin dismissed, taking an ample bite out of her bagel. Only now did she realize it had been days since she'd eaten she'd been so wrapped up trying to find a way to save Christian from Ahriman. Sam and Dean exchanged looks and then both shot Cass a hard look, he had the decency to look guilty.

"You didn't tell her?" Sam asked. Erin swallowed her bite of bagel and tried to figure out what they were talking about. She had begun to accept that a higher power had screwed her kind royally, not that she was about to bow down and accept it, she'd fight it tooth and nail, stop it if she could. But here and now she had to find a way to get Ahriman out of her brother, then she'd figure out what to do about being God's weapons of war. What was Castiel supposed to tell her he hadn't?

"Didn't tell me what?"

"I couldn't," Cass said in abashment.

"You couldn't? Cass...," Dean admonished but Castiel cut him off before he could finish.

"I thought we agreed to find another way?"

"Another way to what?" Erin asked.

"We did Cass. And we're going to try, but if we can't, she has to know what she's facing," Dean insisted.

"Excuse me, would someone like to tell me what's going on?" Erin interrupted again, the bagel and her hunger forgotten.

"You had much food for thought last night. I didn't want to upset you further," Cass explained. Erin gazed back at him expectantly and he found he couldn't say the words. They just wouldn't come. He'd already torn her world apart, he couldn't do it again. Sam and Dean saw that he either couldn't or wouldn't and stepped in.

"Erin, we're going to try and find a way around it I promise but," Sam explained pausing in his own hesitance to tell someone they might have to kill their family and die horribly. "To kill Ahriman you might have to die. It may be the only way."

Erin blinked. "I'm sorry? I thought those were supposed to kill him?" she said, sweeping her hand in
the direction of vial, ring and knife Cass had brought them.

"They only make it possible to kill him. They don't actually do it. If we can't find another way to kill him we'd need you, Sam said sadly.

Then, Sam and Dean told her everything. They told her how the Devil's Gate opening had triggered the countdown to the apocalypse and that they were trying to stop Lilith from breaking the sixty six seals to prevent it from coming, to prevent Lucifer from getting out of his cage. They told her that Ahriman was intent on making sure they didn't succeed, that neither side in the war between heaven and hell succeeded, by killing them both, as a nice aside to getting his revenge on Duncan MacLeod. They told her how Ahriman had information on the next seal Lilith would break and how important it was they find out so she could be stopped. And then they told her how the weapons worked and that the only way to kill Ahriman might be to kill Christian, force Ahriman to possess her, and then kill her and Ahriman with her. Neither could bring themselves to tell her that Cass had asked Dean to torture her while she was possessed by Ahriman to get the information about the seals, even if Dean had flat refused.

"The hits just keep on coming don't they?" Erin said when they'd finished. Sam and Dean both felt terrible that they'd had to tell her but it couldn't be helped. Erin shook her head fervently with absolute conviction, "No. I'd die to save Christian or Duncan in a second but I cannot kill Christian. I won't. He's my brother. I've been fighting to find a way to save him and you think I'm just going to say to hell with it and take his head? No. Never."

Again, Erin was struck by the same possibility she herself had already thought about but refused to entertain. The same thing Methos had insisted was the only way. Ahriman's ultimate target was Duncan, he'd possessed Christian. It was Sophie's choice. If she didn't consent to the terms to destroy him and Ahriman killed her as he planned, Christian would still be possessed and Duncan would still die, along with everyone else he cared for, then Sam and Dean, leaving the apocalypse an open door to walk through. If she did agree, she and Christian wouldn't just die, they would be utterly destroyed. Either choice was unthinkable. She wanted to rail, to scream, to tell all of them to get out but there had to be another way and the Winchesters were her only hope of finding one. And for some reason she couldn't begin to phantom she trusted Sam and Dean and most amazingly, Castiel.

Dean felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach. Sam had the same expression. She was like them. She'd do anything save the ones she loved. But she couldn't kill her brother. It wasn't in her. It imbued a great amount of respect for her in Dean and a tremendous amount of sympathy. She was in the same position they had been in many times. Cass had said nothing during the entire exchange. Dean had the feeling more was going on with him than he or Sam knew and that whatever it was involved Erin. He'd rarely seen the angel so seemingly torn.

"We will find another way. So help me God we will," Dean promised forcefully. Erin looked at him then with such clarity Dean was stunned by it.

"Then where do we start?" she asked, her voice hard as steel and as immovable, giving herself over to their expertise.

Dean and Sam were surprised by Erin's resolute acceptance of the situation. They'd expected her to rail at them or at least at Cass.

"When Erin makes up her mind, nothing can sway her from her path," Cass offered in explanation. It didn't occur to either of the brothers to wonder why it was Cass seemed to know that. Dean, felt a warm prickle on his skin. Nothing he liked more than a woman of action.
Hours later, showered and fed, Sam was buried again in the Gathas and the Yasna looking for a possible lead and Dean was grilling Erin on Demon killing 101 while they finished prepping all their weapons, since her best attempts so far had been luck. Sure she'd seen a few things, they even discovered she knew how to call or kill a few more obscure monsters but she had no real idea how Hunter's did their job and she'd need to, just in case they found a way to take Ahriman out in a more conventional manner. Cass had taken an abrupt exit to confer with Zachariah on possible alternatives.

Erin was sitting on the floor with one of their 9mm's stripped in front of her with a cleaning brush down the barrel, her hair loose around her shoulders in still damp waves, dressed in jeans, a t-shirt and a pair of low biker boots with a dagger tucked into the top of each, as Dean threw questions at her. She no longer looked like the stylish book dealer they'd met, now she looked like what she was, a fighter hell bent on kicking the bad guy's ass her way and damn what anyone else said.

Dean was about done with the machete he was sharpening. He, like his brother, was dressed as they always were when they weren't impersonating some form of law enforcement. T-shirt, jeans, work boots. Okay maybe not exactly the same. Sam favored clothes that looked a little more... how would Dean describe it? Civilized? Softer? Less like a demon killing, monster hunting bad ass? But, just barely.

"So, one more time, you use what to put a hurt on a demon?" he asked.

"Salt, holy water or salt rock rounds," Erin answered, trading the barrel for a different piece of the gun, beside her *The Lesser Key of Solomon* was open to a depiction of a Devil's Trap.

"How do you keep them out of a room?"

"Salt lines at the entrances and windows."

"How do you get rid of them?"

"The demon killing knife or an exorcism."

"Okay and how do you trap them?"

"Devil's trap."

"Good," Dean said. Erin learned quickly but he supposed she had to. As an immortal one bad day, one misstep, meant losing her head; her brother's life was on the line and possibly hers. He still felt like his father, John, teaching someone how to kill the big bads out there. He set down the machete he'd just finished with and didn't see anything else. They'd worked their way through all of Dean and Sam's regular arsenal. Of course, there was a plethora more in the trunk of the Impala they hadn't brought upstairs while Erin slept.

"Just so you know," he said putting away the machete, "The crucifixes and crosses you were drawing with oil won't work. Blessed by a priest or not. The water gun doesn't get enough holy water on them at a time to do more than really piss 'em off."

"Okay," Erin said snapping the slide back onto the now clean gun. Dean looked for something else to work on, Erin's sword was propped against the entertainment center behind Erin, where an episode of *Dr. Sexy M.D.* whispered in the background, and he reached for it. Erin saw him.
"Don't," she warned. Dean, who'd only been methodically working his way through any weapon that came to hand out of instinct and habit, looked surprised.

"Oh, it's no big deal. I don't mind," Dean assured her.

"But, I do," Erin insisted gently but firmly.

Dean held his hands up in a hands off gesture, "Okay. I get it. Don't touch the lady's sword."

"Apparently she's as bad about her sword as you are about the Impala Dean. Must be different when the shoe's on the other foot huh?" Sam teased looking up from his work briefly. He was in the middle of translating a chunk of text that might prove to be useful. Erin was probably as capable at doing it as he was, but she was better served learning how to kill demons while he did the research.

"No offense. But an Immortal's sword is a part of them. It goes everywhere I do."

"None taken," Dean said in understanding but glaring at his brother for picking on him.

"Just tell me you don't sleep with it like Dean does his gun," Sam said in jest.

"Perfectly reasonable precaution," Dean pointed out. Erin just looked at Sam.

"How do you sleep with that thing in the bed?" Sam asked incredulous as he realized the look meant she did sleep with it.

Dean grinned. "She's an Immortal Sammy. What's she supposed to do if another Immortal shows up in the middle of the night? Gank him with a pillow?"

"It's usually under the edge of the bed," Erin said, sighting down the barrel of the gun to make sure everything was aligned.

"That happens?" Sam asked. Erin inclined her head in the affirmative.

"Sometimes, especially if they have a grudge against you or they're hunting."

"Hunting? Just to be doing it?"

"Head hunting. Some Immortals do nothing but head hunt. Not being on guard at all times can lose you your head in my world."

"All the time? Can't you take a break or something?" Sam asked.

"Some of us try. It never works. Some try to find sanctuary on holy ground, but you can't stay there forever. You could be going to the grocery store and run into another Immortal itching for a fight. Other times, we try to remove ourselves from the Game. That never works either. It always finds you. Might take three hundred years might take three but sooner or later, another Immortal is going to come hunting your head. I know, I've tried. More than once," Erin confessed. Sam felt sorry for her. Immortals had it as bad as Hunters. Once you were in, it was for life. You couldn't just decide you were tired of it and retire. "I'm sorry. If it's any consolation Hunters don't have it any easier in that department," Sam said sincerely.

Erin shook her head. "Not your fault. Don't mind me, I can't imagine running around hunting demons and whatever else you two tangle with. The Gathering isn't even a skirmish compared to trying to stop the apocalypse. Seems we're all victims of a capricious God," she said, but her voice held a deeply bitter note. She was still angry about the revelations she'd learned. Neither of them..."
"Well, that's all the weapons then," Dean announced. Erin handed over the 9mm reassembled and got up. "No it's not," she said and padded off to her bedroom.

She returned a few moments later pulling the trunk from her closet. Sam and Dean rushed over to help her carry the monstrosity. It had to weigh a ton. They set it close to the coffee table and Erin flipped back the lid. Dean and Sam gaped at the arsenal of weapons and gadgets inside. Sam hadn't expected anyone who wasn't in their line of work or a demented serial killer to have anything like it. Dean was gaping out of sheer delight at the contents. There was a luger, a colt .45, innumerable knives and daggers, two swords and most drool worthy of all a Tommy gun and a Sten gun. Erin smiled at their reactions.

"You didn't think I'd spent my whole life being a book dealer did you?"

"Nice haul," Dean remarked, admiring some of the pieces. Girl with guns. He liked that.

"Relics of a misspent youth," Erin joked.

"If you're immortal what do you need with all of these?" Sam asked.

"Well, some immortals don't fight by the rules for one and for another I've done a lot more than sell old books in my life. Car thief, ran a chop shop at one point, solider, other illicit activities," Erin confessed with a touch of chagrin, not wishing to elaborate.

"Soldier?" Dean asked.

"World War II. I was with the French Resistance."

"Wow," Dean said.

"How old are you?" Sam breathed. Dean elbowed him in the ribs.

"You aren't supposed to ask a woman her age, idiot."

Erin laughed and answered Sam, "I'll be one thousand nine hundred and fifty seven this September." Sam couldn't think of a response to that, that wasn't lame. Dean did it for him.

"Well, uh, you look great," he said and then cut himself off before he said anything else embarrassing.

"For a one thousand nine hundred and fifty six year old?" Erin quipped back. "You're not so bad yourself." Dean grinned at her and she grinned back with a gleam in her eye. The more he was around Erin the more he liked her, two thousand year old Immortal or not.

"Go ahead dig in," Erin encouraged breaking the moment before it became awkward.

"I thought you didn't want anyone touching your weapons?" Sam said.

"Just my sword... and my car. No one touches the car," Erin said.

"That an Immortal thing too?" Sam joked.

"No. That's just an Erin thing," she laughed.

As Dean and Sam, perused the trove of weapons Erin owned, the strains of an incredibly chipper
and incredibly annoying song started to play. They all looked at each other. It was someone's cell phone and Dean and Sam wouldn't have been caught dead with the Gummy Bear song as a ring tone.

"It's not us," Sam said. Erin looked very uncomfortable, trying for just a moment to pretend she hadn't heard it.

"The Gummy Bear song? Really?" Dean teased. Erin turned scarlet and fumbled in her pants pocket for her phone.

"Beth must have changed my ring tone when I wasn't looking," she insisted truthfully, as she flipped the phone open and answered. Beth loved pulling things like that on her. They were good friends, had been for three years, since Erin had come back to this place. "Hello? Joe?"

###

Castiel found Zachariah with relative ease. The heaven he was borrowing was lackluster by any standards, the paradise of a CEO of a fortune five hundred company who'd jumped from a seventeen story building to his death when the company went bust. It was an executive corner office with a view of the New York skyline and Zachariah was perched in the leather chair behind the large desk, his feet propped up on the corner looking out the window, casually.

"You're back. I assume that means we can rest easy knowing it's done?" Zachariah said, pulling his feet off the desk and swiveling the chair around to face Castiel. Cass didn't beat around the bush he got straight to the point.

"No," he admitted. "Is there anything you know that could kill Ahriman without Erin having to kill her brother and herself?" Zachariah's brows furrowed and he frowned.

"Excuse me? You can't be serious. No, there's no other way. Now get back down there and get her to do what she is supposed to."

"The boys are reluctant to sacrifice an innocent to accomplish the job," Cass said, "So am I."

Zachariah looked at him with disbelief.

"Innocent? She's a nephilim, she's no innocent. They're abominations, pale imitations who should have been wiped out to begin with. If the Winchesters won't cooperate then remove them from the situation," he said with venomous exasperation. Cass looked at the elder angel hard in consideration when he said it. Something seemed even more off to him, than it had when Zachariah had sent him on this mission.

"I don't think they are Zachariah. They are distant kin. Our nieces and nephews if you will. Doesn't that matter to you? God had mercy on them. He gave them a chance. Are you contradicting what our Father proclaimed?"

"No. Of course not. Doesn't matter either way, it's a foregone conclusion," Zachariah insisted with just a little too much force. Cass was beginning to think there was something he wasn't telling him.

"She has a name," Cass pointed out, petulant.

"Oh, don't tell me you're getting attached?" Zachariah said with disdain getting up from the chair and
coming around the desk to stand before him.

"Why? Why did you send me on this mission? You know I shepherded her. Why does she have to
die?"

"Castiel, first her, then the Winchesters. You really are prone to sentimentality lately aren't you? You
were the best one for the job, simple as that. She has to die because that's just the way it is. It's
prophecy Castiel. You can't buck prophecy. Even as we speak your gaggle of pets are finding out
about it."

"Why wasn't I told this before now?" Cass asked darkly. He could see no reason not to have told
him. If it was a prophecy and by extension unavoidable, no matter what anyone did, why not tell
him? For that matter, he had the names of every prophet etched into his brain, every scrap of
religious prophecy and scripture stored there. He should have known. The only way he wouldn't
have is if his bosses had deliberately kept it from him but for what reason?

"You didn't need to know. Ahriman knows which seals Lilith will break next and we need that
information. All you need to know is you have to get her to consent and she has die. Ahriman is
killed and we all go back to saving seals," Zachariah said with an open gesture of his hands.

"If it's a prophecy why must Erin consent? Why do I have to convince her to? If it's a foregone
conclusion, as you say, it shouldn't matter. What exactly does the prophecy say?" Cass pressed,
stepping forward toward Zachariah menacingly.

"Why don't you run back to your howler monkeys and find out?" Zachariah taunted angry. Cass had
hit on something but he wasn't sure what. He knew it had to do with the prophecy but not why.

"Zachariah. Is this mission, God's will? Or yours?" Cass asked. Zachariah's jaw tensed and he took a
moment to answer.

"Don't you dare question me. She has to die. You have to get her to consent. She is too big a risk,"
Zachariah spat truly showing his anger at Cass.

"A risk to what?" Cass pressed, advancing on Zachariah until he was nose to nose with him. There
was more to this. Something big Zachariah was trying to accomplish. If it was God's Will, if it was
just, there was no reason why Cass shouldn't now about it.

"Nothing. You have your orders. Do your job Castiel. Do you understand?"

Cass looked back at Zachariah unblinking.

"I understand."

Cass understood perfectly. He understood that Zachariah was manipulating the situation for his own
gain somehow. Now he just had to figure out why, before it was too late.

###

Dean shook his head and laughed at Erin and Sam, satisfied with his brief view of Erin's weapons
collection since that was more Dean's thing, returned to his translation. Both could hear Erin's side of
the conversation.
"What?" she said in stunned surprise. "They didn't listen when you warned them to have him taken off me?" "Damn." There was a long pause then and Dean watched as all the color drained from Erin's face. "What do you mean you can't reach him?" "This is bad Joe. If you can't reach him... God, I hope he's not coming here." "Yeah I know." "I've got some... specialists... working on it with me." "I'm trying. If you hear from him tell him to go home. Tell him I said go home." "I know Joe. Thanks for letting me know."

Erin closed the phone and ran her hand over her face.

"Bad news?" Sam asked.

"Was that the Joe? Joe Dawson?" Dean asked at the same time a little bit star struck, the Tommy gun he'd been ogling limp in his hands.

"Yes on both counts," Erin told them, "Michael Edwards, my Watcher, is dead. Ahriman got him. Car crash at a hundred and twenty on A1A, he had Ahriman's named etched into his forehead. So is a gun storeowner down on Military Trail. He had the pleasure of being boiled in his skin. Guess we know where Ahriman got a gun now. The Watcher's managed to get it cleaned up before the authorities caught it."

"Damn it!" Erin spat angrily. "The Watchers even tried to get the poor old guy out. He never had a chance."

"I'm sorry. Was he a friend of yours?" Sam offered. Erin shook her head.

"No. I didn't even know who he was until a couple of days ago. I was afraid of this. I tried to warn Joe in time, I guess it wasn't enough. One more casualty to add to the list," Erin cursed, clenching the phone until Dean could hear the plastic groan.

"It's not your fault," Dean tried to tell her.

"Yes it is," she growled and shot Dean such a fiery glare for even suggesting it wasn't, he clamped his mouth shut. There was no way of arguing that with someone when they were that set on accepting the guilt. He knew, he did it often.

"We have more problems. Methos is probably on his way here. I knew that already, but Duncan may be too. Joe can't get a hold of him. They're walking right into Ahriman's waiting jaws and I can't stop them. I can't stop any of it. Everyone I care about is just lining up for the execution like good little sheep and they don't even know it," Erin snapped. Sam and Dean knew she wasn't snapping at them, she just felt helpless.

"Hey, it's not your fault," Dean hazarded again. "You can't save everyone. No matter how hard you try. We've had it happen to us."

Erin paced in a tight circle, her teeth gritted in fury, hands buried in her hair as her emotions built to a fever peak. She traced her steps twice and then snapped, her pent up anger consuming her, sending a small decorative table over on its side with a clatter and all the tiny antique glass pieces on top of it went careening across the room like projectiles with a roar of rage. Dean and Sam ducked to avoid being hit.

As soon as Dean was fairly sure he wasn't going to get hit with broken glass he was on his feet. Cautiously, he approached Erin, who's shoulders heaved with harsh breath, fists clenched at her side, teeth gritted until it hurt, with arms out as if he were trying to calm a enraged wildcat.

"Whoa, whoa." He soothed. She moved her head in desperate way, her eyes squeezed shut. Dean
risked putting a hand on her shoulder. "It's not your fault," Dean told her in a soft, deep voice. He understood what she was feeling. Nothing she could do would do any good right now except killing her brother and herself. It was a no win situation. No one could be a rock through those circumstances. She was torn and lost. For just a moment, he felt she might break and burst into tears but she didn't.

Sam, judged that Dean had the situation under control and he should probably just pretend he wasn't seeing this, so he lowered his eye to the books again but he felt the same way Dean did. They could both relate.

"God damn angels and their God damn plans. I hate them, all of them!" she railed so loud it was a hoarse roar. "Cass too?" Dean asked. He understood her rage but Cass was trying to help.

"No," she assented softly, "Not Castiel."

"Cass," Dean corrected, "Nobody calls him Castiel."

"All the people Ahriman has already killed. All the innocent lives and I don't understand why. And I can't do anything about it. They had nothing to do with Duncan or me. Now Micheal Edwards. He's doing exactly what he promised, killing everyone I care about," Erin said in a harsh voice.

"We're going to kill the bastard," Dean assured her.

"I gave Beth the week off, told her to get out of town take a vacation maybe," Erin went on spilling her emotions in an uncharacteristic display of vulnerability. Then it hit her. Michael Edwards hadn't been lucky enough to escape Ahriman's wrath, Beth might not have been either. "Beth," she breathed and flipped out her phone, dialing Beth's number.

"Who's Beth?" Dean asked.

"She works in the book shop. She's a friend, probably the closest mortal friend I have. I have to make sure she's alright."

###

Ahriman gazed up at the second story of Between the Lines from an immortal sensing proof distance; it was a small drawback to possessing one of them. The ability to feel each other was innate and he couldn't tamp it down but it was a small inconvenience. He could see the Winchesters and Erin moving through the windows. Preparing to try to fight him, then Erin got a phone call and sent a table flying. Then, just as he'd known she would she crumpled like the weak soul she was into Dean Winchester's arms. So typical of her, looking for solace anywhere she could find it. If she only knew what he did. So much more to his plans no one knew about. He hadn't expected this would be so much fun.

He paused and looked at his watch. Just a little while longer and everyone would be in place. All he had to do was wait while they walked straight down the path he'd laid for them, dancing to his drum without even hearing the beat. Clueless, stupid creatures that they were. Ah, it was good to be a demon.
Ruby watched *Between the Lines* from across the street, hidden in her shadowed position, just beyond the circle of light cast by the corner street lamp. On another corner, out of Immortal sensing range, stood Ahriman in his angelic bastard meat suit. He looked at his watch and smiled deviously. He had something up his sleeve and Ruby knew it. She waited. The opportune moment would present itself. He'd make a move, the Winchesters, the nephilim and the angel on their shoulders would rush in and she'd be there to save the day, just in the nick of time.

She had to do this carefully. Dean didn't trust her, Castiel wouldn't either, Erin really wouldn't, given her very recent and very violent introduction to demon kind but, Sam would and when she was the one who saved their necks she'd be right where she wanted to be. They were playing their parts like they were following a script. All she had to do was wait.
Erin cursed; she'd called Beth's cell phone. All she got was her friend's voice mail proclaiming in a chipper voice that she couldn't come to the phone right then and to please leave a message. Frustrated she flipped the phone closed and paced the length of the room. Dean watched her, sitting in one of the living room chairs, and wished he could tell her it would all be all right but he knew better and he knew she did too.

"I think I've got something," Sam announced as he finished translating the last part of the text he'd been working on. Erin and Dean immediately gathered around to see what he'd found but he never got to tell them what. Suddenly that crawling sensation flashed over Erin's brain again that screamed, "Immortal!" She turned her head toward the door automatically and she sprang for her sword, hand closing on her hilt out of long habit. Sam and Dean looked at her and then at the sword.

"What is it?" Dean asked. Erin stood up already slipping into battle mode, sword ready.

"Someone with a long life line," she said edging for the door.

"An Immortal?" Sam asked. Dean picked up his colt 1911 and checked the clip without preamble. Sam grabbed the sawed off and threw salt rock rounds into it. They had no way of knowing which immortal Erin was sensing, best be prepared. Dean being the guy he was, started to supersede Erin to the door and she put out her sword blade to stop him.

"Wait here. We don't know who it is. I doubt it, but it could just be someone head hunting. If it is you cannot interfere," She warned. Disgruntled Dean wavered warring with the inborn desire to do something, standing idly by wasn't something he did but he stepped back and let her pass keeping the gun trained on the door. Sam took up a position beside him and they waited. If it was Christian/Ahriman they'd give him hell, even if they couldn't kill him.

Quiet as a cat, Erin slide up to the door, sword along her thigh. The sound of a loud knock came just as she reached it. She slide back the chain lock and threw the deadbolt then pushed the door open and swung into the space it left at the same time, sword up. The tip of it made a soft 'shing' as it touched the blades already extended on the other side to meet her own.

"Expecting company?" Duncan, asked with smug sarcasm, "Sorry for the sharp entrance but we didn't know if we'd find you or Christian standing over your headless body." He looked exactly like his actor counterpart, but unlike Adrian Paul he hadn't aged a day. He still looked as young as the man who portrayed him had the day the series hit the screen. An eternal thirty year old, his black hair cut short, features still defined and not ravaged by age. Erin groaned in frustration and lowered her sword, so did they.

"What part of 'Don't tell Duncan' didn't you get Methos?" She snapped at the slighter immortal. Methos shrugged and stashed his sword back in his coat. He, like Duncan, was a younger copy than the actor who portrayed him, was today. Still frozen in the visage of a man in his late thirties, brown hair constantly slightly askew as if, no matter what he did, it defied him and did what it wanted to.

"Mac's a bright boy. He figured it out all by himself." He said sardonically.

"You shouldn't have let him come!" Erin insisted.

"This is MacLeod we're talking about. What was I supposed to do? Shoot him and stick him in a box until this was over?" Methos countered.
"Yes!" Erin said in exasperation.

"Tried that. He wasn't real big on the idea."

"What you thought I'd just sit at home in Paris, knowing what was going on?" Duncan put in.

Erin sighed heavily and stepped back motioning them to come inside. They stepped through and looked around. Methos noticed the room was still strewn with the remnant of the glass baubles Erin had shattered in her fit of helpless anger. He also noticed Dean and Sam. Dean lowered his gun and motioned for Sam to do the same. Sam followed his example after a moment and wondered at the expression on his brother's face. Dean was in awe. Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod and Methos, oldest of the immortals were standing right there in the flesh. That was pure awesome.

"Should we say mazel tov or were you just redecorating?" he quipped looking at the shattered glass and pushing a piece of it with the toe of his shoe. Erin rolled her eyes at him. Then he turned his gaze on Dean and Sam. "Taking them two at a time now? Or is this like that time in Tripoli with the crock of honey?" Erin gave him a put upon look for his trouble and Methos gave her an impish smile in return.

Dean did a double take wondering seriously, what Methos meant about Tripoli and crocks of honey. It sounded decidedly kinky to him. Kinky could be good, Dean could handle kinky.

"Duncan, Methos this is Sam and Dean Winchester," Erin introduced, ignoring Methos's attempts to goad her. Duncan put out his hand like a gentleman and Dean took it with a large grin.

"Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod," he said in rather star struck voice.

Duncan gave him slightly embarrassed smile. "Uh, yeah."

"Oh great, another one of those," Methos complained as Duncan shook Sam's hand. "Just blurt ing out that we really exist to anyone these days are we Erin? Kind of defeats the purpose of the TV show don't you think?"

Erin ignored him, "They're helping me with Christian and Ahriman."

"Erin, I came to help you save Christian. You don't know what you're dealing with," Duncan said.

"Them? They're still wet behind the ears," Methos ridiculed.

"Hey, watch it. We're not as wet behind the ears as you think we are," Dean snapped, piqued by Methos's assumption without the proof to back it up.

"You're mortal. All you are going to do is get yourselves killed and probably Erin with you while she tries to keep you alive," Methos retorted.

"This is what we do. We hunt and kill demons. Now I know you're supposed to be the oldest immortal and all but know what you're talking about before you go shooting your mouth off," Dean bit back.

"You listen to me you little sniveling brat," Methos growled, intending to tell the boy exactly how dangerous a situation he was in with Ahriman but Erin stepped in.

"That's enough. It's the other way around. I do know what I'm dealing with and so do they. So, as you can see I can take care of myself and Christian. I don't need your help Duncan."
"I told you she didn't want you here," Methos said to Duncan in an I-told-you-so manner. Duncan gave him a sidelong glare for it.

"No you don't. I'm the one who's supposed to defeat Ahriman. There's even a prophecy about it! We'll find a way to get him out of Christian if he's possessed him. I've done it once I can do it again. You can't fight Ahriman that just makes him stronger. You have to give in, refuse to. Accept that evil is a part of who you are. He's powerless then," Duncan insisted.

"Oh buddy do you have it wrong," Sam muttered.

"That was before he was walking the Earth in Christian's body. He couldn't do then the things he can now. This isn't like when you fought him. He sent Trajan after me Duncan," Erin argued.

"He's messing with your mind Erin. That's what he does. It wasn't real," Duncan told her.

"Well it felt pretty damn real to me. He can manifest things now. I did not hallucinate being torn apart like a meaty bone thrown to a pack of hungry wolves."

Sam and Dean winced at the mental image that caused. Neither had known that had happened, it sounded gruesome to say the least.

"Erin, you can't fight him alone," Duncan pleaded.

"I can and I will. Now go home."

"That's good enough for me," Methos said dropping an arm around Duncan's shoulders to lead him to the door.

"No," Duncan said slipping from Methos's grasp and rounding on Erin again.

"Do you see what I'm dealing with here?" Methos exclaimed.

"This is my fight not yours," Erin explained.

"Yes it is. I'm the champion Erin. You can't fight him alone," Duncan insisted.

"You were the champion. It's someone else's turn now," Methos reasoned.

"I have to help her. Christian's her student. I can't let her go through what I went through with Richie!" Duncan protested.

"She doesn't want your help. You aren't the hero in this story MacLeod," Methos said.

"I can't just let her fight him alone!" Duncan reiterated. Methos and Erin both threw their hands up in exasperation with the Highlander.

"Okay look. Ahriman is majorly pissed you sent him back to hell the first time. That's what this is, he wants revenge. First, he kills Erin and any one she cares about, then anyone else you care about and then he kills you. That's his whole game plan. Erin is trying to save your ass. Why don't you go home or where ever you came from and let her do it? Let us do our jobs," Dean interrupted refraining from adding anything that didn't directly relate to what the other two Immortals would already know. Erin had deliberately refrained from it herself and he bet she had good reason for it.

"Kid's not as stupid as I thought he was," Methos commented.

"You cannot be in this fight. You're too important," Erin said hoping that would persuade him. It
"Yes I can," Duncan pushed.

"No you can't," Sam put in. All of them looked at him surprised by the force of the statement. "Methos is right. You aren't the hero in this story. You aren't the only one with a prophecy," Sam explained fetching the notepad he'd been working on.

"I've read the prophecy with you in it," Sam told Duncan. "You are always referred to as The Champion. There's no champion in this one. Listen," he said and began to read aloud, "From the annals of time a sinner will come to do battle with him. Aided by three wise men, the sinner will rise and slay their brother in the name of all that is holy. These three shall be the trinity of god, angel, and demon. As two shall bend so shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces. With these pieces and faith alone shall the sinner consume him and he be destroyed by the power of God. So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true."

"Kinda vague isn't it?" Dean said. Sam shrugged. It was a little esoteric to be sure but he hadn't had time to work out the full meaning in less obtuse terms yet. As it stood it sounded hopeless, it confirmed everything Cass had already told them. It didn't look good.

"That could be anyone, we're all sinners. Angels and demons? You have to be kidding me," Duncan scoffed.

"He's not Duncan. You're The One. You always were. I know it. Methos knows it. We've all believed it was destined to be you for years and now I've got it on good authority that we're right. You can't be in this. This is my fight. Not yours," Erin argued. Duncan was a belligerent man. His heart was in the right place but he always had to play the hero. Convincing him that he wasn't always the hero was just about impossible.


"I told you you'd have to kill Christian," Methos said.

"I am not killing him Methos," Erin snarled.

"What more proof do you need?" Methos reasoned. Erin scowled deeply, he had told her. The Winchesters and Cass had told her. But she refused to go along with it. Was she wrong? Look how many were already dead because of Ahriman. Was she being selfish trying to save Christian's life when so many others were on the line.

"No," Erin said refuting him.

"Don't make me do this Erin," Methos pleaded.

"Do what?" Duncan asked, but Methos was already in motion, with a flick of his wrist he'd drawn his sword and swung it at Erin not giving Duncan the chance to argue the decision as he knew the Scot would. Once blades crossed, he wouldn't interfere. Erin saw it and brought her own sword up to block the blow, catching his blade on hers.

"Whoa! Hold on a minute!" Dean protested.

"If you won't kill Christian I will. You have to choose. Christian or Duncan. You're being sentimental and I understand, I do. You of all people, know I do. Because you've put me in the same
position. He's your student, your brother. You love him. But he can't be saved. You know that. If you won't stand against him and do the right thing he will kill you and then he will come for me and Amanda and Joe and MacLeod. I can't let that happen. If that means taking your head so be it.

"That's how it is then? You came to take my head because I'm not doing things your way?" Erin growled.

“No, I came to try and convince you to save yourself. You always were quick to throw yourself on the pyre. Christian doesn’t deserve it. He never did. He’s not worthy of you giving your life trying to save him,” Methos said his voice tinged with sorrow and hurt anger.

"Stop this!" Duncan insisted in shocked horror. “It’s Erin Methos. Think about what you’re doing. She was your student for God’s sake!” This was not how he'd thought things would go. He'd come to help not have two of his best friends try to kill each other. They had already crossed swords, he couldn't stop them if they insisted on going through with this now.

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Methos said morosely to Duncan without looking away from Erin or dropping his guard. Then to Erin he confessed, "I don't want to do this. But I will if I have to."

Erin knew he meant it. The one thing they had most in common between them was a love for Duncan and if either stood in the way of protecting him to the other's mind, they'd kill to protect him, even if it meant killing each other, despite their much longer acquaintance.

"I can't kill Christian," Erin still insisted in an apologetic tone.

“Have it your way,” Methos said regretfully, then he engaged Erin's blade fully, shoving her back so he could get a better stance.

"You can't do this!" Sam insisted.

"Stay out of it. You can't interfere now," Erin told him, using the momentum of her backward stumble to correct and swing for Methos's midsection. Methos avoided the swing and lunged trying to catch her off guard. She parried him and struck back.

"After what Cass told you, you're still worried about the rules?" Dean cried, indignant.

"This is how it's done Dean," Erin grunted as she fought.

"This is insane. I swear if you do this, whoever survives, you fight me next," Duncan declared incensed at his fellow Immortal's unforeseen desire to kill each other. Neither Erin or Methos listened, they were both focused on each other completely now.

"To hell with the rules," Dean said and leveled his gun intent on shooting one or both of them to end the fight before someone lost their head. It had to be a killing shot though or the other would have an open opportunity to take the other's head. But with the way they were moving he was having a problem getting a bead on a shot that would kill instantly.

Erin and Methos pushed back toward the middle of the living room, narrowly avoiding the coffee table and couch as swords sliced the air. Duncan stood by helpless to stop either of them. It should have been over then and there, both saw and opening and took it, swords coming down in an arc for the other's neck, it was just a matter of whose blade struck first. Dean was still trying to shoot without getting a target he could use. Then out of nowhere, both swords ripped themselves from their owner's hands and sailed across the room, falling harmless to the floor. Cass had returned.

"What's going on?" he asked, his voice fierce and low. Erin looked both relieved and chagrined at
the same time. Methos just looked shocked.

"Immortal version of a sibling spat," Dean explained, uncocking his gun. Cass gave both hard, disapproving looks in turn. Erin cowered under Cass's disapproving glare.

"We don't have time for this," Cass announced and strode forward, grabbing both Methos and Duncan by the shoulder. "You can't be here," he explained and then he was gone in a rush of wings and them with him.

###

One second Duncan had been watching, helpless, as Methos and Erin tried to take each other's heads in the name of protecting him. Protection he didn't need or want. The next he, Methos and the stranger in a tan trench coat were back in Duncan's barge in Paris. This could not be happening. It couldn't be real.

"What the?" He mumbled.

"Who the hell are you?" Methos railed, quicker to recover than MacLeod and seriously angry. Cass was nonplussed by his anger.

"I am Castiel. An angel of the Lord," he told him and then ignored him.

"Duncan, you are the one fated to win the Prize. You are The One. You must be more careful."

"What the hell is going on?" Duncan demanded his fury rising.

"This does not concern you. Not directly." Cass said emotionless. Then faster than either man could anticipate. He reached out and touched their foreheads.

They slumped into unconsciousness and he pushed back on their chests as one, tipping them so they fell limply on to the couch in what served as a living room on the barge. Neither would remember any of this. They'd wake in a few hours with no memory of Ahriman's killing spree, ignorant of the whole thing. As it should be.

Cass would take a momenty and wipe this Joe Dawson’s memory as well, leaving him with only what he absolutely needed to know to not become suspicious. Duncan MacLeod had a future that was too important to risk and Methos had a part to play in it. Joe Dawson was a secondary concern but what he knew they would know. They could not be involved. He looked down at them a minute, his lips in a taut line as he thought about how things were playing out, what he knew the future would bring.

He heard Dean's hard edged call for help, "Cass get your ass back here right now! We've got a problem!" Cass was gone in a heartbeat, back to Erin's apartment. Joe Dawson’s memory would have to wait.

###
"Wow, remind me never to piss you off," Dean commented as soon as Cass and the other two immortals with him blinked out.

"That was incredibly stupid," Sam pointed out. Erin was picking up her sword and Methos's. She guessed she'd have to mail the thing back to him at some point. He wasn't going to be happy about this.

"He made the challenge. What was I supposed to do let him have my head?" Erin said in explanation setting the swords against the wall.

"Is that how you settle an argument? You try to kill each other?" Sam went on exasperated.

"Not usually. Methos wouldn't have killed me… I don't think," She said with a hint of uncertainty in her voice, "He was trying to make a point."

"Could have fooled us," Dean retorted.

"Methos is older than me. He's better and he knows it. He let me match him. He could have taken my head anytime he wanted. He just wanted me to know he was deadly serious," Erin said sitting down on the couch with a weary slump of her shoulders.

"So he made his point with a sword? And I thought our family was dysfunctional," Sam said shaking his head.

"Immortals see things differently. The longer we live the greater that difference becomes. We are what we are. You live for a few thousand years and you'll see things differently too."

"Didn't seem as different as you think. But, it's over now, Cass zapped them somewhere. So can we get back to that prophecy Sam was talking about?" Dean said playing it off.

"Yeah," Sam said picking up the notepad and then paused. "Wait, how did they get up here?" Dean felt his stomach drop as soon as he'd said it and it dawned on Erin too.

"The salt lines," they all said in chorus and bolted for the door, Dean grabbing a container of salt from the kitchen counter as they went. But they were too late, as soon as they opened the door they ran smack into... someone. Dean stared in disbelief, the salt line at the door was holding so it couldn't pass but he couldn't be seeing what he was seeing.

There stood a six-foot tall man clad in Roman armor, golden blonde hair fell just past his ears as if he'd begun to grow it out from its customary military crop. He had blue eyes, he was unarmed and he had a gaping wound in his stomach where something had impaled him when he was still alive. His skin was pallid in death, making the color of his eyes stand out.

All three scrambled backward to avoid crossing the protective line into the hall, Dean and Sam's first reaction was that it was a ghost. Dean flung salt at it. The man didn't move, he didn't flicker, he was completely unaffected. Erin was frozen in place her face drawn in a conglomerate of fear, sorrow and grief.

"What the...?" Dean said. He'd never run into a ghost who wasn't affected by salt, maybe it was a zombie or a revenant.


"Éireann," the man answered in a voice as despondent as her own.
Sam slammed the door in the man's face certain whatever it was it wasn't good. They needed a second to figure out what it was so they could kill it. Dean was already grabbing an iron bladed machete, Sam sprung for a silver one long enough to do some real damage. Erin was still frozen breath coming in ragged gasps. The man walked *through* the door like it wasn't even there.

"I died because of you," the man accused in pained anger.

"Alexander I didn't know," Erin pleaded with the whatever it was. Apparently, it had taken the form of or was, someone she had known and now it was ticked off. The only explanation was Ahriman had sent it to screw with Erin and it was working like a charm. It was advancing on Erin who wouldn't even move to defend herself.

"The whole village. Your adoptive family, your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, me. All slaughtered because he was after you. It wasn't an invasion. He wanted you," the man accused angry and pained.

"I'm sorry Alexander, please," Erin pleaded. She was begging who ever Alexander was for mercy or forgiveness. They weren't sure which.

Dean and Sam ignored its commentary and attacked it. But both blades passed through it like it wasn't there. They looked at the weapons they were holding and then at it. Dean and Sam reached out and grabbed Erin by an arm each and dragged her away from it. But it kept coming.

"You're a monster. An abomination. A sin before God!," the man continued, unfazed by Erin's pleading.

"Alexander," she begged again, held in Sam and Dean's grasp, her eyes were filled with tears, bereft. Dean and Sam felt for her. Whatever had happened between her and Alexander had been bad that much they knew.

"I wish I had never met you," the man raged.

"No. Don't say that. Alexander I loved you," Erin beseeched him. Sam winced, reminded painfully of Jessica. Dean wasn't immune to the stab that caused either. Alexander must have been her lover and for some reason, something had happened to get him killed and he blamed her. They could relate to that. Boy, could they.

"Cass get your ass back here right now! We've got a problem!" Dean called heavenward to the angel. He didn't know what else to do. Nothing was working, they couldn't even slow it down and they had no idea what it might do next.

"It's your fault. All of it!" the man yelled in anguish.


"You'll beg for Ahriman to kill you before this is over," the man threatened with judgmental pleasure.

Cass appeared out of nowhere, took one look at what was going on and shoved Dean, Sam and Erin out of the way, placing himself between them and Alexander. He extended his hand, palm out, as white light began to glow there.

"Shut your eyes," he ordered. Dean pulled Erin, who was still oblivious to anyone but Alexander, into his chest, shielding her head and ducked his own. Sam threw his arm over her as well and bent his head to theirs, hiding his eyes. The room flooded with brilliance and then dissipated, fading like a
dying light bulb.

They lifted their heads, letting go of Erin and hazarded a look around. Alexander was gone. Only Castiel was there with an expression of sorrow. Erin gave an inarticulate mournful wail and collapsed. Dean caught her, sinking to the floor with her to avoid both of them falling. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her head to his chest, his chin on top of her hair. Sam looked down on them with a pained sympathetic expression.

"What was that?" Sam asked.

"Alexander Aurelius, or the illusion of him," Cass explained. Erin was sobbing into Dean's chest.

"That was an illusion?" Dean exclaimed.

"Yes, a very powerful one. No doubt Ahriman sent it to torment Erin."

"I'd say it worked," Dean bit, stroking Erin's hair, trying to comfort her. She'd truly broken at the sight of Alexander. It had pushed her over the edge she was standing on. She was a woman after all, prone to all the same vulnerabilities. The tough exterior shattered like the glass she'd thrown.

"But why? Who was he?" Sam asked right behind Dean.

"A roman solider and a devout Christian when being one was still cause for a death sentence. He was the first man Erin loved. Her teacher slaughtered an entire village, her family and Alexander, to get his hands on her. She still believes it was her fault, Ahriman used that against her," Cass explained, looking down on Erin cradled in Dean's arms, crying like a despondent child. He'd have done anything if he could have spared her the pain but he couldn't.

"Oh God," Sam breathed horrified.

Dean's eyes shut in sympathy and he held onto Erin a little tighter. "Son of a bitch," he cursed.

Both he and his brother could understand profoundly. Their mother had been killed, their father had died to save Dean, Sam's girlfriend Jessica had been murdered, all because Azazel had been trying to get his hands on Sam. Feeding him demon blood to warp him into the creature he wanted Sam to be when he'd only been six months old.

"Erin, listen to me. It wasn't real. It wasn't Alexander," Cass said kneeling beside her, placing a hand on her arm. She cried harder. Dean looked at Cass imploringly even though he knew there was nothing Cass could do. Cass's brow furrowed with concern.

"We have a larger problem. I'm no longer certain I was told the entire truth. There is a prophecy," Cass began looking up from his place knelt on the floor.

"Yeah, I found it," Sam agreed.

"I need to see it."

"Hey have a heart Cass. She's going through hell here," Dean admonished soulfully. Cass gave him a blank look. He wasn't trying to be heartless. He was trying to find the answer before they ran out of time. Dean sighed. "You know what give us a minute will you? Somebody needs to fix the salt lines that got broken anyway go look at it there. I'll stay with her."

"Of course," Cass assented. Sam cast his brother and Erin a last empathizing glance and snagged the salt container Dean had grabbed earlier and the notepad he'd translated the prophecy on. Together
they left the room, leaving Dean and Erin alone.

"Erin?" Dean asked, pulling her gently off him and taking her face in his hands. "Look at me okay? You've got to look at me." She did because she had no choice; her face was tear streaked and wet, eyes blood shot and red rimmed.

"You've got to pull it together. I know it's hard. God knows I do. Sam and I both do but that wasn't Alexander. It was Ahriman dicking you over," he explained gently. Erin gave another ragged, hiccuping breath and pulled away from him, wiping at the tears with the back of her hand as she pulled her knees up.

"It doesn't matter. He was right," Erin said her voice still unsteady as she wrapped her arms around her knees.

"No he wasn't. Ahriman is trying to break you down. Tear you apart from the inside out," Dean insisted.

"You weren't there Dean," she said shaking her head and looking up at the ceiling as if she were searching for something.

"Okay so you just let your whole family be killed?" Dean countered. It was rather vicious and he knew it, but he also didn't think Erin was seeing things clearly and needed a jolt.

"No!" Erin exclaimed in anguish. Dean gave her an expectant look to continue. Hesitantly as if she were afraid for him to hear it, she began her tale.

"My teacher, Tiberius Trajan, was a general in the Roman army. At the time Rome was toying with the idea of invading Ireland and somehow he found me. Found out what I was. We just thought Rome was attempting to invade but it was him. He used the invasion as a reason to do what he wanted. We thought we had them and at dawn, they'd cross the line and there would be a battle but he snuck in during the night. Brought a legion of soldiers down on us, we didn't have a chance. He razed the whole village, burned it to the ground and killed everyone there. First Alexander, then me. I watched him die. I loved him. He loved me then. He was a Christian, I was a Druid. He didn't care. He thought if God didn't approve we wouldn't have fallen in love.

"That was my first death. I had no idea what I was. I didn't know until later Trajan stayed and killed my whole family. He did it all just so he could have me. If they had never taken me in. If Alexander had never fallen in love with me. If they had known what I was. They wouldn't have been slaughtered."

Dean grimaced when she stopped. "I'm so sorry Erin." He couldn't offer her more than that. He felt the same way, carried the same kind of guilt. There was nothing he could say that would make her feel that she wasn't to blame, that would lift the burden. But maybe, hard as it would be, there was one thing he could offer her.

"Me and Sam, our whole family is dead. It's just us. Our grand dad, our grandmother, our mom, our dad, all our mom's friends, her family, Sammy's fiancé Jessica, all of 'em. We didn't know why. It was a because of a demon. He wanted Sam and he killed them all to get to him," Dean shared, eyes shining with tears of his own. It was hard to tell her that but he identified with her. She was becoming less and less just a hot woman he lusted after who happened to be involved in a job and more and more a kindred spirit. They had a lot in common.

"I'm sorry," Erin offered weakly. It was inadequate and she knew it but his commiseration let her
know he understood as much as she'd told him about her past. There was so much more he didn't know that she couldn't bring herself to say. Why Trajan had wanted her, what he'd done. What she had done. Dean would hate her. She hated herself, it was why what the illusion of Alexander had said hurt so badly. Ahriman was right. She was a monster, whether Dean knew it or not.

Dean draped an arm over her shoulder and hugged her then and she let him, wrapping her arms around him.

###

Meanwhile, down stairs Sam was checking the salt lines Erin had laid. Replacing the one Methos and Duncan had broken at the front door of the shop when they came up. One of them had busted the glass window in the door and unlocked it from the outside, pushing the line away when they opened the door. Cass followed after him absently as he read the prophecy Sam had transcribed.

"You're certain this is correct?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm not sure what it means yet but I translated it right," Sam answered pouring a little more salt on a window sill that didn't have as thick a line as he felt it needed.

"This is not good," Cass said as if Sam didn't already know that. "Have Erin and Dean seen this?"

"Yeah, I sorta tried to use it to get Duncan to stop trying to play hero. They both heard it I don't know how much attention Erin was paying at the time. You didn't know about this? I mean you said you have the names of all the prophets that have ever lived seared into your brain right? So shouldn't you have known about this already?" he asked moving along to another window and pushing the salt already there back into a form that he was satisfied with.

"Yes. That's why I think I may not have been told everything. I had no knowledge of this before now. I should have."

"So what? Your bosses lied to you? Why?" Sam asked mystified.

"I don't know Sam. If I did, do you think I'd be discussing this with you?" Cass retorted in a curt voice.

"Okay, sorry. As it stands, that prophecy is saying everything you said Zachariah already told you, so what do we do?" Sam asked avoiding the subject of lying angels. Cass didn't seem all that pleased with discussing it.

"Prophecies are complex, easily misinterpreted. The wording can be of utmost importance. You do what you have been. Look for another way. I think Zachariah may be mistaken. Something isn't right. He's keeping something from me. I don't know what or why. I need to get help from someone who won't have a vested interest in keeping the truth from me," Cass said already walking off with a determined stride.

"Where are you going?" Sam called after him.

"To find Anna," Cass answered and disappeared in a clap of wings and a rush of air. The breeze blew the salt line off the window Sam had just fixed.
"Hey, be careful man! You're messing up the demon proofing!" Sam cried after Cass, indignant. He didn't expect an answer but it made him feel better to complain.

###

Ahriman was enraged. They'd thwarted him. He was beyond angry. He'd stood down here and watched as everything fell neatly into place. All of them in one room. He sent the illusion of Alexander intent on outing Erin to her nearest and dearest. To make the Winchesters hate her as a monster, the very thing they hunted. To torment Duncan as he watched his dear friend deconstructed from what he believed she was. Turn Methos on Erin. To play on everything she kept buried and hidden. To hurt all of them. Then that damn angel showed up and whisked the other two Immortals away. Just when things were looking promising.

He hadn't expected an angel to be involved in this. He thought he'd planned for every eventuality. It didn't matter, Alexander had done his job. He could have done it better if that angel hadn't blasted him with holy light right before he got to the good part. He hadn't dared to go up there after that.

Ahriman believed he was invincible, he didn't think the angel could harm him but this far into his plans he didn't dare risk it. He'd never actually seen an angel before tonight but he still knew a thing or two about getting rid of one. Ahriman would just have to adapt. He was good at that. It was time to up his game plan. With an angry red flare of his eyes, he disappeared. Erin would come to him, she'd beg for him to kill her. That's the way he wanted it and that's the way it would be.

###

Ahriman hadn't been the only one watching. So had Ruby. She'd watched and waited for a chance to insinuate herself into the Winchester's little strong hold. But she hadn't realized what Ahriman was doing until it was too late. She had been expecting a direct assault, expected him to deal the final blow when she saw the other Immortals arrive. He hadn't and she'd lost her chance.

Ahriman fumed on the street corner and then vanished. To where Ruby couldn't know. But, she could find out. She was tired of waiting. She'd just have to make her own opportunity to segue into the situation.
Chapter 11

Castiel stood on a snow shoveled asphalt path, underneath the glow of a street lamp, his breath unfurling in white tendrils, his head tilted skyward. The cold didn't affect him. The icy clinging of snow to his shoes was inconsequential. He'd done the same thing, in the same place, once before. When he'd called Anna, a fallen angel, for her advice, when he'd been ordered to have Dean torture Alastair for information about angels who were being murdered. Then, he'd discovered there never had been orders. It had all been his misguided brother, Uriel. He hoped that today, he wouldn't find out anything similar.

"Anna!" he called out, his voice echoing in the stillness. The only sound that answered him was the distant chirping of some insect brave enough to be out in this cold and the blowing of a faint breeze.

"Anna please!" Cass tried again, pacing as he prayed for her to hear him.

The street lamp guttered and sputtered like a disturbed candle flame, crackling with a spark of electricity, followed by a whoosh of chill air and the barest sound of wings in flight. He turned toward it.

"What do you want this time Cass?" Anna asked, her dark red hair falling around her like a cloak, her face placid but for the slight lines at the side of her mouth indicating tension. She was still not over the fact he'd been willing to follow through on orders to kill her. It wasn't unreasonable that she was less than at ease in his presence.

"I," Cass said pausing to get the words out, "need your help."

Anna's eyebrows shot up and she crossed her arms, her boot heels clicking on the asphalt as she meandered toward him.

"You need my help?" she asked with incredulous irony.

"Yes, there was no one else I could ask," Cass admitted.

"Look how the mighty have fallen, asking trash like me for help," was Anna's sardonic reply. "Why don't you ask your boss?"

"I'm no longer certain Zachariah is telling me everything," Cass offered in explanation.

"Ah," Ann said stepping slightly to the side and considering Cass a moment as if she were appraising him. "Why would he? You're a grunt. All you need to know is that you follow orders. But you'd already started to question that. To think for yourself. So why are you here really?"

"The nephilim," Cass began and Anna's eyes widened.

"It's begun? Ahriman got through the Devil's Gate?" She asked.

"Yes. Zachariah sent me to ensure he is destroyed. There is a prophecy," Cass started again the paper Sam had written the pertinent text on in his hand to show her, only to be interrupted for a second time.

"I know there is," Anna said simply. That gave Cass pause. Why would Anna know about the prophecy when he hadn't?
"You know?"

"Yes. Of course I do," she said as if it should have been obvious. "It's existed for thousands of years."

"Then why didn't I know about it?" Cass asked confused. Anna actually looked surprised.

"Zachariah didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Cass asked again suspicious. Ana recoiled, disturbed.

"He didn't explain?"

Cass's temper was growing shorter by the moment, "No. Apparently not."

"This is bad Cass. This is so bad. Let me see it," Anna said holding out her hand. He gave her the bit of yellow, blue lined paper and she read rapidly.

"Where's the rest of it?" she asked.

"The rest of it?" Cass asked. This was getting irritating.

"The second half. Didn't you find out about it too?" Ana pressed urgently.

"There was no second half. Sam would have included it if there were," Cass insisted.

"Yes there is. What did Zachariah tell you?"

Cass blinked; he couldn't understand why she wouldn't just get straight to the point.

"He gave me weapons that will enable Ahriman to be destroyed. He told me that Erin must consent to their use and then defeat him in battle, taking him into herself and then she must die for him to be destroyed. He was very sure, he did mention that it was prophesied but he seemed reluctant to elaborate," Cass explained.

"I guess he would be," Anna remarked. "The prophecy it's delicate. You only have the first part. The nephilim have their own prophet, Cassandra. She's the one who told Duncan he would be chosen to fight a great evil. Ahriman. She is the one who set down the second half of the prophecy."

"I know of no prophet named Cassandra, who is an Immortal," Cass pointed out.

"Because no one wanted you to. Zachariah is trying to gain control of them, to turn them to his own purpose. That's not how it's supposed to be and Erin is the one who can stop it. If she lives," Anna told him. Cass canted his head at an odd angle. That hadn't been something he was expecting to hear. It disturbed him greatly. If Zachariah had kept this from him, what else was he keeping from him?

"Zachariah must have interpreted the prophecy wrong," he offered in excuse for his superior.

"Maybe," Anna answered him, but her voice lacked conviction. Then she repeated the prophecy in full, including the part Castiel and the Winchester had no clue about.

"From the annals of time a sinner will come to do battle with him. Aided by three wise men, the sinner will rise and slay their brother in the name of all that is holy. These three shall be the trinity of god, angel, and demon. As two shall bend so shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces. With these pieces and faith alone shall the sinner consume him and he be destroyed by the power of God. So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true."
"In the shadows she will stand between heaven and earth as God wills. Righting what the hosts of heaven would take. Bringing light from dark, choice from its absence, purging evil from the ranks. That the weapon of God will be righteous and good, free to choose as it was intended."

Cass felt a chill creep up his spine when she said it. "Erin said she would fight destiny to stop the Gathering. She is not happy about the revelation of her kind's true nature and purpose."

"The nephilim were never meant to be forced into service Cass. They were always meant to have a choice. She is the only one who can give it them, to ensure it is Duncan MacLeod who wins the Prize. But she has to survive first. This prophecy is so fragile Cass. If you fail, if she fails, she will die and Zachariah will have a weapon of God like none we've ever seen. To use as he see fit. That's not how God planned it. The whole thing hinges on faith and free will. It can go either way," Anna explained fervently.

Cass's brow furrowed deeply. "I don't understand."

Anna stepped forward and placed a warm hand on his arm looking up into his eyes with deep seriousness, "Ahriman will be destroyed no matter which way it goes. But Cass, you and Sam and Dean. You're the trinity in the prophecy. Dean represents the angel, he's Michael's vessel; Sam, the demon blood in his veins, he's the demon; and you're God, because you're doing His will. His true will. Why do you think you were the one who brought Erin down from the Guff? Why you shepherded her for years before you were told to turn away?

"All she's suffered has been to prepare her for this. She has to be strong enough to face it. She has to be torn down to her foundations and built up again. She must say yes. God would never ask someone something like this without giving them a choice. I mean she has to really say yes to being God's weapon, not just consent to go along with the plan. She has to have faith or the only way this ends is in her death and Zachariah gains control of her kind if we're lucky. If we're not, the demons will overrun the nephilim and take them for their own. You cannot let that happen, Cass. Imagine the power they would have with a weapon like that."

Cass thought he felt the bedrock beneath his feet shift and pitch with the revelation. Betrayed, lied to, manipulated, again, by someone he trusted. "Erin is like Dean, she lacks faith. She believes God has forsaken her. She won't be easy to convince," he said solemnly.

"Then you have to give it to her," Anna said with certainty."You're the only one who can."

Cass looked doubtful. Dean had had far less time to lose his faith and Cass still hadn't been able to imbue faith in Dean, though he kept trying. Erin had had nearly two thousand years to lose hers.

"How? I don't know what to do," Cass confessed tragically. He felt he'd already failed. How could he give Erin faith when she was so bereft of it already? So convinced there was no reason to have any?

"I don't know Cass. That's why you were chosen for this. You know her. You have to find a way. But if you tell her, if you tell Sam or Dean, what the prophecy really holds, it will destroy any chance you have. She has to make the decision herself," Anna warned him.

"I understand," Cass said, though he doubted greatly that his chances to salvage this were very high. If he'd known from the beginning, maybe. But now? He wasn't certain.

"Good," Anna said and stepped away from him, turning to go.

"There's one other thing. Zachariah said Ahriman knows which seals Lilith will break next. He
wants Dean to torture him once he's trapped in Erin to gain the information. Is it true?" Cass asked before she could. She turned back to him with an apologetic gaze.

"I don't know. Maybe. Ahriman might have over heard something. He likes to meddle in others affairs that way. It's possible. Be careful Cass. Remember what I said about breaking the only real weapon you have," she advised.

"What you've said, it still doesn't explain the prophecy completely, what does being 'sundered into a million pieces' mean? It makes no sense if she is supposed to live. No soul can withstand that Anna. How can she give Immortals a choice when it still all ends with Duncan MacLeod as the One? How is that a choice?" Cass pressed.

"Erin isn't the only one who has to have faith Cass. So do you, all of you," Anna said and then, in a flurry of feathers, she was gone. Leaving Cass with most of the answers he'd come for and a barrage of new questions left unanswered.

###

When Erin was finally able to get a hold of herself and she and Dean had broken apart, they sat there in a rare awkward moment of vulnerability. Dean felt decidedly self-conscious, he never opened up to anyone and yet he'd just blabbed to a woman he hadn't known for more than a couple of days. He wasn't sure why but he couldn't take it back now. Maybe it was the fact that she was in the same boat he and Sam were. In any case, the silence was becoming deafening. Dean tried to shake it off.

“Well, uh, we should probably go help Sam with those salt lines,” he muttered starting to get to his feet. Erin looked undecided a moment, running a hand through her hair and trying to compose herself, still taken aback by having her past literally come back to haunt her. Then she nodded, clearing her throat, as self-conscious as he was.

“Yeah, yeah. Of course,” she said moving to get up as well. Dean offered her his hand to help her up and pulled her to her feet. “Thanks,” she muttered. She looked up at him then her eyes limpid, still, and Dean thought against her will, open as a book, exposing how wounded and broken she really was underneath her tough exterior.

He looked back at her, his expression softening. He didn't know why but he was struck by an overwhelming desire to kiss her in that instant. He acted on it before he'd made a conscious decision to do so. Gently he slipped a hand behind her neck as if he expected her to retreat. When she didn't push him away, he lowered his head tentatively, pausing to give her every opportunity to pull away, to say no. None came. Hesitantly his mouth closed on hers, lush and warm.

Her hand slid behind his head into his hair and he knew she wanted it as much as he did. Dean cupped her head with his other hand and deepened the kiss. There was a quiet urgency to it. This wasn't just lust, Dean wasn't sure what it was exactly. He thought they could have stayed like that forever but a knock sounded gently on the door and Sam's voice called from beyond it.

"Hey, can I come in?"

The moment was gone and they pulled away from each other. Erin lowered her eyes and turned away from him. Dean ran a hand over his head, clearing his throat.

"Yeah Sammy."
Sam opened the door and peered around it before he came in and saw something had been going on he wasn't privy too. He looked from Dean to Erin and back again then thumbed back over his shoulder. "Should I just go worry about salt lines again?" he asked. He had a pretty good idea what had just happened and they both seemed a little embarrassed. He didn't know about Erin but that wasn't like Dean. He wondered what had provoked that.

Dean shook his head and waved him in, "No, no come on in."

"Where's Cass?" Erin asked her voice much more subdued that Sam had become used to.

"He went to find Anna to help him with the prophecy. He wants to be sure what it means," Sam offered still wondering if he shouldn't just find something else to do for a while.

Dean was quick to shrug off whatever had just happened in his brother's presence, for some reason he felt like it was something that should be kept between him and Erin. "So what are we supposed to do? Sit around and play tiddly winks?" he asked resuming his usually snarky demeanor.

"He wants us to keep looking for another way. Seems he's kinda bothered he didn't know about the prophecy already," Sam said, shutting the door. He shoved the salt line back in place with his foot.

"Why would he? No one knew," Erin asked in the same quiet voice.

"Because Cass is supposed to know all of them. He's got the names of every prophet who's ever lived seared into his brain. That is disturbing," Dean said.

"Yeah so we should probably get back to work," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah, right," Erin agreed. She seemed happy for a distraction.

"Yeah okay," Dean said. "I just hope Cass finds something soon. I'm getting tired of doing nothing but research. My brain's going to turn to mush."

"Your brain is already mush Dean," Sam joked as they sat down around the coffee table again. Erin and Sam took books. Dean, fed up with trying to read esoteric texts, took a lap top and they worked in quiet.

After a while, he looked up from the searching he'd been doing to no avail and thought for a moment. "Erin? You said you were raised a druid right?"

"Yeah. So?" she answered never looking up. She'd been silent the whole time, more reserved.

"Yeah okay," Dean said. "I just hope Cass finds something soon. I'm getting tired of doing nothing but research. My brain's going to turn to mush."

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"Yeah. So?" she answered never looking up. She'd been silent the whole time, more reserved.

"So you know any Druidy stuff that might help?" Dean asked.

"Something to get rid of a demon possessed immortal? Uh no. We didn't cover that in class," Erin said. It lacked the sarcastic humor it was meant to convey.

"Not even a hint? I mean, we know ancient Celtic rites but the druids didn't leave anything for anyone to study," Sam asked looking up from his book. Erin looked up then closing the book she'd been studying.

"That's because it was all oral. They didn't think it should be passed down in written form because it was too dangerous for laymen to have that kind of knowledge. My education was cut kind of short. I was twenty-six when I had my first death, I started studying when I was fifteen, and it takes close to twenty years to learn all of the teachings. You want a fertility ritual I'm your girl but I never learned the more arcane rites," Erin admitted somber.
Dean being Dean couldn’t help the smirk that spread across his face. "Fertility ritual? And what does that require?" he asked. He couldn't help it, it just came naturally to him to be a flirt. Erin managed a slight quirking of the lips before she answered despite her sudden solemnity.

"A white robe, a white cloak, a golden sickle, a branch of mistletoe, two white bulls and a feast," Erin told him truthfully.

"White bulls? The ritual requires a barbecue?" Dean teased.


Dean's lift in mood evaporated into queasiness. "Well that's not sexy at all," he muttered, "And a waste of good beef." Erin managed an amused sniff at him.

Sam ignored it altogether, intrigued that he could actually ask a Druid what they did, how they lived. It could be very useful in the future. "So is it true you did human sacrifice? There were a lot of mummies found in peat bogs archaeologist believe were Druidic sacrifices is that true?"

"They did do human sacrifice. I never got far enough to be allowed to practice it. The bog mummies were sacrifices, usually criminals. Keep in mind that was a different world, we were all primitive, tribal. We didn't know there was any other way, didn't know any better. Christianity was just taking a foothold in the world. You could still be executed for believing in it," Erin told him.

"Usually criminals? And when they weren't?" Dean asked.

"Willing sacrifices. They didn't just go grab some person out of a hut and throw them on a pyre."

"You keep saying they. Do you not follow the religion anymore? You seemed kinda like a Christian to me, what made you change your mind?" Sam asked with a purely scholastic bent to the question.

Erin's face became shadowed again as she answered. "Alexander. His God, a benevolent and loving creator, seemed a lot more appealing than a God who needed the blood of others to appease him for his favor. But that was a long time ago."

Sam nodded in understanding and began to ask another question but Dean interrupted him, he could tell his brother's questions were disturbing Erin. "Aren't we supposed to be working?"

Sam gave him a look for stopping his academic interview, Dean was the last person to encourage anyone to do research, but he subsided when Dean gave him a subtle shake of his head. "Yeah," he said and returned to his book. Erin opened the book she'd been reading and then shut it again, "It's late. You should get some sleep. You won't be worth anything if you're dead on our feet."

"And you don't need sleep?" Dean asked noting she hadn't included herself.

"No, I have a lot on my mind. I don't think I could if I tried. There's a bedroom and a second bathroom down the hall. They're Christian's but you're welcome to use it. A bed's a bed," she said setting the book aside.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks," Dean said watching her as she walked around the couch and headed for the door. He was guessing to head for the roof again. Seemed that's where she liked to go to be alone. When she was gone Sam turned to his brother.

"Is she going to be alright?" he asked concerned.

Dean shook his head, "Would you be?"
Sam's brow furrowed as he set his book aside. The offer of a bed making him remember, he really was tired. "No, I guess not," he admitted.

###

Sam had agreed that they did need sleep and Dean could hear the sound of the shower running from here. The books and notes had been stacked in an order only Sam could decipher, marking where he'd left off, the lap top still open to the last thing Dean had been researching. Dean was stretched across the length of the couch, his booted feet propped on one arm and his head on the other, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were shut but he wasn't asleep, he was dozing, more or less, while still keeping an eye on things.

Despite Erin's suggestion of sleep and a bed to do it in, he couldn't sleep anymore than she could. She was falling apart one piece at a time and they couldn't find a way to fix any of this that didn't end badly. That weighted on him. He wanted to be here, awake and alert, if something happened, if Ahriman tried something else and, though he wasn't going to admit it to anyone, he wanted to be here if Erin needed him. That kiss had sparked something Dean couldn't quite place his finger on.

The rushing of water from the shower down the hall stopped and a few minutes later Sam came out dressed in clean pants, toweling his hair dry. "Shower's all yours," he told his brother.

Dean opened one eye and shifted to get more comfortable. "In a little while."

"You really oughta get some sleep while you can Dean," Sam admonished.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Dean said. Sam cocked a brow at him and draped the damp towel over his arm.

"Okay, there something going on you want to tell me about?" Sam asked surprised Dean hadn't jumped on the idea of a shower and a warm bed.

"No," Dean answered, leaving it at that. Sam wasn't convinced though.

"I know something happened with you and Erin and it wasn't just, I dunno, a simple kiss or something. You don't get shy with women or embarrassed when you're caught with them, so what gives?"

"That's between me and Erin," Dean cautioned opening the other eye and pegging Sam with a look.

"So there is more to it?" Sam asked.

"Leave it alone Sammy," Dean grumbled.

"Fine, okay. Do what you want. Just... be careful. We haven't found anything to contradict that prophecy and unless Cass has something when he gets back, she's probably going to die. This isn't like you," Sam advised with concern. He was concerned about everything. He didn't want Erin to have to die, he didn't want Dean to get attached to her and get hurt if she did, he didn't want Ahriman to get through Erin to them, there was nothing good about this situation.

"That's sweet of you Sammy, really. But, I can take care of myself," Dean snarked.
"Alright," Sam relented and started to head for the bedroom. Dean was a notorious hard head, he couldn't change his brother's mind and he knew it.

Dean gave a sudden cut off yelp of surprise and Sam swung around to find out what was wrong. Cass was right up against the couch nearly touching Dean's head he'd appeared so close. Dean had sat straight up, startled.

"Personal space Cass!" Dean complained gruffly. Castiel had yet to master the art of not standing so close that it made humans uncomfortable. Despite Dean complaining about it, every time he did it.

"I apologize," Cass said and backed up.

"You find out anything?" Dean asked, swinging his legs over the edge so he was sitting the right way. Sam came to stand behind him.

"I talked to Anna. The prophecy says exactly what we feared," Cass said trying to phrase what he was telling them without telling them there was another way. They wouldn't have a chance at the other way if they knew. It wasn't exactly lying but Cass still didn't like it.

"Come on, Cass don't tell me that," Dean said pained.

"We can't change it? It worked with the prophecy about me and Lilith," Sam said pleadingly.

"No. I'm sorry," Cass said his brows pulling together in a tight knot, eyes plaintive.

"Son of a bitch," Dean cursed, angry. This hadn't been what he was hoping for.

"Then we keep looking for another way," Sam said as if that were the only solution.

"There isn't one," Cass pointed out.

Cass really was apologetic for having to say what he had, it was cruel not to be able to tell them. Maybe he could without actually doing it. "Prophecy's can't be interfered with Dean. I've told you this before. It is the only way. The events have to play out in the order they are written, we can't stop it."

"So we just wait for it to happen? Tell her we're sorry and move on to the next job? She's your niece Cass. That's gotta count for something," Dean pushed. Cass leveled a look at him that would have cut through steel and Dean actually stopped cold in mid-lecture he was so struck by the power of it.

"It does but my hands are tied Dean," he told him making sure he said every word with perfect enunciation, perfect phrasing. "Ancient prophecy can be obscure, easily misunderstood. Word order can be paramount. Read the prophecy again, see for yourself," he said handing the paper Sam had translated the prophecy on to him.

Dean and Sam stood there a moment, thinking about that. It was Sam who picked out the thread of a possible hint there. "So we should read it again, paying attention to the word order so we get it?"

"Yes. It is very important you 'get it'," Cass said turning the same penetrating gaze on Sam he had on Dean.

"Yeah, we'll do that. We'll read it until we get it," Sam promised. He understood that for some reason Cass could not tell them something about the prophecy and that the key to figuring it out for themselves, lay within how the prophecy was written. They had a way out if they could figure out what Cass's cryptic hinting meant. Dean's expression was softer and determined and pissed off. Dean
hated having to dance in circles to get around holy bull crap to an answer. This only reinforced his dislike for it, again.

"Good," Cass said firmly.

"Thanks Cass," Dean said truthfully. He understood too. This wasn't the first time Cass had managed to give them a hint in the right direction where a prophecy was concerned without actually interfering.

"I would not suggest telling Erin. I think it is important that she," Cass paused looking for how to put a word to it, "comes to her own conclusions." Dean and Sam both sighed heavily. So now they couldn't even tell Erin or somehow that would screw things up too. Great. Because things weren't complicated enough.

"Great," Dean grunted.

"Where is Erin?" Cass asked, moving on to his next task. The task of somehow against all logic and hope getting Erin to have faith in a God she hated.

"Up stairs, on the roof," Dean answered, flopping back down on the couch with the paper, Sam joined him.

"Thank you," Cass said and disappeared.

---

Erin had left Sam and Dean below with the option of a night's sleep or staying up working if they liked. She didn't really feel up to it because, frankly, she didn't see another option. Nothing had turned up a lead and the prophecy Sam had spouted off during her argument with Duncan had seemed pretty plain, mirroring everything Castiel had already said. She didn't have much hope left in her. So many unanswered questions, so many doubts weighed on her. And the kiss with Dean, did she dare? There was a reason Erin hadn't had a steady significant other in more years than she could count. She had had more than a brief romantic entanglement since Alexander. Passing fancies that didn't mean much in the long run. What she was endangered them or they died simply because mortal life was so frail and easily ended. It was too dangerous, but it had made her feel... what? Free? Understood? Some connection she was unwilling to put a name to?

With a sigh Erin hung up her cell phone and propped on the ledge of the glass panes, arms folded, looking out to the sea while being careful not to disturb the salt lines that kept Ahriman at bay. She needed the solitude the space offered her, watching the boats sail by on the water just across the way. She'd tried to call Beth again and gotten the same cheery voice mail message as before. She could only hope that meant Beth had taken that vacation and that the reason she wasn't answering wasn't because she couldn't. Erin must have been up here for thirty minutes maybe longer, below Sam and Dean were presumably taking her advice to sleep.

She was beginning to lose any hope she'd had of this ending well, however small that shred of hope might have been. She should probably be downstairs working on finding a solution or sleeping so she would be prepared if a fight ensued, as it surely would, sooner or later. But, she had pretty much resigned herself to the prospect that, one way or another, she was going to die. No matter what anyone did. Since she refused to kill Christian, she was betting Ahriman would end up with her.
head. And yet, she couldn't just lay down and die either. Then Duncan and the others would fall right behind her. Then there was the Game. Even if somehow she survived this Duncan was fated to the One. She was dead no matter what she did. It was a no win situation.

A rush of gentle air disturbed the enclosed confines and a sound like a bird taking flight permeated the atmosphere. Erin didn't have to look behind her to know who it was. She could almost feel him there watching her.

"Dean said I'd find you here," Cass said from a distance. Erin didn't turn, she knew she didn't have to.

"Hey you know me, got a thing for high places. Must be the angel blood," Erin joked sullen.

Castiel, being so naive of human humor, didn't catch it. "Angels have no particular love for high places," he pointed out coming to stand beside her.

"It was a joke Cass," Erin said,"Ya know like 'City of Angels'?” She said. He looked at her blankly and she shook her head. "Never mind." "Dean should have gone to bed I told him he and Sam could have Christian's room."

"Dean is stubborn," Cass explained simply.

He stood like a stone statue, watching the view with her, saying nothing. Erin stood beside him in the silence, her gaze never moving from the ocean beyond. They stayed that way for a long while before he broke the quiet with an observation of his own, searching for something to break the ice. He had no idea how he was going to get Erin to have faith, not without an excruciating number of years to do it. He wasn't sure he could do it even then. "I see why this appeals to you. It is tranquil."

It took a moment before Erin replied, she seemed to be deeply considering something. "I thought so." Then she turned to him, her expression gravely serious. "I can get why he wouldn't lift a finger to help Immortals. Bastard children that we are. Doesn't mean I agree with it. But my family? Alexander? They were human, his most beloved creations. Why did they have to die? Why let them? Trajan could have gotten me another way. Why let him decimate an entire village to get to me? God abhors Immortals anyway, why let even one human die in our stead? And it's not just my family, the Crusades, the Inquisition, North and South Ireland, Holy Wars. I've lived through them all. Why wouldn't God care? Why stand by and watch while those who believe in him are slaughtered like helpless lambs? Or murder in his name? Why let those who simply don't believe be killed? It's no particular sin not to worship a god you don't know. How is that God's work? At what point does he step in? When have enough people died to prove they believe in a God they've never seen?"

The barrage of questions were disturbingly similar to the ones Dean had asked him when Castiel had pulled him from hell. Dean hadn't been convinced then, he doubted Erin would be now.

"God works...," he began about to tell her the same thing he had Dean. She balked immediately in almost the exact same words.

"If you say 'in mysterious ways' I am going to hit you."

Cass changed his approach, making his answer lead Erin down the path he needed her to follow, for her own sake and everyone else's. "Free will. God didn't tell them to wage those wars. He didn't tell Trajan to murder your family and Alexander. They chose to do it God does not abhor immortals, if he did you wouldn't exist."

Erin shook her head lightly, solemn. "He could have stopped it any time he wanted. He didn't. I don't
have faith in a God who would let that happen. If there is a God, he doesn't care about any of us. Immortal or mortal. I mean, why me? Why write a prophecy about me? I'm no one. I'm not a hero, I'm a monster Cass. The things I've done I can never atone for, no matter how long I live or how hard I try. You can't wash that off."

Cass tilted his head in consideration. "Perhaps He sees something in you, you can't see in yourself. There is no sin so grave it cannot be forgiven," he answered. Still Erin shook her head. "I'm sorry. I just don't believe that. You have faith I don't and never will. That died a long time ago," she said casting her eyes down and looking back out to the sea. "There's no other way out of this is there? The prophecy means exactly what it says doesn't it?"

Cass moved so she had to look at him. He looked her hard in the eyes until she felt like he was penetrating her soul.

"Are you so anxious to die?"

Erin didn't answer, her eyes slid away from his and he knew she was seriously contemplating the idea. He couldn't let her. He could read it on her soul; she wondered if just giving in to the prophecy as she saw it might not be her one chance for redemption. The only thing stopping her, was the love and responsibility she felt for Christian. Cass reached out and forced her to turn and face him, his bright blue eyes burning into hers. Seeing her as she was, as only an angel could, bare and naked to the soul.

"If you have faith in nothing else, have faith in Sam and Dean. Have faith... in me."

Then he was gone, leaving Erin to stare into the empty space he left and think about all he'd said.

###

Methos groaned and tried to turn over, one hand clutching for the bed covers and found none. That was strange, he thought. Where had the blankets gone? Come to think of it, the bed felt too scratchy and it seemed as if it had slipped sideways, he wasn't lying flat. Perturbed he sat up and groggily looked around. He wasn't in his bed, he was slumped on MacLeod's couch. Why was he asleep on Duncan's couch? He had no memory of any exploits that should have ended with him passed out here and what was that racket?

Duncan was canted over sideways, his head hanging over the arm of the couch, mouth open in a loud snore. Methos wrinkled his nose and kicked the other Immortal's dangling foot. Duncan didn't seem to feel it. He just snored louder. Methos kicked him harder.

"Huh?" the Highlander grunted sitting up blurry eyed. "Methos? Why are you here?" he mumbled as he sat up and tried to get his bearings.

"I don't know. You tell me. It's your couch I'm waking up on," Methos grumbled.

"How should I know?" MacLeod protested.

"What did we do last night?" Methos asked, searching his memory for a hint and finding an absolute blank. The last thing he remembered he'd been at home, In London, watching TV while drinking a beer and considering turning in for the night. This was not London, this was France. How had he gotten here?
Duncan thought about Methos's question and came up as blank as Methos had. Last he remembered he'd been reading a book, in a chair, across the room. This made no sense. "I... don't know," he said.

"Doesn't look like we had a rollicking good time whatever it was. No women, no beer bottles, we're still dressed. I'm with you...," Methos mused looking around the barge for a clue.

"Oh haha," Duncan snarked.

"Must have been bad beer. Had to be bad beer. Only explanation. Your bad beer," Methos decided.

Duncan took offense. "Why does it have to be my bad beer? You don't remember anything, maybe it was your bad beer!"

"Impossible. I'd never buy bad beer," Methos said getting up and straightening his clothes, automatically patting down his clothes to make sure his sword was still there. It wasn't.

"MacLeod, where's my sword?" he asked wary.

"How should I know? Maybe you lost it after drinking my bad beer," Duncan retorted, standing up and checking for his own sword. It was there, tucked in the coat he still had in.

"Not funny Mac. Where is it?" Methos demanded.

Duncan fought not to laugh and held his hands up in surrender. "I honestly have no idea Methos."

"You don't think? She wouldn't have?" Methos asked as an idea hit him.

"Nooo," Duncan said wide eyed as the same thought hit him.

"Amanda!" Methos screeched in outrage.
Ahriman stood outside the little blue one story house with its white trim, ensconced in its hedgerows and carefully planted flowerbeds and smiled. He saw his target move past the kitchen window from his vantage point on the street outside, mouse brown hair bobbing in a flippy ponytail as she went about her business. When he could no longer see her, he smiled and chuckled darkly to himself as he sauntered to the door and pressed the doorbell. A responding 'ding dong' sounded within the house and he could hear the shuffle of feet as the woman came to answer the door. The woman wasn't a classic beauty and some would say she carried a few too many pounds but she was pretty. Soft brown eyes sparkling with happy surprise when she saw who was at the door.

"Christian! You're back from Colorado early. How was the trip? Must have been pretty good with you in a tuxedo," she asked jovially not realizing that Christian was no longer the man she knew. Ahriman smiled winningly.

"Hi Beth. Oh, it was fun and... profitable," Ahriman answered.

"Oh good. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Do you want to come in? I was just making breakfast. Would you like some?" Beth Middleton offered. Ahriman quirked his brows in feigned interest.

"Sounds wonderful, but first, think you could help me arrange a surprise for Erin?"

"Oh she'll love that!" Beth enthused with innocent naivety and stepping aside so he could enter. "What kind of surprise?"

Ahriman strode through the door and waited until Beth had closed and locked the door before he answered. Then he pushed Beth against the wall, pressing his body to hers. His eyes flared crimson and he smiled. "One she'll never forget." Beth's mouth worked but no sound came. She was trying to scream but absolute terror had robbed her of her voice. "How about a little trip?" Ahriman enticed. Beth shook in fear against him.

###

Ruby, frustrated with waiting and needing to know what Ahriman was planning next or at least where he'd gone, had resorted to spell work. She had left *Between the Lines* unwatched just long enough to collect what she needed. A map, black candles and a box of matches. Wouldn't seem like much to someone who didn't know any better but those mundane items were going to tell her what she wanted to know. Where Ahriman had gone.

She had ducked into an alley, setting up on a trashcan to work the spell. In the dark, no one bothered to wonder what the chick in the alley was doing. They just assumed she was another freak and walked on. She laid out the map and placed the candles, lighting each one with a match, then shook it until the flame went out. Picking up one of the black candles, she began to chant, setting fire to the map as she did.


Ruby's eyes shifted to solid black from corner to corner, as she spoke, the map catching the flame and burning like kindling. It blazed high and fierce for a moment, then Ruby said. "Out."
The map snuffed out like it had never been alight, leaving behind a map that had been charred to ash save for a small circle in the upper left corner. That was where Ahriman was. Ruby plucked up the bit of map that was still intact and shook it free of the ashes, stashing it in her pocket as she took to the sidewalk, looking for a car. Now, she had to get to him before he could disappear again.

###

Erin woke to someone gently shaking her shoulder. She blinked sleep-blurred eyes and it took her a moment to realize where she was and who was doing the waking. She must have fallen asleep on the futon on her roof thinking about all that had transpired and all Castiel had said because she was curled among the many pillows cushioning the futon and Sam was knelt down beside it his hand on her arm, his tall form towering over her, even hunkered down.

"Sam?" she croaked, groggy.

"Hey. Breakfast is ready if you want it. It's cereal but I'm not much of a cook," Sam joked.

"Breakfast?" Erin asked sitting up, her hand automatically fumbling to locate her sword. Only to find it wasn't there. How odd. She knew logically that it was still downstairs, right where she'd left it but she hadn't woken without it within arm's reach in... She paused to think of when that had last happened and realized she couldn't remember. Never? Not since she'd been an Immortal? For some reason, it didn't disturb her. Somehow, Dean's, Sam's and Cass's presence made her almost feel she could let down her guard. It had been a very long time since she'd felt that way and she had no idea why they made her feel it. What was it Cass had said only a few hours before? Have faith? Erin shook her head and ran a hand through her hair.

"Yeah or something close to it," Sam said with a smile.

"Yeah, okay," Erin consented and got to her feet yawning. Sam got up as well and preceded her out the door. She could hear his feet thudding on the stairs down to the apartment. She followed.

Inside the apartment, Dean was crunching away on a mouthful of cereal, parked in front of the coffee table with a piece of paper sitting on the laptop keyboard in front of him, seriously staring at it as if he couldn't see what he wanted to there. It was the paper the prophecy had been translated on. Erin refrained from commenting on the "no eating in the living room rule" she strictly adhered to. What was the point? Who cared about something so frivolous now?

Castiel was standing, inert between the pathway between the living room and the kitchen as if he had been there all night. For all she knew he had. He gave her a considering look as she came in. Sam had made directly for the kitchen and breakfast.

"Oh hey," Dean said noticing her entrance, mouth stuffed to bursting, "I gotta hand it to you, health food isn't really my thing. But this, muesli is pretty good."

"It's muesli Dean. Not muesllee. What? You think you're eating cat pajamas now?" Sam shot from in the kitchen. He was pouring a bowl for himself and Erin.

"Less weird than half the crap you eat Sam," Dean shot back. Erin ignored it.

"Why didn't someone wake me before now? What time is it?"
"It's eight and we didn't wake you because feather head over there threatened to smite our asses if we so much as coughed too loud," Dean quipped, shoving another spoon of cereal into his mouth as he stared at the translation.

"I did not threaten to "smite your asses" I merely suggested that we," Cass began to argue when Erin's cell phone began to ring again, still belting out *The Gummy Bear* song. Erin turned red.

Sam came back into the room with a bowl in each hand, trying not to snicker. Dean didn't bother, "You have got to change that ring tone. It's like you're ten." Even Cass managed to look rather askance at it. Erin flushed redder and fished the phone out; her heart doing a small skip of relief, the caller ID said it was Beth.

"Beth? Oh, thank God. I've been calling you since yesterday why haven't you been answering the phone?" she said as she answered, intent on lecturing her friend for having worried her sick. Hearing the girl's name got Dean and Sam's attention immediately. Cass was just as alert even if he didn't know who Beth was. Unfortunately, they couldn't hear both sides of the conversation.

"Erin, help me please," Beth begged piteously, instead of the bright, chipper joke Erin had expected. Erin could feel her hair stand on end, goosebumps rising on her arms.

"Where are you?"

"Please, he's going to kill me. He's crazy. It's Christian. He, he's possessed or something," Beth tried to explain wild with fear.

"Beth, just tell me where you are," Erin ordered firmly, already in motion, shouldering on her coat and stashing her sword in it.

"Just like we rehearsed now Elizabeth. You're ruining the surprise," Erin could hear Ahriman say with Christian's voice in the background. It was cold and sadistically amused. Dean and Sam were on their feet as well, grabbing weapons. They hadn't a clue what was going on but it was a fair bet a fight was about to go down. They could put enough together from what they could hear.

Beth sobbed brokenly into the phone and Erin felt her stomach clench. "Seven fifty eight Forum Street. You have forty minutes," Beth managed to sputter out through her crying. She sounded as if she were already injured or so terrified she was in shock.

"I'm on my way," Erin promised her. She grabbed her gun and checked the clip, then shoved it in her waistband at the same time Dean mirrored her with his own. Cass moved closer, a deep frown etching into his forehead.

There was a sound as the phone was passed off to Ahriman. In the background Erin could hear Beth dissolve into a pathetic wail. "Better hurry. You still have a chance to save her. Tick, tock," he mocked with a chuckle. Erin snarled into the phone.

"You chicken shit malignant eunuch bastard."

Dean's eyebrows shot up, that was an impressive insult. He'd have to remember it for future reference.

"I think she's pissed," Sam said as he loaded a sawed off and shoved it into one of the duffel bags they used to carry gear and stuck his own hand gun on his person. Dean was shoving things into the duffel as well, sticking a machete into his coat. Sam took possession of the demon-killing knife.

"Such language. You're calling me a coward?" Ahriman laughed.
"You're damn right I am. If you weren't, you wouldn't be hiding in an Immortal and using a mortal as bait," Erin spat back shoving a handful of rock salt rounds in her pockets along with extra clips, and picking up a rifle.

Beth screamed in obvious pain and Erin could only imagine what Ahriman was doing to her, she winced and gritted her teeth against the sound. The others heard that loud and clear. Cass's face became graven and Dean and Sam's tightened in fury.

"So help me God, I am going to kill you," Erin hissed through teeth clenched so hard it felt like her jaw would break.

"Sticks and stones, thirty seven minutes left," Ahriman taunted and then the line went dead. Erin shoved the phone back in her pocket and set her watch on a countdown marking the time, then spun in a quick circle looking for anything else to take.

"He's got Beth?" Sam said. Erin's eyes fell on the weapons Castiel had brought them. She grabbed the dagger without hesitation, but her hand quavered over the ring and the vial.

"I'm going after her. He told me where they are," Erin said trying to decide. If she used them she was signing her own death warrant and Christian's. Cass was watching her carefully, gauging her decision. She wasn't ready to use them and survive it he knew.

"You know this is a trap right?" Dean pointed out, checking himself over to make sure he had everything he wanted.

"Yes," Erin said, her outstretched hand closing, empty. She slid the dagger into her boot in place of the one that had been there. She would fight Ahriman but she still couldn't bring herself to kill Christian to do it. If Ahriman had possessed someone else she wouldn't have hesitated, but she couldn't do it. Cass watched and felt torn. To do this, to go up against Ahriman without all of the weapons was suicide but if he protested it, it would destroy whatever tender bonds of faith he might have cultivated in Erin. A quick glance proved that Dean and Sam knew it too and yet, they still looked resolved to the current course of action.

"Alright then. Let's go gank the son of a bitch," Dean said accepting. He wasn't any more likely to sacrifice an innocent girl than Erin or Sam were. Erin turned to face him then with such a look of surprise it was all Dean could do not to smile broadly.

"This is my fight. You don't have to do this," Erin said to all of them, the rest went unsaid. Because we're probably all going to die in the attempt.

"No it's our fight. You think we'd let you try and whoop hellboy’s ass without some back up?" Dean said with absolute sincerity. Erin smiled then, a free smile. One neither Dean nor Sam had seen before. Cass had seen it, almost two thousand years ago, on the face of a girl who'd danced along the edge of a cliff without fear and never known why. It was the first tiny shades of faith and trust. It was working. If Cass had been human he would have breathed a small sigh of relief, this might work after all. If they didn't all die first.

"We came to help Erin. We're not going to back out now," Sam added and she favored him with almost the same smile as he and Dean shouldered their bags. None of them had to say what passed between the three; it was the unspoken language all fighters spoke. The tilt of a head, the glint of an eye. The pact was sealed. They did this together.

"Seven fifty eight Forum Street. We've got thirty three minutes," Erin said without hesitation then, as one body they all turned and shot for the door, intent on driving to their destination. Cass was
quicker. He grabbed Dean and Sam by the shoulders. Dean grimaced slightly already realizing what he was going to do.

"You're not going without me. This is faster," Cass stated gruffly. Erin gave him a deep look that carried a shocked echo of gratitude and Cass returned it for a split second. Progress.

"Bend your knees," Dean said grabbing her hand and they were gone in a burst of wing beats.

###

The group reappeared on the corner of Forum Street, which ended in a cul-de-sac. Erin unbalanced and would have stumbled if Dean hadn't been holding on to her hand. She took a moment to regain her composure and get a feel of her surroundings as Dean grinned impishly. "Told you to bend your knees," he said as Cass removed his hands from Sam and Dean's shoulders. Erin ignored the quip, focused like a laser on the task at hand, making Dean raise an eyebrow at her lack of a witty come back. It raised a few hairs on Dean's arms she was so focused and reminded him for a brief moment of Cass when he was set on something.

Just because the street ended in a cul-de-sac didn't mean it wasn't busy. It was thronged with people. Across the street was an elementary school, before them was a under construction sky scraper slated to be called Century Tower, its rebar, glass and steel still raw to the eye as it was formed into the next monument to modern progress. Beside it was a huge law firm. There were cars constantly up and down the street; the parking lots were filled with them. Century Tower was their destination. Ahriman had picked a very public and very arrogant place for this.

"He would pick a sky scraper. How the hell are we supposed to figure out where Beth is?" Sam asked. Erin didn't look at him, she was looking straight up to the top of the incomplete sky scraper.

"Top floor. I'd say the roof if it had one yet."

"You can't possibly know that," Dean pointed out and Erin looked at him with cold certainty.

"Yes I do. Because, it's what I would do if I were him. He's mocking Immortals. Thing is I can't sneak up on him. He'll know I'm coming, you two can't kill him and we don't have time to climb a sky scraper," Erin said trying to form a plan. Dean felt a chill creep up his spine she was so deadpan about it. What did that say?

"What if we go up first and wait? Then you go up so he's focused on where you are and go in before we do. That'll give us a distraction," Sam suggested. Erin nodded curtly.

"Good plan. Now how do we get up there? We have thirty minutes left," she said checking her watch.

"Cass?" Dean asked. Castiel didn't wait for it to be explained. He could get them where they needed to be without wasting time and Dean knew it.

"Wait here," Cass said to Erin and then Sam and Dean disappeared with him. Erin swallowed hard and waited, a coldness building in her she'd fought for fifteen hundred years to suppress. She prayed silently, to a God who she believed reviled her, they'd make it in time.
Castiel deposited Dean and Sam on the top floor of the building. The inside was nothing but steel girders, glass, unfinished doors, and drywall that would eventually be the internal walls. The ceiling hadn't been installed yet, leaving nothing but sky above them. Dean took the lead, weapons loaded and ready with Sam and Cass behind him and they crept along the partially finished hallways looking for Ahriman and Beth. It didn't take them long. Beth was sobbing loud enough to be heard fifty feet away. They were mournful, muffled, pained sounds. Though they couldn't see her because the room she was in with Ahriman had no windows on the inside yet, they could tell she was, at the least, wounded. With Ahriman and Beth's position confirmed, Dean looked at Cass and Cass gave him a nod, disappearing silently. Proving that the sound of wing beats and rush of air was more a cordial warning that an angel was coming or going, than a byproduct of an angel's ability to teleport anywhere they liked.

Sam and Dean put their backs to the wall beside the door into the room, ready to burst in guns blazing at the right moment. Inside, Beth gave a pathetic moan of excruciating pain and both of them winced in sympathy. Sam heard a noise and looked in the direction it had come from. Down the opposite end of the hallway. Dean noticed and moved his head in a "What is it?" gesture. Sam motioned with his own down the hall.

"Pssst," came the sound again and Ruby's head popped around the corner of the adjacent hallway, motioning them to come there. Dean and Sam both looked dumb struck for a moment at her sudden appearance. Then Dean rolled his eyes in exasperation and gritted his teeth. He had no love for Ruby. She was a demon plain and simple, but on rare occasions, she'd had her uses. Including saving his life once, much as he despised admitting it. He never could shake the feeling that Ruby was up to something they just hadn't figured out yet. And, again, she was a demon. Dean couldn't reiterate that fact enough to Sam, who merrily ignored it because he believed Ruby was different. Dean didn't buy it for a second, he just couldn't figure out what purpose her helping them on occasion served. Yet.

Sam's surprise slid into anger, he'd been calling Ruby repeatedly because he was out of demon blood, out of the fix he needed to do what needed to be done. A secret he'd been keeping carefully hidden from his brother, who would never have understood. The blood allowed him to exorcise, torture, maim, even kill demons, on a whim. Only the very powerful, the most elite, could resist him after he'd drank it. Despite what the angels thought, Sam felt that Dean would never be able to prevent the apocalypse. He was too weak; something had irrevocably broken in him when he'd been sent to hell. Sam was the only one capable of doing the job as far as he was concerned. He would be the one to kill Lilith and stop the seals from breaking. With another rush of anger, Sam snarled slightly, Ruby would turn up now, having ignored him for well over a week. If she hadn't Sam could probably have solved this whole situation on his own, saving all of them the trouble they were in and the prophecy be hanged. Silently he and Dean slunk to where she was.

When they scrambled around the corner and reached her, Ruby was leaned against the unfinished wall panting with exhaustion, her otherwise almost invincible demonic form bound by the restrictions the body she'd possessed forced her to endure.

"What are you doing here?" Dean hissed accusingly. She had to be up to something and not something in their favor. It was the only thing that made sense to him. If Ruby had known about what was going on and waited until now to show up she was up to something.

"Give me a second. You got up here by angel transit. I had to climb," Ruby said, her voice breathy from her exertion. She had climbed part of the way so that wasn't a blatant lie. She'd used a swing
stage scaffold left attached to the building to get most of the way up, but it helped to play to Sam's
sympathies. She knew he was already angry, just as she wanted him to be but now she needed him
to forgive her, feel a little sorry for all she was doing to help him. She'd have to make it look good.

Sam, to Dean's surprise and never-ending joy, looked at Ruby with angry eyes. Maybe he was
starting to come around to Dean's way of thinking after all. "Yeah? I'm not feeling real generous
right now. So out with it. You after Ahriman? We already know he's a reject to his own kind," Sam
said terse.

Dean resisted the urge to clap him proudly on the shoulder. That's a boy Sammy. She's a demon
bitch. He had no way to know the real reason Sam was angry about Ruby's sudden appearance. Sam
didn't miss the hopeful glint in Dean's eye and his gaze slid sideways in shame. Dean couldn't know.
He'd never understand. Sam was doing what he had to do. It was the only way.

"Of course I'm here after Ahriman. What? You think I climb skyscrapers for kicks? I'm glad I caught
you in time. I'm really sorry Sam, I would have been here sooner if I had known you were involved
but I was trying to find a way to stop him and I did. I'm sure you know what's at stake here," Ruby
said with the best apologetic expression she could. It helped that this body had a pair of large, dark,
doe like eyes it took very little effort to make look genuinely sorry. She almost looked innocent and
she knew it.

"Oh yeah, we know. But how do you?" Sam said his voice still hard but the edge had softened. He
was giving in already. Ruby had to suppress a smile. Sam was so predictable when it came to things
like this. He wanted fervently to believe people were on their side.

At this distance Beth’s wails of desperation were little more than horrifying whispers. It didn't do
anything to ease Dean and Sam's apprehension about saving her. They would have preferred to kick
in the door and save the day. Sometimes it just didn't work out that way.

"Everybody knows Sam. The prophecy's not a secret. He's not exactly Daddy's favorite. He's
dangerous to everyone, he wants you two dead just to screw with the angels and demons almost as
much as he wants to take revenge on the guy who sent him back to Hell. He's a loose cannon," Ruby
said as she pulled a couple of hex bags from her coat pocket. Dean and Sam both covered their noses
to avoid the scent that wafted from them.

"What the hell have you got in there?" Dean asked. "It smells like gasoline."

"It is. They're soaked in it. Siphoned some out of the car I borrowed. Makes burning them faster.
These will get rid of Ahriman. You have no idea how hard it was to find something that would kill
him," Ruby pointed out stuffing the hex bags back in her pocket.

"You're sure those will kill him?" Sam asked, the tension in his voice going down another notch.
Good, she'd known once he thought she was trying to help them from the jump he'd back down like
a good little puppy.

"Sure as I can be. Immortals don't exactly get possessed by demons everyday so, you know, there's
some margin for error. At the least, they oughta knock him into next week," Ruby assured him. They
wouldn't kill Ahriman. She knew they wouldn't but they should knock him for one hell of a loop.
She had no intention of killing Ahriman. The prophecy had to play out nice and neat. Erin had to kill
her brother, and then she had to die possessed by Ahriman for this all to work. Ruby knew very well
the only weapons that would kill Ahriman were already in the Winchesters' possession.

"Whoa, whoa. If they kill Ahriman are they going to kill Christian too?" Dean asked his hand out to
stop the conversation, his gun hanging by his side in his hand almost as an afterthought.
"Christian? The guy Ahriman's wearing to the prom?" Ruby asked incredulous.

"Yeah, he's Erin's brother. She's not gonna be real happy if we gank her little brother along with a
demon. I mean, come on, that's like asking me to kill Sam. It ain't gonna happen," Dean pointed out.

"Grow a pair Dean, this is bigger than some half angel chick's wanna be brother. If Ahriman is
allowed to live he will kill you and Sam when he's done with the guy who sent him back to hell,"
Ruby said, playing dumb.

"Excuse me?" Dean bit back. Ruby smiled cockily and grinned.

"Maybe it's not that you haven't got the Daddy Pills, maybe you're thinking with your little head. Let
me guess you have the hots for her don't you Dean?"

Dean's expression grew fiercely angry, not that Ruby wasn't right or had been. While there was still a
tremendous attraction there, now it was more camaraderie, someone like he was that he related to,
maybe even some one he could call friend despite the short time they'd known each other and Ruby's
callous implication ticked him off. Royally. Dean pointed a finger at her. "You listen to me you hell
spawned bitch. That is none of your business," he began to rage, but Sam interceded, seeing the way
Dean's eyes flashed, making their green depths almost glow in malcontent.

"Okay guys let's stay focused here. We got a demon to get rid of, without killing the poor bastard
he's possessing." Dean and Ruby both shot him annoyed glances but relented. "How about we get
back into position before Erin gets up here?"

"Fine, but you keep your BFF demon bitch on a leash," Dean spat and then at Ruby, "You do not
use those hex bags unless there's no other choice. Got it?"

Ruby feigned looking slightly hurt by the implication that she'd just kill an innocent person possessed
by a demon. "Fine. I'm not a monster Dean."

"No, you're a demon," Dean shot back as they slinked back to the door to wait on Erin's distracting
entrance. Sam could only follow, his eyes shooting daggers at the back of Ruby's head for not
returning his calls or providing what he needed to do his job. Dean wasn't the only one who was
peeved with Ruby. Sam was just better at controlling his temper and hiding his real anger.

###

Meanwhile, clueless to Ruby's sudden appearance, Castiel came into existence at Erin's side. She
was standing, looking up to where they had gone, her eyes cold and hard, her lips in a thin
line. Waiting in eerie silence despite the busy traffic and the coming and going of people around her.
She stood like a rock in a hurricane. She didn't blink when Cass appeared at her side and clapped a
hand on her shoulder ready to transport her.

"There's a steel girder where construction stopped above the top floor," Erin said with little
inflection. Cass nodded knowingly and without a sound they disappeared from the side walk. None
of the passersby noticed.

They materialized on the girder high above the street, far enough away from the room below that
Ahriman could not use Christian's Immortal ability to sense his own kind to know she was there.
Cass held on to Erin's shoulder securely until he knew she had her balance. The wind this high,
whipping her long blonde hair back like a flag.

"Where is he?" Erin asked in a short voice. Cass took no offense to it. He knew her and he himself was prone to being straight and to the point. This was the Erin Dean and Sam would likely never see. He wondered if her half-angelic nature might be why she could be like this with him and not with Dean or Sam. Other Immortals were often the same way. Perhaps it was a trait that had carried over.

"Fourth room from the street on the east side," Cass informed her. Erin nodded and turned to balance her way like a tight ropewalker to her destination.

"You know if you use the dagger. Ahriman will know you have a weapon against him," Cass warned.

"I know," Erin said making her way down the girder toward the room below her. Cass followed, his trench coat billowing behind him. He didn't like the plan, but to question it would show he lacked faith in her. He had to have faith in her if she were to have it in God, for whom he was an agent. Using the dagger could put them at a bad disadvantage without going through with the whole scenario but he knew he couldn't ask any of them to let Beth die for the advancement of a long term plan. Their human natures, even Erin's, though she was only half, would refuse to accept it. For all their violence and destruction there were a select few humans who wouldn't throw their brethren to the wolves just to save their own necks. The Winchesters and Erin were among them.

"What are you going to do?" Cass asked. Erin turned her head to look at him.

"Dance on the edge of a cliff," she said and there was the faint hint of humor behind the tightness of her lips. There was that tiny flare of hope again, one he'd keep feeding. He gave her a knowing nod in return and returned to Dean and Sam below, who awaited him.

###

Castiel coalesced just behind Dean and Sam... and Ruby. He'd appeared silently so as not to alert Ahriman, when he briefly touched Dean's shoulder with his finger to his lips to indicate quiet and so he wouldn't alarm them with his arrival, his expression displeased. He gave the demon a withering glance and Ruby looked momentarily terrified, certain Castiel was going to destroy her for even being there but, just at the moment he didn't have time to. Erin would move swiftly to keep Ahriman from being able to react when he sensed her. Ruby opened one hand to reveal the hex bags in an attempt to explain she was on their side. Cass was wary. He didn't trust Ruby. She was a demon. Demons couldn't be trusted.

"Erin where she needs to be?" Dean asked, shooting Ruby another glance that was nearly as cold as Castiel's.

"Be ready. Her entrance will be abrupt... and loud," Cass warned. Dean's and Sam's eyebrows went up. They wondered what Erin's entrance was going to be. From inside the room they could hear Beth moan in pain. They could hear nothing from Ahriman. It made the hairs stand up on Sam's and Dean's arms. They had to bide their time. Wait. This was hell; they knew there was an innocent girl in there going through God only knows what and they didn't dare bust down the door, guns blazing to help her yet.
Ruby maneuvered to place herself as the first to enter the room when the time came. Dean snarled and stuck his sawed off, loaded with rock salt rounds in front of her. "Uh uh honey. You're the low man on the totem pole."

Ruby began to protest and Cass solved the whole problem, grabbing her by the shoulder and pulling her out of the way. "I'm going first."

He didn't want Ruby here. He was sure Dean didn't. Sam, he didn't know about but he did know if Ruby was up to something he wouldn't let her get the chance to do it. Erin was as much his charge right now as the Winchester's were. He would not let Ruby harm her or the boys.

"Have at it Smitey McSmitherton," Dean agreed moving so Cass could get into position, knowing if any of them had a real chance against Ahriman without using the weapons it was Cass. Cass's visage remained stern and focused as he took his post and they waited. Ruby stood behind them with a sour expression, unhappy she was being ousted to the back of the line like the outcast she was. Dean had to fight an honest chuckle of epicaricacy.
Chapter 13

Just as Castiel was replacing Ruby as the first man on the front line inside the building, Erin felt herself come into sensing distance of Ahriman. She moved with swift efficiency, sprinting down the girder, pitching herself into a cartwheel and twisting, then swinging like a trapeze artist off the edge of the girder with her hands in an advanced swing, sweeping down and pushing out with her legs, using them like a battering ram.

Everything happened at once. The momentum of the swing made Erin hit the glass pane of the window like a wrecking ball. The glass shattered inward with a crash, casting razor sharp, shining bits of confetti into the room before her.

The others on the opposite side of the door didn't miss a beat, as soon as they heard the first shard of glass break Cass flung the door off its hinges with a sweep of his arm, sending it careening into the room. Dean and Sam flanked him, guns cocked and aimed, fingers already squeezing triggers. Ruby brought up the rear, a hex bag in hand and a Zippo lit to set fire to it in the other, the flame only centimeters from the fabric.

Erin caught her feet landing like a cat, coming up in one smooth motion drawing her weapons, her sword in one hand, a gun in the other and was about to launch herself at Ahriman, who was dead center of the room. Beth was clenched in his hand in a death gripe by her throat, covered in blood, her clothes ripped and torn, jagged wounds sliced into her body. Ahriman's back was turned to the door, he'd turned to face Erin's oncoming presence and the maniacal smile of malicious glee on his face, eyes red as heart's blood from corner to corner, the twisted and perverted image of Christian, would haunt her for the rest of her life.

It was apparent that both of Beth's arms and legs had been broken in several places. She dangled like a disjointed doll, limbs twitching, a nausea inducing wet gurgling managing to escape from her open mouth and Ahriman's other hand was buried in her abdomen nearly to the elbow, slick with blood, the only stain marring his otherwise pristine formal attire. He moved faster than any of them could, it was like time had slowed down and they were moving through viscous fluid trying to move quicker and he was on fast forward. None of them could stop it. Not even Castiel. Ahriman chuckled low in his throat and wrenched his arm from Beth's body, her spinal cord clutched in his hand, ripped from her. She couldn't even scream in agony her throat was crushed so tightly in Ahriman's hand.

Erin roared in grief and fury, catapulting toward him, firing bullets rapidly. Castiel beat her there, moving so fast one second he seemed to be standing where he'd entered and the next Ahriman went flying through the air, thrown by the force of a palm to chest shove only an angel had the strength to deliver. Beth's mutilated body lay in a heap in the floor where Ahriman had dropped her when he'd been sent flying. He'd been struck so hard, the wall cracked with the force and he slid to the floor.

At the same time, Dean and Sam followed Ahriman's moving form and fired, hitting him dead on with salt rock rounds. They never penetrated, they hit, they should have torn through him like a rock through a taut sheet of paper. Instead, only his clothing showed that the rock salt had hit anything at all, small holes torn where it had hit. Beneath, the skin was as pink and healthy as it had ever been.

Ruby held back, genuinely concerned. Castiel hadn't been able to phase Ahriman, the rock salt hadn't. She didn't want to use the hex bags until she had to. What might knock Ahriman for a loop might well kill her. She wasn't as high in the ranks as he was, he was far more powerful even without an Immortal host.

Cass leveled a cold look at Ahriman, his own angel sword sliding into his hand from his trench coat.
sleeve and flipped it deftly into position and stalked across the room for him, intent on ending this before anything else could go wrong. His own blade might not be enough to kill Ahriman, but he figured it wouldn't do him any good either. They had never had a chance to save Beth and he'd known it. But, he'd also known Erin and the boys had to try. Ahriman got to his feet laughing and tilted over a piece of drywall that had not yet been hung. Behind it was scrawled a sigil in blood. Beth's blood. Dean and Sam recognized it immediately.

"Cass!" Dean shouted. Cass stopped in mid-step. He knew all too well what the sigil on the wall was. But it was too late.

"Have a nice trip," Ahriman taunted and slammed his hand flat on the center of the sigil. Cass lit up like a Christmas tree, brilliant white, and everyone was forced to cover their eyes or be blinded. Erin screeched once in shock and pain, flaring the same incandescent white, then she stuttered and skewed like a light distortion before stabilizing. It left her panting.

When they dared to look again, Castiel was no longer among them. He'd been banished by the sigil. Save the weapons he'd brought, of which Erin had only brought the dagger, they had just lost their most powerful chance against Ahriman in this fight. Erin had almost been banished along with Cass. Either something had kept her from it or her human half had kept her where she was.

"What the hell was that?" Erin gasped, angry.

"Angel banishing sigil. I guess you're immune... sort of," Dean said.

This was no longer a search and rescue. It was a fight to get out alive. Without Cass or all the weapons he'd brought them, they were toast. Dean jerked a flask of holy water from his jacket pocket, flipped the top and flung it at Ahriman as he lowered his arm, all it did was get the demon wet and, apparently, amuse him based on the smirk on his face.

"Not so tough after all, afraid Cass would smite your ass back to Hell?" Sam snarled.

Erin, teeth bared like a wild animal, used Sam's insult as a diversion. While Ahriman turned his gaze to Sam, she traded her gun for the dagger in her boot and tried to bury it in Ahriman's back, since it was now turned to her. Ahriman, as if he knew it was coming, spun, catching her by the wrist with his blood soaked hand and squeezing until the bones cracked and she was forced to let go, the dagger falling useless from her hand.

"Lovely piece of work. Where'd you get it?" Ahriman purred, continuing to squeeze, trying to force Erin to buckle as he swept out his other hand in a gesture, throwing Dean and Sam against the wall and pinning them there with a dull thud. Erin gritted her teeth and bore it, she'd suffered more than this at the hands of Tiberius Trajan, only a stilted growl showing that she definitely felt the pain of her crushed bones.

Ruby figured now would be a good time to try those hex bags, quickly she held the flame under them. Somehow, she'd managed, so far, to escape being thrown across the room. She cursed silently as, despite the gasoline, the bags took a moment to catch fire.

Dean began forcing out the words of an exorcism even though he was trapped as securely as if he had a two-ton boulder on his chest, "Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus, omnis satanica potestas, omnis incursio infernalis adversarii."

He never got further, Ahriman closed the hand he had out and twisted it as if he were turning a lever and Dean uttered a groan of pain as his voice was cut off, pain flaring in his chest as if someone were squeezing his heart.
"Stop!" Erin barked terrified Ahriman would kill Dean. This was a mistake, they might all die here. Ahriman paid no attention to her. He snapped back her arm. The sound of the bones breaking were like the snapping of wet, dead branches and Erin gave a bitten off yelp of pain as her knees wobbled in spite of her best efforts not to waver. The break would not mend until the cause of the injury was removed. Namely, Ahriman, forcing her arm back into an unnatural position.

Sam, as inescapably trapped as his brother, stared hard at Ahriman, unable to move his arms he made himself concentrate as hard as he could on Ahriman. Willing himself to exorcise the demon from Christian's body or kill him to save them all. His body shook with tremors he tried to put so much effort into it, blood beginning to trickle from his nose.

"Sam, no!" Dean managed to gasp desperately through the pain of having his heart clenched in an invisible iron fist. Using his powers was the last thing Dean wanted Sam to do. Sam didn't listen, certain he had to do it or they would all die. He concentrated harder; his head felt like it was on fire, on the verge of exploding. If he'd had the demon blood he needed he knew he could have done this without a thought. If Ruby hadn't been too busy to return his calls and give him what he needed. Now it might cost them all their lives.

Ruby finally caught the hex bags on fire and threw them right at Ahriman. They hit the floor at his feet and exploded like dynamite, filling the room with smoke for a moment before it cleared. Ahriman roared in anger at the intrusion and moved his focus from Dean and Sam long enough to slash his arm through the air like a whip, hurtling Ruby into the far wall with such force she went nearly through it and collapsed unconscious onto the floor, her clothing and exposed flesh seared like cooked meat by whatever had been in the bags. It had been something she'd been willing to risk. Injury just proved how self-sacrificing she was, how innocent of any deception she wanted them to think she was. It fed into her plans for Sam beautifully.

The tactic had two effects, it freed Dean and Sam from Ahriman's gripe and it drew enough of the demon's attention away from Erin that she could fight. She pulled back and kicked Ahriman in the stomach, shoving him and breaking loose of his gripe, her injured arm cradled close to her side for the moment. As soon as Ahriman stumbled backward, she did the unthinkable for an Immortal. She dropped her sword in favor of the rifle she carried. Flip cocking it, she shot one handed, blasting Ahriman in the chest. It didn't do him any harm, but it did send him careening across the room. Giving them time to make a move.

Dean took it, diving for the dagger Erin had dropped and rolling as he hit the floor in a slide. Ahriman was on his feet again in a blink. Sam picked up where Dean had left off with the exorcism, "Omnis legio, omnis congregatio et secta diabolica. Ergo, draco maledicte," arm outstretched, still trying to use his abilities to at least stay Ahriman.

Erin tossed off her rifle to Sam, who caught it with a well practice hand, and she darted for her sword, as Dean came up on his knees in a spin with the dagger and Ahriman launched himself at Erin. He beat Erin to the sword, using his foot to catch the blade and flip it into his hand. Erin stopped dead, trying to fling herself to the side as she saw what he intended to do but she was bound by mortal speed, unlike Ahriman. Being Immortal didn't grant her superpowers. It just made her hard to kill. He'd brought the sword around in an arch, catching her on her knees. Dean flung himself into the fray, sinking the dagger into the back of Ahriman's leg and pulling it back out as he dashed away.

"Ecclesiam tuam securi tibi facias libertate servire," Sam kept going.

Ahriman yelled in infuriated pain and surprise, his knees buckling part way, but he caught his balance ignoring the pain. The dagger had slashed deep, blood welling down his leg. It stopped the sword blade from severing Erin's head. Instead, the blade sliced along the side of her neck, leaving a
deep gash but the blade remained there. She didn't dare move. Dean got to his feet and Sam had brought the rifle to bare on Ahriman, stopping in mid sentence. They were at a standstill. They couldn't attack Ahriman. Not without him taking Erin's head in the process. Sam, desperate to try and save them, finished the exorcism, "Te rogamus, audi nos."

Ahriman only flinched as if an insect had bitten him. "Ow, that kind of hurts a little," he snarked turning his gaze to Sam, eyes brilliant red, the sword blade still against Erin's neck. Erin's eyes darted from Dean to Sam, who looked at each other and then at her trying to figure out what to do. If they could stall long enough maybe Cass would make it back before they all ended up dead. Maybe Ruby would wake up and somehow distract the demon long enough for them to get away.

Ahriman's gaze shifted to Dean, whose own expression went dark as their eyes met. "What you did, on the other hand. That really did hurt. Neat trick. Where did you get that dagger?" he said as his gaze traveled down to look at the dagger, still clenched in Dean's fist.

"Come over here and find out, you spineless, repulsive bastard," Dean provoked. He was trying to draw Ahriman away from Erin. If she could get out from under his blade, maybe they could at least whoop this demon's ass. Ahriman just laughed as if Dean had told him a joke instead of insulting him.

"I don't think that's helping Dean," Sam pointed out.

"Oh no, I'm not that stupid. But I'm tired of this game. Let's play a new one," Ahriman suggested maliciously and flung Dean and Sam against the wall again with a wave of his hand. They hit the wall with grunts of pain and Ahriman returned his gaze to Erin, who stared back at him, her eyes full of hate and grief. This was still her brother, this was still Christian. Behind the red eyes and the sickening smile lay the man she'd called family for three hundred years.

"Christian. I know you're in there. Fight it. Let me, let us, save you. Don't let him win," Erin pleaded desperately. If Dean and Sam could have, they'd have winced in pained sympathy. Her voice sounded so much like theirs had when one or the other had been forced into similar circumstance.

Ahriman chuckled again and shook his head in amused disbelief. "You just don't get it. None of you knows what you're dealing with do you?"

"Oh I get you're gonna die like the piece of scum you are," Dean growled. Ahriman shot him a dirty look and closed his hand, causing Dean to writhe in pain as his chest seized.

"You think Erin's the innocent victim here? You think she's some poor lost Immortal who's beloved brother has been possessed by big bad me? Allow me to let you in on a little secret. Erin's got more blood on her hands than you can even dream of," Ahriman intoned darkly, his eyes blazing as the room grew cold. Behind him, two forms began to coalesce. Erin looked truly afraid then, her face had gone white as ivory.

The shapes formed into a man and a woman, dressed in ancient rags. They terrified Erin, ripped at her soul more than Trajan or Ahriman ever could. Both were mangled so badly no one could have recognized them. Except her. Dean and Sam looked both mortified and annoyed. They knew the specters were nothing but illusions but they were hideously mangled.

The man, his name had been Cynan, was missing all of his toes and fingers, his body was criss crossed with cuts that went to the bone, the flesh flayed away, his teeth were missing and a gaping slit ran from the base of one ear to the other. That was just what they could see; Erin knew there was so much more hidden under the tattered rags of the clothing he wore. Enid, his wife was a charred mass of walking flesh, she'd been burned alive in the end, but beneath the charred remains lay
garrote marks, bruises and broken bones, her fingernails and toenails pulled out by the roots one by one. Erin knew intimately what every one of their wounds were. She knew because she'd been the one that had done it.

Ahriman reveled in the expression of abject horror and guilt that plagued Erin.

The man and woman, their eyes blank and flat with death for centuries, stared at Erin pleadingly as they advanced. Their mouths opened, they spoke, and Erin wanted to claw her own ears off just so she wouldn't be able to hear them.

"Why?" they asked, over and over again.

"They're not real Ahriman. They're an illusion. It won't work this time," Erin insisted. But her face said otherwise. She knew they couldn't be real, she knew it was another of Ahriman's tricks. But she couldn't bear to face what they stood for, the past they made her remember with horrid clarity. Tears glistened unshed in her eyes, for them, for what she'd done and couldn't undo.

"Does it matter? We both know who they are. We both know what you did. They're just two of how many? A hundred? A thousand? Do you even know how many lives you took? Or were there so many you just stopped counting? Two hundred years of cold blooded torturing and murder. But you didn't tell them about that did you? Just like you never told Christian or Duncan," Ahriman said gleefully.

Dean and Sam both looked mortified. Dean didn't know what to think, Erin didn't strike him as someone who'd do something like that. Hundreds, maybe thousands killed in cold blood? Why? Why would a prophecy declare her its hero if she were such a murdering bitch? It didn't make sense.

"Don't listen to him Erin," Dean said. He didn't believe it. He couldn't.

"He's screwing with you," Sam added.

Ahriman slid the blade of the sword so it sank deeper and Erin winced at the pain, she could feel a thick stream of blood seep down her chest from it. At least her broken arm had mended now. Ahriman's wounded leg had healed within moments of the injury and he cocked his stance into something mocking. "Tell your naive cohorts how many Erin."

Erin squeezed her eyes shut, the two phantoms were so close now she could feel their cold dead breath, oxymoron that it was. "How many?" Ahriman pressed digging the blade deeper.

"Five hundred seventy six," Erin confessed in deep shame, but it was Sam and Dean she looked at when she said it. They gaped at her. Horror and betrayal foremost in their expressions as she admitted to what she'd done.

"And how many were Immortals Erin?" Ahriman pushed. Erin swallowed hard, licking her lips, her face contorted with fifteen hundred years of guilt.

"A hundred and twelve."

"So that means you killed four hundred and sixty four mortals. Innocent men and women whose only crime was attracting the attention of a sadistic Immortal," Ahriman said. The ghostly man and woman wailed as if they'd been stricken. It made Sam and Dean's skin crawl, chilling them to the bone. Ahriman looked triumphantly down on Erin then at Sam and Dean. "This is the monster you're trying to help. She's worse than I am. I, at least, don't deny what I am."

"Shut your pie hole, you worthless son of a bitch," Dean spat at him, but all the sympathy he'd felt
for Erin, the connection he'd thought he'd found with her fled like vapor. She wasn't who he thought she was. She was as much a monster as Ahriman. She was one of the things they hunted. But Cass seemed so certain of her. He vouched for her. He even seemed deeply fond of her. How could Erin have managed to deceive an angel? They could look into your soul and see it all. It didn't matter. The only thing she was good for now was preventing Ahriman from succeeding, for fulfilling the prophecy. He felt hurt, he'd begun to care about her and she'd deceived him.

Erin saw it in his eyes and she looked crushed, unable to hold his gaze she looked at Sam who looked almost as hurt and angry. He'd warned Dean not to let his heart get tied up in this and Erin had turned out to be as much a monster as Ahriman. But was she? Wasn't he a freak and a monster for what he was doing? Hadn't Cass stood by her? He questioned more than Dean would. Maybe because he was walking on the edge of a knife himself. Was Ahriman's story as simple as it sounded? Or was there more to it?

"Erin why?" Sam asked, beseechingly looking for an answer from her that he could accept.

"There's no reason I can give you that justifies it," Erin breathed brokenly.

Sam grimaced in a mixture of sympathy and anger. She looked absolutely mortified by what she'd done, guilty to her core but her explanation seemed to leave no doubt that she was a cold blooded torturing murderer. The imitations of the poor souls Ahriman had called stood rock solid testimony to the pain and wrong she could do. Their expressions mournful and angry. Their bodies mangled beyond recognition. It took an incredible dark streak to do something like that. Dean squeezed his eyes shut as her answer stabbed at him more. A monster, she was a monster in every sense of the word.

"Now that you know what an abomination you've been trying to aid, I'll let you in on something else," Ahriman said viciously. "I'm not alone in my plans. You see Christian's awake in here," he said tapping his temple, "Has been the whole time and he's the mastermind behind part of this you idiot humans don't have a clue about. He doesn't want to be saved. He never did."


Ahriman feigned surprise, "Oh? Like you would never kill over five hundred people in cold blood? Don't believe me? Why don't I hand over the wheel for a little while. He can tell you himself."

Ahriman's posture changed becoming almost casual, his shoulders dropped a bit, the cant of his head became more lacks, the red receded from his eyes, and Christian took over. Eyes as brilliant blue as Castiel's but colder than ice staring down at Erin with utter and complete disdain. Inexorably, Dean and Sam remained pinned to the wall unable to move. Even if Christian was the one in control now, either Ahriman was still capable of using his abilities or somehow Christian was capable of subverting them for his own use.

"You poor, stupid, gutless, bitch," he snarled, even his voice was different. Slightly higher than it had been, it sounded more like the painfully young man he'd been when he'd become Immortal, barely more than a kid.

"Christian," she breathed. He bared his teeth in a grotesque smirk and dug the blade in deeper, harder than even Ahriman had done. Erin gasped in pain, sagging forward and bracing herself on one hand, the blade still firmly to her throat. If things kept up this way, she'd be beheaded a centimeter at a time. The rag clad man and woman moved with her.

"Killer, murderer, monster," they whispered loud enough Dean and Sam could clearly hear them. The tremor that shook Erin when they said it was hard to watch, even if they did know now, what
they hadn't before.

"You had it all. You could have been a God among men. Trajan tried to teach you, tried to show you the power, the potential, you had and you killed him for it. I suppose you never told me in three hundred years because you were afraid I'd see it. See the power Immortals could have and seize it. You lied to me, all your talk about doing what's right, honor, charity, morality. You're a hypocrite and a coward," Christian hissed.

"That wasn't power Christian. This isn't you, it's the dark quickening talking or Ahriman. He's lying to you Christian. That was murder and torture. It was innocent people killed for no good reason, killed because Trajan was a sadistic monster who made more just like him and then offed them, when they were no longer any use to him. That's not power it's evil," Erin reasoned desperately with him but to no avail. He just shook his head in disgust.

"Oh trust me, this is all me. No dark quickening, no Ahriman. Just me, with my eyes wide open to everything you kept hidden. You were a vicious killer. He honed you until you were the perfect weapon. You were a cold and cruel God who welded power that terrified any who saw it. And you threw it all away because of what? Because your conscience got the better of you? Because you suddenly gave a damn what happened to the people you tortured and killed? Or were you just too afraid of having real power? You're weak Erin. You always were," he rebuked her.

"Christian please. I'm begging you. Don't ally yourself with Ahriman. He's going to kill Duncan, and everything he holds dear. Some of those people are your friends. You care about them. What about Joe? Methos? You know Duncan, he's your friend. You've known him for hundreds of years. He tried to come here and help me save you but I wouldn't let him. Because I care about him. I didn't want Ahriman to kill him. Those people, me, we're your family, Christian. Immortals get the rare gift of being able to pick who they call family. How many people can say that? Please, you're my brother. Don't do this," Erin pleaded, her voice breaking, hoping against hope, that it was the dark quickening talking, or Ahriman. Duncan had said many things he never would have when he'd been under a dark quickening's influence. She held on to that hope with a vengeance.

"Too late. I've seen what I can be and I'll be damned if I'm going to buy into your simpering, do-gooder bullshit again," Christian snapped, anger flashing in his eyes. Erin leaned back on her heels and the man and woman, her hapless, defenseless victims, grabbed her by the arms holding her locked between them. Christian carefully kept the sword blade at her neck, refusing to relinquish the advantage he had. She looked almost like she were praying she was looking up at Christian with such fervor.

"Ahriman is going to kill Sam and Dean, the two men you've got pegged to a wall like hunting trophies over there, just because it will screw with the angels' and demons' plans. How many Immortals have you and he killed in the last week? How many mortals? Thirty five, Christian. How many did you know? How many did you call friend? Beth was your friend and Ahriman ripped her spine out like she was nothing but an altar sacrifice. How many had nothing to do with any of this? How many were innocent bystanders you and Ahriman killed for no reason? What's so great about that? Who ends up with the power in the end? Not you. Ahriman will subjugate you just like any demon subjugates the person they possess when you aren't any more use. He's just like Trajan and you are dangerously close to becoming the same thing," Erin pleaded desperately.

"You stupid son of a bitch," Dean said in a hoarse voice, "Even if she is a monster. She's right. Ahriman is using you, you idiot. You really think a demon is going to share power with anyone? You're going to kill your whole family just because a demon is dangling a power up in front of you? Something is wrong with you."
Christian ignored him, sliding the sword along Erin's neck, cutting deeper until the hilt touched it, he grabbed a hand full of her hair and wrenched her head back, exposing her throat, moving the blade so it rested there, threateningly.

"You know what I'm going to do? You think this whole thing is just about revenge on Duncan MacLeod and screwing with a few demons and angels we happen to be kin to?," he hissed into her ear, but making it loud enough everyone could hear it. All of them started as the realization that he knew exactly what Immortals were hit them, and still he was set on aiding Ahriman. He'd gone drunk with the notion of power he was never going to have.

"Don't look so surprised," he said to Erin, whose mouth hung open in horror. "Who do you think told Ahriman who would cut you deepest? Hm? Who do you think had the idea to use Beth as bait? Why do you think we've been killing Immortals in record numbers? I'm going to be the one who wins the prize with Ahriman's help. I'm going to have the power of a demon and all the Immortals at my beck and command. I'm going to be more powerful than anything you've ever seen. All those mortals? They were just fun. I watched every one of them die in terror and I loved every minute of it. Beth was just one more stupid cow to be slaughtered. You were a fool for ever letting this kind of power out of your grasp Erin. Now you'll die like all the rest. You thought you could save me but I don't want to be saved. We were just stringing you along, twisting the knife," Christian said laughing.

Erin's mouth shut and her eyes welled with tears she didn't bother to stop from flowing. They slipped down her cheeks leaving tracks where the soot from the hex bags exploding washed away. Sam and Dean blanched. The very idea of a demon possessed Immortal winning the prize was enough to terrify even them. As it was, Ahriman cum Christian was already nearly invincible. What would winning the prize do? What kind of super monster would it create given what they knew the prize really was? Did Christian even know what he was saying? Or had Ahriman neglected to tell him that part?

"Oh my god, you really are insane," Sam breathed. Christian ignored him as resolutely as he had Dean..

"You could join me Erin. I'd spare you if you'd take up the mantle again. Take back the power you once had. You were Trajan's best student. None of his others ever compared to you. You proved that by being able to kill him. That pitiful dagger of yours isn't going to do more than cut me. Though it is ingenious. Didn't think anyone could come up with something to even do that. You always were bright Erin, be all you can be. Stop pretending you are anything like these pathetic mortals," he tried to persuade her waving in Sam and Dean's prone direction.

"I'll show you pathetic you sorry son of a," Dean began, but Christian flicked his wrist and Dean's throat closed on him. He couldn't breathe.

"Dean!" Sam cried alarmed. Dean thrashed against the wall. He'd have been scrabbling at his throat if he could move his arms. Christian silenced Sam the same way he had Dean, closing his esophagus and cutting off his air with a gesture.

"Shut up. Can't you see I'm having a family discussion with my sister?" he growled sarcastically.

Erin swallowed hard and looked Christian straight in the eye. Utterly heartbroken. Any hope she'd had fled with the realization that her beloved Christian, her brother, had gone completely dark side. He'd become her worst nightmare. Another Trajan with infinitely more power and hungry for more. Her eyes hardened, her mouth set. Now she had two enemies. This was a moment every Immortal dreaded. That they would be forced to take the head of someone they had taught or had taught them, a friend, a lover, family because they'd turned evil.
"I'll die first," she said harshly. She was bereft, held in the literal clutches of her sins. Ahriman had won. There was nothing left. He'd destroyed everything she cared for, save Duncan.

"So be it," Christian snarled in rejected anger. He'd been certain he could convince Erin to join him. They had been so close once upon a time. He leaned in so only she could hear him and whispered, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." He stepped back and relished the look of desolation it left on Erin's face. With that one phrase he'd left no doubt in Erin's mind that he was in complete and utter control of what he was doing. That it was his choice and that he wasn't just a puppet to Ahriman's whims.

"You better kill me now," Erin seethed through clenched teeth.

"Oh? Or what?" Christian taunted. Dean and Sam could hear what was being said but they were coming close to blacking out. Neither could get a breath.

"Because if you don't I will find a way to kill you, both of you. I won't stop," Erin promised, careful to refrain from telling either personality residing in Christian's body that she already had a way to kill them.

Christian grinned wickedly, his stance unconsciously mimicking the way Ahriman stood when he was in control. "I know you won't. But you're powerless. What are you going to do? Have your mortal monster hunter over there poke me with that dagger again? It's useless, a child's toy. No matter what you do, what choices you make. It all ends the same. I win," His voice had changed again, the voice deepened. Ahriman had taken back control, his eyes flipping to red like he had a nictating third eyelid.

"You're wrong," Erin glowered.

"We'll see. Remember, I told you you'd beg me to kill you before this was over. You have nothing left, as soon as that sinks in you'll come crawling to me to take your head just to be free of it all. Call me," Ahriman gloated, his hand to his ear in imitation of a held phone and then he just wasn't there. Erin's sword clattering to the ground where he had been. With his sudden departure, Dean and Sam slid to the floor in crumpled heaps gasping in precious air in great gulps. But Ahriman's illusions, illusions that obviously had the ability to physically affect you, hadn't gone with their Master.

They remained and now they were free to do as they willed or maybe they were just doing as they'd been constructed to. With gleeful cackles, they hefted Erin up off the ground, still holding on to her arms and raced for the broken window Erin had swung through earlier. Erin didn't have time to fight them and they were unnaturally strong, it would have done her no good. In a way, she wanted them to kill her. She had no protest she could offer that absolved her from what she'd done to the real Cynan and Enid. She deserved it, anything they chose to do to her, she'd deserve and more.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered once in pitiful apology and then they hurtled her out the window fourteen stories up and disappeared as if they had never been there.

"No!" Dean yelled without thinking as he and Sam bolted for the window, leaning out still gasping to fill their lungs as Erin plunged like a rock to the cement on the street below them. She hit with a surprising soft but sickening thud, very dead.

"Erin!" Sam called unconsciously reacting on gut instinct. You saw someone fall out of a fourteen-story window and you completely forgot for a brief instant that it wasn't going to permanently kill them, or that just seconds ago they'd been outed as a brutal killer.

The fall had probably broken every bone in her body and even now people gathered around her
fallen form. She'd revive sooner or later, probably later given the amount of damage that had been caused. Somewhere in the back of their minds Dean and Sam knew it was only temporary but it still made their stomach's twist to see Erin smashed on the pavement like an eggshell. No matter how they felt about her now, Erin was the only certainty of killing Ahriman cum Christian.
Chapter 14

Dean and Sam were still staring down at the crowd gathering around Erin's fallen body moments later. An ambulance siren was fast approaching. Ruby moaned as she came around and Sam turned to check on her. She rose on her elbow and put one hand to her head squinting at the disaster and carnage around her. Beth was still lying in the middle of the floor where she'd fallen, a sticky pool of drying blood beneath her mutilated body.

"Did we win?" she asked. She knew they hadn't but at the same time Ahriman and Erin were both absent. She had no idea what was going on.

"Not exactly," Sam answered, moving to help her to her feet. With Sam's help she clambered up, her clothing a dirty, torn mess but she'd healed while she'd been unconscious at least. Dean was still leaned out the window, both hands gripping the window seal until his knuckles turned white. Erin had been deceiving them all along. She was as big a monster as Ahriman. Five hundred seventy six people in two hundred years and she hadn't even been able to give them a justification for it. She'd admitted there wasn't one. He couldn't get over it, he couldn't stomach it.

He'd kissed her. Held her when she'd broken apart only to discover someone he'd thought he had a connection with had all been a lie. Again. Dean was hurt and furious. If killing Ahriman didn't kill her, he'd kill Erin himself. She was just another thing he and Sam hunted. A supernatural, piece of murdering crap. But he'd never known Cass to make a mistake like that. To trust someone so vile. He was an angel; Cass didn't make those kinds of mistakes.

"You okay?" Sam asked Ruby. She brushed herself off and took stock of the damage.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry the hex bags didn't work. They were a long shot," she said in feigned apology.

"Hey you tried, That's what matters right?" Sam assured her, a little less angry at her given the circumstances. At least Ruby hadn't been lying to them the whole time. Hadn't snared his brother into her web just to crush him when he discovered the truth about her. If he only knew that was exactly what Ruby was doing to him.

Cass reappeared quite suddenly, with a great gust of wind, in the exact same spot he'd been banished from earlier. It felt like it had been hours since they'd last seen him but it couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes. He looked incredibly pissed off and a little more rumpled than usual, his never quite straight tie turned completely backward in its Windsor knot, the trench coat he habitually wore riding low on his shoulders over his open suit jacket and his white shirt bagging even more than normal from his belted waist. He looked around and grew grave.

"Where are Erin and Ahriman?"

"Ahriman took a hike. Erin, lying bitch that she is, is down there," Dean said tightly, his jaw flexing in barely restrained anger as he waved offhandedly out the window, but the fact he was torn colored his voice. Cass looked confused for a moment but relegated finding out what Dean's problem was for later. Why the sudden degradation of Erin? He'd been more than willing to risk his life a few minutes ago. Cass came to Dean's side, quickly scooping up Erin's sword and pausing to gaze at the blade with blood still on it. He stashed it in his coat and peered out the window with a deep frown. Sam and Ruby joined them.

"She should have been banished along with me. In fact, it should have been much worse for her,"
Cass observed.

"So her being half human didn't have some side benefit or something?" Sam asked.

"No. Something or someone kept her here. I don't know what or who."

Cass tilted his head and looked slightly disconsolate, his lips pressed together tightly. This could be a problem. It bothered him seeing Erin broken on the pavement below like a porcelain doll, even if he did know it wouldn't truly kill her. He was, after all, an angel and a true servant of heaven did not take pleasure in suffering of any kind, even if they were the ones who had to cause it. He did not enjoy seeing others in pain, least of all those he'd gotten attached to. It took a lot for him to admit that. But he had, to Erin, to Dean, even to Sam, who was walking a dark path none of them knew what was.

"We better get down there. It's not going to look good when she wakes up without a mark on her. Someone may have already noticed she's healing," Sam pointed out, pragmatic as he gathered up their fallen weapons. They could figure out the whole Erin-is-a-monster debacle once they were in the clear with the public. And despite her open admission of guilt Sam was trying to reserve judgment, he was the last person to judge someone. He wanted to know the whole story first.

Dean, reluctantly agreed, "We better hurry up then, I can see the ambulance down the street a couple of blocks."

Erin's sudden public demise was about to cause a lot of problems. It would not be easy to explain her resurrecting in front of a crowd or if someone recognized her later. No doubt, that had been Ahriman's intention. Killing her in such a public manner destroyed any hope she had of maintaining her current identity.

Cass clapped a hand on each of the boys' shoulders and to his great distaste Ruby linked her arm through Sam's. With a sharp glance of disapproval, he whisked all three of them out of the sky scraper and just behind a few sparse palm trees that were the rudiments of landscaping that would soon bedeck the skyscraper's tiny lawn only a few discrete feet away from Erin.

She was still dead and despite the crowd that was around her it was more disconcerting to see her this close. Her skull was smashed from the impact with the pavement, blood seeping from the wound. Her arms and legs were at odd angles, they were certainly broken in several places. She seemed flatter than she should have been, the force of her landing shattering her rib cage. Her eyes stared off into nothing and a trickle of blood ran from her open mouth. Worst of all, she still had the guilt laden, heartbroken expression on her face she'd had when she'd fallen.

A Good Samaritan, a young woman, had knelt by her body, two fingers to her throat checking for a pulse. She frowned sadly and shook her head. Dean wedged himself into the fray kneeling next to Erin's broken body, the others strung their way in as well. The ambulance lights could be seen working their way through the midday traffic toward them. They had very little time to figure out how to salvage the situation.

"She's dead, sir," the young woman told Dean. Even as they stood there, the rag tag group noticed a tiny lick of electricity crackle over the gash in Erin's neck. The wound closed part of the way in its wake. Dean placed his hand flat over it to hide the healing wound from anyone's sight. The young woman mistook his action and the apprehensive expression on his face for sorrow.

"Did you know her?" she asked gently. Dean opened his mouth to answer but Cass turned his head briefly to look at the woman.
"She's my niece," he said matter of fact.

The woman gasped and placed a hand over her mouth in sympathy. "I am so sorry. Your niece is in the arms of the angels. She'll be one of them now. They will wing her home."

Cass, socially naive as he was, didn't think about what he said before he said it, he was simply voicing the truth. He shook his head slightly, "No, she's not in any angel's arms. Dean is not an angel. She's only half angel. Angels do not wing anyone home, that's what Reapers are for."

The woman blanched and looked taken aback, Dean jumped to intercede before Cass innocently screwed the pooch. "He's suffered a horrible shock, excuse him if he sounds like a lunatic," he said looking at Cass askance and silently willing him to shut up. Cass looked confused but kept his tongue. Humans were so convoluted. All he'd told the woman was the truth.

The woman's mouth opened and shut and she swallowed whatever she'd been about to say. "Of course. I am very sorry for your loss," she said and moved back.

"We haven't lost anything," Cass pointed out looking the situation over. The woman looked horrified by the statement. The crowd had begun to move back some and so Dean figured they could get away with speaking in a low voice without being heard by onlookers.

"Cass, you can't go around dishing out bald faced truth like that," Dean hissed.

"Why not?" Cass asked.

"Because it makes you look like a crazed douche bag. We're human dude. Somebody consoles you because you're niece just took a header out a skyscraper window, you say thank you. Otherwise, you look like a callous bastard, Dean explained. Cass just looked further confused. He brushed it off and returned to the current problem, "We should move her before she revives."

"We can't the ambulance is here and there are way too many people to do it without being seen," Sam said looking around. The paramedics were already pushing a stretcher through the back of the crowd. People parted to let them through whispering among themselves. Such a public death, one that looked like a suicide, was rare. It was like a train wreck, you didn't want to look but you had to.

"How long will it be before she comes back?" Dean asked. Cass looked over calculating how long it would take. They were going to have to let things run their course.

"Half an hour at the earliest. The damage is extensive."

"Alright, I say we let the ambulance take her, then head them off at the hospital. We'll snatch her from the back when they get there. They aren't going to be in any hurry to get her in the ER since she's already dead," Dean suggested.

"It's the best thing we can do right now. Bad enough they are going to wonder what happened to her body," Sam agreed.

"I defer to your better judgment," Cass said. He really didn't see why he couldn't just whisk them off and be done with it. What did it matter if the people here wondered what had just happened? It was beyond their comprehension anyway. God's warriors didn't have to answer to humans when there was cause for action but the boys seemed certain they couldn't do that.

Ruby was wisely keeping her trap shut, hovering behind Sam like a shadow. Things were going very well indeed. She shouldn't have to push much at all to keep things on the right path for her plans. Ahriman was doing most of the work for her, she just had to be sure they both died in the end.
As things stood that shouldn't be very hard to do.

Cass, satisfied they had a working plan stepped back out of the way as the paramedics trundled up the stretcher and leapt into action. Dean seceded his place to one of them glad to see the gash in Erin's neck had healed over completely. At least now, they wouldn't see a wound close right in front of them. Erin would have to keep her cover of being dead on her own until they could get her out. He didn't doubt she had a lot of experience with that as an Immortal.

"What happened?" Cass asked as the paramedics worked.

"A lot. Seems Erin's as much a monster as Ahriman," Dean said with anger seeping back into his voice.

"I don't understand," Cass said looking between Sam and Dean.

"Found out Erin's not what she pretended to be huh?" Ruby snarked. Cass shot her a dark look.

"Erin did not pretend to be anything but what she is."

"You knew about this already?" Dean seethed.

"Yeah, but we didn't exactly have time to discuss it," Ruby shot back.

"Can we talk about this later? It'll make a lot more sense when we can tell Cass the whole thing at once," Sam reasoned.

"Tell me what?" Cass asked again as the paramedics lifted Erin's shattered body onto the stretcher in a black body bag.

"Later Cass," Sam said and caught one of the paramedics by the arm as they began to push the stretcher back to the ambulance. "Where are you taking her?"

"You know her?" the paramedic asked a little surprised he'd been stopped.

"Yeah, we're, we know, knew, each other," Sam explained.

"I'm really sorry man. You can't see something like this coming," the paramedic offered consolingly.

"Thanks. We appreciate it," Sam said.

"We'll take her to Jefferson Memorial on Presidio. It's just south of here," the paramedic said, looking sorry for them.

"Thanks," Sam said and the paramedic gave him a sad nod of his head before they pushed the stretcher away.

"We should go," Cass said and moved back toward the cover of the sparse palm trees. The others followed him, Dean looking back over his shoulder once dismally. This was a helluva mess.

"Take us back to Erin's place. We can't keep taking Angel Air everywhere. We're going to need a car to pull this off," Sam said. Cass didn't acknowledge if he understood or not he just grabbed Dean and Sam by the shoulders and gritted his teeth when Ruby salaciously grabbed Sam's hand. Assuming without asking that he would take her along. Dean gave her a dirty look too. There was nothing about this he liked. Nothing.

Just before they disappeared, Dean said, "I tell you what. If taking out Ahriman doesn't kill Erin. I'll
do it myself." It earned him a startled look from Cass as they blinked out.

###

They arrived in the alley behind *Between the Lines*, where Erin's Mustang and Dean's Impala were parked and Cass immediately removed his hands from the boys’ shoulders. The alley was cool despite the Florida heat and damp. Alleys always were, trash scattered by the breeze rustled in the afternoon stillness.

"What is going on Dean? Why do you want to kill Erin?" he asked stern. Something had gone very wrong while he'd been banished.

"Because she's a monster that's why," Dean said, heading straight for the Impala without hesitation, ready to get this over with.

"I don't understand. Erin is on our side Dean. She's not a monster," Cass insisted.

"That's what you think," Dean growled, jerking the door of the Impala open, about to throw himself behind the wheel.

"Would someone please tell me what the hell is going on?" Cass asked. That got a raised eyebrow from all of them. Cass rarely cursed. When he did, it was either hilariously inappropriate or incredibly well timed, but he never did it unless he was truly pissed or very vexed.

"Well, it seems Christian has been awake the whole time Ahriman has been possessing him. He never wanted anyone to save him. He and Ahriman killed all those Immortals before he got to Erin because, he's power hungry, he wants to be the one who wins The Prize, with Ahriman still possessing him. The mortals were just for kicks. The guy’s a real piece of work. Whoever he used to be he's a monster now.

"And he outed Erin. Made her confess she's no angel either. She murdered close to six hundred people in two hundred years in cold blood. Tortured them. From what I gathered she helped the teacher, Trajan, she claimed to hate so much, to just kill for the pleasure of it. Ahriman called an illusion of two of the people she'd done it to. They were really messed up Cass. I mean really messed up. Christian offered to let her live if she'd join him," Sam explained. Cass's expression grew progressively sour through it.

"She'd die first," Cass said with certainty.

"So she said. But does that really matter? She killed hundreds just because she could Cass. She's as much a monster as anything else we've hunted," Sam affirmed.

Cass shook his head, "No."

"She admitted it, Cass. She admitted there was no justifiable reason for it. She's been playing all of us. All that crap about Alexander and Trajan and all the rest of it. She's a serial killer. She's good, I'll give her that. She even has you snowed," Dean said petulant, speaking up. He'd paused with the car door open.

"You don't understand Dean. It's not like that," Cass argued. Dean shook his head in disbelief at the naive angel.
"Yes, it is like that Cass. And if she survives this, when Ahriman's dead and gone, I'll finish the job. She's just one more monster," Dean said gruffly. He was still torn. Monumentally angry he'd let himself be roped into her innocent act, hurt that he'd been wrong about her when he'd been convinced as strongly as Cass that they had to find a way around the prophecy. That she shouldn't have to die. That she was one of the good guys. That he'd made some sort of connection with her.

"I agree with Dean. The bitch has got to go. Bad enough Ahriman/Christian is going to take over the Immortals the same way the demons planned to. You don't even want to know what he could do with that kind of power and he only serves his own interests. We can't have something like her running around too. They both have to die. The prophecy just backs that up," Ruby added. Cass gave her such a cold look of anger she went wide-eyed.

"You know about the prophecy too?" Sam asked in surprise.

"I told you I was busy," Ruby said with a shrug.

"You have no say in this. You're an abomination. Shut up," Cass said without a single change in tone. That just made the impact that, Castiel, who never did this sort of thing, had just told Ruby off, all the more dramatic. Castiel was really angry.


"Hey, I'm just pointing out the obvious," Ruby said, hands up defensively, "She's as bad as the thing you're trying to kill."

"Shut up. Or I'll do it for you," Cass threatened.

"Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you," Ruby snapped back. But the coldness in Castiel's eyes made her really afraid. He could smite her with barely more than a thought if he chose to. Dean and Sam even looked a little surprised by the vehemence of his words. When it was apparent Ruby wasn't going to say anything else, Cass turned back to Dean.

"You're wrong," Cass insisted again. Dean left his place at the car and walked to confront Cass. His friend just wouldn't see reason.

"No, I'm not Cass. Look, I know she's kin. I do. But she killed five hundred seventy six people in cold blood. She tortured them before she finally killed them. I've been tortured. It's not pleasant. We use her to get rid of Ahriman and then we gank her before she can go dark side again and become worse than Ahriman. She's a monster Cass," he reasoned his voice soft in apology for having to speak the truth.

"I don't know Dean. She looked pretty torn up over the whole thing. How do we know Ahriman and Christian weren't just twisting it to their advantage? What if there's more to it?" Sam put in but if Cass or Dean heard him, they gave no indication of it.

Cass pegged Dean with a steely look, his voice low, "No."

Dean shook his head in dismal exasperation, "Listen to me Cass. She has got you snowed man," he began but Cass grabbed him by the front of his jacket, quick as a snake striking, spinning him around and pinning him to the alley wall.

"No, you listen to me, Dean. Erin is not a monster. She is exactly like you," he seethed. Dean's black and white view of the world had just pushed Castiel as far as he could go. Things weren't that simple.
"Whoa, Cass. Hold up," Dean pleaded, relenting. He'd rarely seen Castiel this angry. Cass wasn't hurting him, but it wouldn't take much to. Sam and Ruby could only look on in shock.

"When Trajan captured Erin, killed her family, killed Alexander. He tortured her. For three Hundred. Years. She refused to do what he wanted and he only got more creative. That's what Trajan did. He found someone with the potential to become Immortal, forced it to happen and then he tortured them until they broke. All they had to do to make it stop was give in, to do what he wanted, to kill and torture for him. Erin was his best student, none of them were as good, none of them took as long to break and when he thought they were becoming too strong, that they might be a threat, he took their heads. Erin wasn't the first, she was just the last. It took three hundred years of torture but she finally broke.

"Yes, she did kill, she tortured, she maimed. For two hundred years she did Trajan's biding and then she turned on him, she couldn't do it anymore. She couldn't let innocents die just to spare herself Trajan's wrath. She killed Trajan, knowing that if she stepped wrong even once that was it. It was over. Immortals don't get second chances Dean. They win the first time or they die. Trajan was seven hundred years older than her, stronger, cruel, insane, evil and she still stood her ground. She has spent the last fifteen hundred years trying to atone for her sins. She didn't have a justifiable reason to give you because she doesn't believe there is one. She doesn't think she deserves to be saved. Just. Like. You.

"How many did you torture while you were in Hell Dean? So many you lost count. You did the same thing Erin did, so who are you to judge her? Do you really think God would appoint a monster to carry out a prophecy? Do you think I'd be so blind as to be deceived that easily? I am the one who brought Erin down from the Guff of Souls. I gave her this life. I watched over her for years and then, when she needed me most, I was forbidden to help her. I could have stopped it all and I didn't because I was ordered not to. I know Erin better than anyone. I have watched her for two thousand years. She is not a monster, anymore than you are and I will not let what happened before happen again," Cass finally finished, releasing an awestruck Dean. His mouth gaped and he looked humbled. A rare thing for Dean.

Cass turned away, getting a grip on himself. His burst of anger was shameful and he knew it. The more he was around humans the more he emulated them. Emotions were frowned upon within the garrisons. His superiors would not be pleased if they learned of this.

"Oh man. Oh my God," Dean mumbled. He'd had no idea and now he felt guilty for the way he'd reacted. The connection had been real. She was just like him, in more ways than he'd fathomed. "Cass, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"It's forgotten. Don't worry about it," Cass said softly and turned back to him. Now Cass's face was plaintiff and forlorn. "If you doubt her now, if you have no faith, no trust. Then we've already lost Dean. You must have faith in Erin. It's essential to this fight. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dean assented somber.

"Do you understand the prophecy yet?" Cass asked looking from Dean to Sam.

Sam canted his head in the negative. "No Cass. I'm sorry. We're trying but it's just not jumping out at us. It looks like exactly what it says on the tin."

"I know it. It's a pretty straight forward prophecy," Ruby said, quick to try and dissuade them from digging further. She didn't need them realizing what Castiel apparently already knew about it. Prophecies were good that way. If you didn't go about things just right you could royally screw yourself over. He couldn't tell them what it really meant. They had to figure it out on their own. She
quailed quickly under Castiel's infuriated look though. Snapping her mouth shut again before he decided to blast her with holy light back to hell.

"Prophecies are never straight forward. Watch your tongue. You are only here because you have been of use before. The second you cease to be, you will be eliminated."

"Wow Cass, protective much?" Dean joked lightly. Cass, failed to see the humor.

"Erin is my kin. I am no less protective of you and Sam. You are my friends," he answered truthfully.

Dean beamed at him and clapped Cass's shoulder heading back to the car with his spirits restored. He wouldn't turn it into a chick flick moment, but he couldn't deny that had made him feel a little warm and fuzzy for just a moment. Cass was trying to correct what he couldn't stop in the past. He was protective of Erin, of him, of Sam because he thought of them as at least friends. Erin wasn't the monster Dean had feared. They could and would do this. They were The Winchesters with an angel up their sleeve, an Immortal in their back pocket and a demon on the side. No one was going to beat them down. Dean wouldn't let them.

"Come on, we gotta get Erin outta hock before they cram her in a freezer. I don't think she'll be real happy if she gets turned into an immortal-cicle," Dean urged slamming the Impala door. Sam shrugged, that was Dean. Once he'd made up his mind, that was it. They all filtered into the car and Dean flipped on the radio, throwing the car into gear. Bon Jovi's *Keep the Faith* came barreling through the speakers, to which Dean began singing along.

All Sam could do was grin and shake his head while Ruby, as far on the opposite side of the backseat from Cass as she could get, looked annoyed by it and fearful of Cass. Cass just looked befuddled by Dean's sudden rise in mood, underlying it was a hell-bent determination to beat this without getting any of them killed. Dean belted out the next verse off key as they pulled out. Dean had his own style that was for sure.

Sam's humor at his brother lasted only long enough for the song to hit the lyrics just after the guitar solo and then Dean dropped into silence, the words weighting on them. Suddenly the song and Dean's joking wasn't so funny. It was tragic.

###

Erin sucked in a gasping breath of life that was heavy with the scent of plastic. The air was stale and she felt like she was in a cocoon and she couldn't see anything but darkness. She'd been in this situation before. Body bag. She felt the bump and sway as the ambulance made its casual way to either a hospital or the county morgue. Then, she remembered what had happened, how she'd gotten into the body bag.

A fourteen-story fall, thrown out a window by the specters of people she'd murdered, tortured horribly more than fifteen hundred years ago. Innocent people, all her sins laid bare for Sam and Dean to see, and no explanation for them that could begin to justify what she'd done. Christian turned into what she hated and feared most, willingly. A monster, just like Trajan, just like her. She wished she'd never revived.

The fact she had surprised her. She would have expected, with the news of her past mortal sins,
Dean and Sam would have made short work of her after she crashed to the pavement below the sky scraper. Rid the world of one more monster. She wouldn't have blamed them. She deserved it.

Castiel might be dead. She had no idea what that sigil had done to him. If he was, it was her fault. All of this was. He'd been wrong. Some sins couldn't be forgiven. Surely, Dean and Sam just hadn't had the heart to kill her. That's why she was in a body bag now. They'd probably left her to whatever fate she met and moved on or gone after Ahriman alone. She couldn't blame them, but neither could she let them die for her if they had.

Ahriman would kill them eventually. Now, after he'd had his revenge on Duncan, it didn't matter. Sooner or later they would die. She couldn't and wouldn't let that happen. She'd consent, she'd fulfill the prophecy and hang trying to find a way around it. This had to come to an end before more innocent people died. Enough people had died because of her.

Ahriman was right, she'd lost it all. Christian, her beloved brother, the thin veil she hid behind in the name of seeking redemption for crimes she could never atone for, her identity, any inkling of faith or hope for salvation she'd had. There was nothing left. But, he'd made a mistake that would prove fatal. She wouldn't let him and Christian win the prize. Duncan still lived and she intended to make sure he stayed that way. Dean and Sam would be next in line if she didn't do this. She'd found her line and her resolve. In his arrogance, he'd forgotten the most important rule Immortals lived by. There Can Be Only One. And it damn sure wasn't going to be him. She'd do what every teacher dreaded, she'd do what every Immortal had to prepare themselves for one day. She'd kill Christian, though it broke her heart and killed her soul. She'd do what she had never thought she could.

But first she had to get out of this body bag before the paramedics realized she wasn't dead. She fumbled with the zipper. It was difficult to get it open part way from the inside and the cool fresh air was sweet as honey. In the darkness of the body bag she waited. She'd have to wait until the paramedics left her, to sneak away. Otherwise, she'd give herself away. So, she was either going to have to play morgue break or ditch from the ambulance when the chance arose. Either way, she had to wait.

###

Dean, let the Impala idle behind the line of cars parked nearest the ambulance entrance to Jefferson Memorial. After the unintentionally ominous lyrics they'd been gifted with by the local radio station, Dean had cut the radio off. The car was quiet.

It was broad daylight out. This was going to be one haphazard body snatch. Especially when the body wasn't as dead as the paramedics thought it was.

"Okay, uh, when the ambulance gets here we... I dunno, distract the paramedics, hijack Erin and get the hell out of Dodge," Dean suggested peering through the fringe of shrubbery that obscured their view of the ambulance dock. He'd have preferred a spot with a better line of vision but there wasn't one. Not where they wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. The paramedics had seen them, they couldn't just pretend to be someone else to do this, they were going to have to be sneaky.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious, for that eloquent summary of what we need to do," Sam teased.

"You got a better idea genius?" Dean shot back.
Sam held his hands up in surrender. "No," he admitted. "But gimme a second I can come up with something better than snatch and grab," he added in defense. As he said it, the ambulance that had picked up Erin came into view on the hospital's labyrinthine driveway.

"Look, we can't just go in there and demand they give us a dead body dude," Dean argued with his brother. This wasn't uncommon. They often disagreed on how to accomplish the little tasks. Snatching a not-so-dead body was definitely on the little tasks list for them.

"I know that Dean," Sam argued back. The ambulance had turned a corner and would be here in a minute. They didn't have a real big window of opportunity unless they wanted to try and break her out of the morgue. Which they didn't.

Neither noticed Cass looking from one to the other in the back seat as if they were missing something. Even, Ruby threw her hands up and shook her head as the two brothers argued. It should have been obvious. Cass looked a little exasperated and then disappeared without a sound.

"Okay, so what? You go pretend to be the heart broken friend or something, while we sneak her out? You're the one with the puppy dog eyes. They always buy it from you," Dean suggested.

"Might work," Sam agreed.

The ambulance finished its slow trek up to the dock and stopped.

"Come on, let's do this," Dean said, his hand going for the handle of his door to get out.

"That won't be necessary," Cass said.

"What, now you have a plan suggestion? When did this become a tribunal?" Dean said in a put upon voice turning to look at the angel. He was right back where he had been. Except now, Erin, hair a matted bloody mess, clothing bloody and rent, with a look of tormented, guilt-ridden determination, was between him and Ruby.

Dean blinked. "Oh."

"Or we could do that," Sam remarked.

Dean turned back around and threw the car into gear again, backing out and going a direction out of the hospital that the paramedics wouldn't see. The paramedics had just opened the back doors to the ambulance and both stood there with expressions of stark shock and amazement, white as sheets... at an empty body bag on a gurney.

Despite the melancholy aura that permeated the air, Dean had to chuckle. "Good luck explaining that one guys."

###

None of them had said anything yet. As soon as Cass had retrieved her and Dean had made his crack about the paramedics explaining Erin's missing body, the air had become thick with tension. Despite all of Cass's assurances, despite Dean's deep trust and faith of the angel. It didn't change the fact the last words they'd heard Erin utter had been a confession to the murder and torture of close to six hundred people. There was no easy way to segue into a conversation with that hanging over their
heads and none of them, not even Cass could think of what to say. Dean hadn't gotten them back on Presidio Blvd for more than five minutes before Erin spoke.

Erin's voice was soft, almost inaudible, she didn't look up at any of them, she looked down at her hands as if she couldn't bear to meet their eyes.

"Who are you?"

The question was directed at Ruby and Dean's and Sam's backs went ridged. Now, would not be the best time for Erin to find out that Ruby was a demon. Not that Dean wouldn't be immensely satisfied if Erin took it into her head to gank the hell bitch in the backseat, he hated her. But, if Ruby could offer any help they might need her and the fury it was likely to trigger when Erin discovered that Ruby wasn't human or angel could be... bad. If her railing at Castiel had been intense, her fury at them and Ruby would be brutal Dean suspected.

"Ruby. I'm a friend of Sam and Dean's. Sorry I didn't show up before now I was trying to help them find a way to kill Ahriman," Ruby offered in explanation. Dean couldn't stop his mouth from opening.

"A friend of Sam's. You and me, we're more like Enemy Mine," he pointed out in no uncertain terms. Friend was the last word he'd ever use to describe Ruby.

Ruby sighed, "Don't mind him. We've just got some... bad blood... between us." She forced herself not smirk at that jab at Dean and he'd be clueless to its real meaning. Sam, however, was not. He wasn't obvious about it, but Ruby noticed the tight way his shoulders crept up and he gazed out the passenger side window. His mouth set firmly, even in profile.

Erin nodded slightly in acknowledgment, not really caring at this point. She'd already made her decision. "I appreciate that but it doesn't matter now."

"Of course it does. We'll find a way out of this Erin. I said we would and we will," Dean said as he pulled behind Between the Lines and parked the Impala. Cass stepped out of the car and Erin slid out behind him, shutting the door carefully. He caught her eyes with his for just a moment and her gaze slid away. He knew what she was going to say before she said it and his head tilted in anguish.

"No we won't. I'm doing it," she said with resigned conviction.

"What?" Sam said in disbelief as he shut his own door. "Erin, it's suicide."

Erin looked at him over the hood of the Impala, with a morosely sardonic grin. "It's not suicide. It's justice."

"Whoa, whoa. Just hold on a minute," Dean insisted ducking out of the car, hands out in entreaty.

"We don't have a minute. This has to end. Enough people have died because of me. Get your gear out of the apartment, no lights. It will raise suspicion. I died rather publicly back there," Erin said, walking to the alleyway door of the building. Her mind was made up.

"You're kicking us out?" Dean asked in consternation as he followed her. Erin stopped and turned back.

"I died rather publicly back there," Erin offered, opening the door and carefully stepping over the salt
line there, leaving it undisturbed. Sam was a pace behind Dean with Cass behind him and Ruby bringing up the rear.

"No, you don't understand. We're in this with you and we're seeing this thing through to the end."

"You're going walk into the jaws of the dragon with a monster? I'm no hero Sam. Don't patronize me by pretending you didn't hear what went on back there," Erin said gruffly.

"Okay, ya know what... Cass told us what you did. We need to talk," Dean said forcefully, taking Erin's elbow as he stepped over the threshold of the door. Sam crowded into the small space at the foot of the stairs with them and Cass followed, carefully remaining silent. This conversation had the potential to help the bond between them, he would remain quiet unless he needed to steer it in the right direction.

Erin pulled her elbow away from Dean and glowered. "No, we don't. It's done. I've made up my mind. That's it."

Dean frowned angry, "You're just crazy enough to do it aren't you?"

"Hey I say the lady can make her own decisions. There's no other way to get rid of Ahriman," Ruby said as she started to step inside. She stopped, one foot off the ground, and realized she couldn't enter. The salt line prevented her. Cass gave her a hard glance.

It hit Dean and Sam at the same time, they looked down at the salt line and back up at Ruby, whose face was irritated by not being able to just walk right in. There was no way to stop Erin from finding out what Ruby was now.

Erin's gaze went to the salt line then very slowly rose to look Ruby straight in the eye and her expression wasn't enraged, it wasn't wild, it was cold, calculating and utterly still. It sent a chill down Dean's spine. He imagined that had been the face six hundred unsuspecting victims had seen right before they'd died. This wasn't the Erin who'd been desperately trying to find a way to save her brother, this was a well honed killer who'd just realized her enemy was standing three foot away, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Cass stepped backward a pace, knowing this was not going to end well. He said nothing, because he knew nothing he could say would stop Erin. She was an accomplished fighter, this would be bloody if he allowed it to finish. He wouldn't. But if Erin spent a portion of her rage on Ruby it would help her focus on killing Ahriman.

"Erin, wait!" Sam cried.

Erin sprang like a hunting cat, snagging Ruby by the front of her shirt and dragging her through the doorway. Ruby dug in her heels trying to prevent it but she wasn't fast enough. She screamed bloody murder as she passed over the salt line, in excruciating pain. Erin snarled and shoved her back out and she screamed again.

"Demon," Erin seethed. Ruby could only pant, recovering from being forced to cross the salt line.

"Let me explain!" Ruby gasped. Erin's bared her teeth like a feral animal, accentuated by the dried blood on her clothes and matting her hair, from her fall.

"Not a chance in hell," she growled and jerked Ruby back through the door, eliciting another pained wail from Ruby. She forced her against the wall an arm across Ruby's throat so she couldn't speak. Ruby scrabbled, trying to free herself, her strength had waned making it hard for her to invoke anything above the power her vessel possessed.
"Note to self. Do not piss off Immortal chicks," Dean said surprised by the strength it took to bodily jerk Ruby through the door like that.

"Erin. Don't," Sam pleaded. Erin ignored him. Dean tried to make up his mind whether to let things just take their course. He wouldn't be sorry to see Ruby go, that's for sure.

"Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus, omnis satanica potestas, omnis incursio infernalis adversarii," Erin began repeating the same exorcism she'd heard Dean use. Ruby writhed against the words, fighting to get her strength back. She focused and pushed. Flinging Erin off of her and into the wall on the other side of the narrow hall way.

Erin barely blinked. She kept going, "Omnis legio, omnis congregatio et secta diabolica. Ergo, draco maledicte."

Sam tackled her, one arm around her abdomen, locking her arms to her body, the other over her mouth. Immortal or not, Erin was still limited to the same physical limitations as a human. He was easily eight inches taller and sixty pounds heavier. Erin's initial adrenaline and rage fueled strength had ebbed quickly.

"Dean help," Sam said in exasperation. His brother was just standing there alongside Cass and it didn't look like he intended to interfere.

Sam let out a sudden yell of pain as Erin sank her teeth into his fingers and loosened his grip. Erin brought her elbow back in a gut punch as soon as he did, whirling, and pick pocketing him of the demon killing dagger at the same time. When she came back around it was to meet Ruby, who had retreated a few pace to get a better stance. Ruby flung her arm to one side and sent Erin reeling before she could lunge for her.

"Look bitch," Ruby started to curse. But, Erin had turned in the air, using Ruby's throw to catapult herself off the wall and catch a water pipe running along the ceiling. She swung off it and sailed over Ruby's head to land on her feet behind her.

"Wow," Dean muttered to no one. That was an impressive stunt. He had to wonder where Erin had learned to bounce off walls like a cat.

Ruby spun to face her at the same time Erin came around from her landing, dagger raised to strike. Ruby couldn't get out of the path. Cass moved.

Before the dagger could hit home and sink into Ruby's chest Cass had Erin's wrist in a steel grip.

"Stop."

Erin blinked at him incredulous. "You have got to be kidding me?!"

"No. She may be of use."

Cass locked eyes with Erin, effortlessly keeping her from completing her strike, despite the fact Erin still had a death grip on the dagger and was pushing with enough force to disarm a normal man. Erin's arm and posture relaxed and she rolled her eyes, her lips tightening in reluctant obedience. Cass gently let go of her as she relented. Ruby heaved a sigh of relief but kept a wary eye on her. Just in case.

"You brought a demon here? On purpose?" Erin spat at Dean and Sam.

Dean held his arms up in surrender and pointed at his brother who was nursing his hand, Erin had bitten through the flesh and it was bloody.
"You bit me!" he proclaimed.

"You brought a demon here." Erin countered.

Cass silently walked over to Sam and took the offended hand. With a touch the bite marks disappeared along with the blood. Sam shook his hand murmuring "Thanks Cass."

Then, still shocked Erin had actually bitten him. "Who bites people in a fight? You couldn't have gotten loose if you hadn't. That's not fair."

Erin quirked a brow. "Not much incentive for me to fight fair then is it?"

Sam couldn't nay say that so he just huffed. Ruby crept over to Sam's side and stood just behind him. Erin would have to go through Sam to get to her if she had any second thoughts about obeying Castiel.

"Now, how exactly is a demon going to be of use?" Erin asked. She still seethed inside, and she'd take any excuse at all to kill Ruby where she stood but she trusted them. They had refused to let her stand alone again and again, even after knowing what she'd done. Cass above all had never faltered in his faith. She owed them the benefit of the doubt.

"Yeah, I'd like to know that myself since your hex bags didn't do a lick of good," Dean snipped in agreement, looking right at Ruby.

"I tried. You have no idea what I went through to find out about Ahriman!" Ruby protested.

"Find out what exactly?" Sam asked.

"Well not much now. He went and blabbed it all. But, he knows about the seals. He knows which ones Lilith will break next," Ruby offered. She had to keep at least Sam strung along or she'd lose her painfully gained position in this whole thing.

"We already know he might. Cass already told us," Dean pointed out trite.

"So you're not really much use at all. Now are you?" Erin snarked. It was a barely veiled threat. Just like Cass, the second Ruby ceased to be of use, Erin wouldn't hesitate to kill her. The blade of the demon-killing knife glinted in the faint light of the stairwell, backing up the threat.

Cass laid a hand on Erin's shoulder to stay her. He knew that she had only stood down because he'd asked her too, only given them a chance to explain because that little bud of faith and trust was growing. He was using every possible opportunity to feed it. As things stood, they were going to lose. Erin was bent on walking right into the jaws of the dragon without hesitation and not enough faith to bring her out the other side alive.

"No I know he knows. It's not a possibility. It's certain. He knows which seals will be broken next," Ruby insisted.

It was a blatant lie. She knew what they didn't and she would not hesitate to use it to her advantage. The truth was, Ahriman hadn't a clue about the seals. He had no idea which one Lilith had or had not broken or which ones she would break. He didn't care. He knew about the Winchesters simply because every demon knew who they were. Ahriman didn't care who won the apocalypse, he just wanted to do what he willed and he'd do anything to accomplish it. It would be a nice plus to drive that thorn in after the fact. Another break in the Winchesters' and especially Sam's armor.

Dean turned green with the news. It meant he couldn't avoid the fact that if Erin did this, she'd have
to be tortured while Ahriman possessed her to get the information they needed. He'd already refused to do it. He still would. He couldn't. What he'd become when he'd been in hell, the things he'd done. He couldn't do it again. He'd become a monster. Dean had no reason to doubt what Ruby had said, especially now. The demons wanted the apocalypse desperately. No matter whose side she was on, it made sense for her to try and stop Ahriman from interfering.

"If she knows this, she may prove to know more later. Having one of Ahriman's own at our disposal might prove advantageous," Cass pointed out. Ruby fought a sadistic smile. So easily roped in.

"War makes for strange bedfellows?" Erin said.

"Yes," Cass admitted.

Erin gritted her teeth and sighed heavily. She'd lived through more wars than she cared to count. It wasn't an ideal premise but Cass had a point. When you were at war you did what you had to, to get the job done and this was a war, however small.

"I don't like this," Erin said with wary acceptance.

"I know," Cass said sagely.

Erin flipped the dagger over so the handle was facing away from her and held it out to Sam. "Sorry about, you know, biting you," she apologized. There wasn't a hint of embarrassment in it though. She'd taken the only advantage she had. That's what you did, you took any opening you could get in a fight. Fair fights were a myth.

"Yeah, sure. No problem. Sorry, for not telling you about Ruby," Sam responded weakly, taking the dagger back.

He had to admit he was a bit weirded out by the whole thing, they had all been taken by surprise by Erin's sudden attack.

"What the hell. I'm an Immortal monster on a suicide mission, we're being shuttled around by an angel who looks like a tax accountant, you both hunt things that go bump in the night whilst trying to prevent the apocalypse. Why not add a demon to the mix. It can't get any weirder," Erin shrugged.

"Yes it can. Trust me," Dean scoffed jokingly.

"Don't I get an apology? I'm the one you tried to kill," Ruby protested from behind Sam. Erin craned her head and gave her a pointed look.

"You're alive. Don't push your luck."

"We should leave now," Cass suggested.

"Right. And where are we going exactly?" Dean asked.

"I have a place about forty five minutes north of here. It's not ideal but it'll do. But, before we go there, I need to get cleaned up. If someone notices I'm driving around looking like I took a header out a fourteen story window, I don't have to tell you the attention that's going to cause."

"Me and Dean rented a hotel room, you can change there," Sam suggested.

"Alright then let's move," Erin said. Dean and Sam didn't have to be told twice, once they had a plan they enacted it. That's how they'd stayed alive this long. Ruby turned to follow them up the stairs and
Erin grabbed the collar of her shirt.

"Not you. Out."

"Excuse me?" Ruby exclaimed.

"I might be willing to have you on our team for the sake of strategic advantage. But I'm not willing to let you step foot in my apartment. Out and if you touch my car, you're dead." Erin said scrapping the salt line clear and ushering her back out the door. With an evil grin Erin slammed it in Ruby's furious face. "Enjoy the mosquitoes!" To ensure Ruby couldn't enter, Erin pushed the salt line back into form and then followed Sam and Dean up the stairs, Cass following behind.

As Erin mounted the stairs Dean hung back and grabbed Erin's elbow again as she passed. Cass noticed but said nothing. They had to talk at some point and he knew it. He cast them a casual glance and kept going past them. They hadn't locked the door before they left so Sam went right in, but Cass paused discreetly before entering, listening to what was said.

"I'm serious Erin. We need to talk," Dean said in a low voice to avoid being heard but Cass could hear just fine. Erin gave a deep sigh.

"Fine. We can talk when we get where we're going but it's pointless. You can't change my mind."

"With your shield or on it. Is that it?" Dean hissed.

"No, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one," Erin countered.

"A Star Trek reference? Really?"

"Doesn't make it any less true."

Now, Dean sighed heavily. He obviously couldn't get through to her and they didn't have time for him to try and badger her to see reason. Which, if he thought about it, could prove to be a rather dangerous feat. Erin did not take well to being argued with it seemed, not when she'd made up her mind. Just like Dean.

"This isn't over," Dean said with light ferocity a finger pointed at her. To his surprise, a faint, bittersweet smile played on her lips.

"I know," she said softly.

Cass smiled just a bit despite himself, glad his back was turned to them so they wouldn't see. Very slowly it was working. By shades, the trust and faith Erin had in them, and they in her, grew. He opened the door and walked into the apartment. Behind him he could still hear Erin and Dean talking.

"Where'd you learn to bounce off walls like a cat anyway?"

"Once upon a time, I ran away to the circus."
Chapter 15

On the way to the Deer Motel and the boys' as yet unused motel room, Erin drove her Mustang alone. Or, that's what she tried to do. Dean, Sam and Ruby rode in the Impala. Cass had chosen to ride with Erin on the short trip; popping in on her once they'd gotten on the road, to her displeasure, in an attempt get her to see that this was a dead end street. She could not go up against Ahriman this way. The prophecy would play out in all the wrong ways.

"You are set on this insane task aren't you?"

"Insane or not it's the only way out of this," Erin countered.

"You will die," Cass pointed out.

"I know that Cass, but if Ahriman pulls this off, if Christian manages to win the prize and Duncan dies, Dean dies, Sam dies and the world is going to go down the crapper faster than you can blink. No one should have that kind of power. It doesn't matter if I die. It never did. I'm a monster and it finally caught up to me. You were wrong, there are some sins that can't be forgiven. The only thing that mattered to me was saving Christian and he doesn't want to be saved. So what else is there? I've lost everything and look how many lives it cost. There's nothing left Cass," Erin reasoned, her face showing traces of the grief and heartbreak she felt underneath the veneer of a hardened fighter, tamped down to keep going.

Cass wished fervently he dared to tell her it didn't have to end that way. The faith and trust was there but it wasn't enough. It hadn't grown strong enough to sustain her through her trial by fire.

"You must have Faith, Erin," Cass advised her sagely with an undisguised edge of desperation to his voice. Erin cast him a scathing look for it.

"Don't Cass. I found my line. This is my last stand. I'm done," she warned.

Cass dropped into silence and they stayed that way for a short while. Erin broke the quiet.

"Have you ever seen him? God I mean?"

Cass forced himself not to flinch. He doubted the answer would help circumstances.

"No. Only four angels have ever looked upon the face of God."

"No?" Erin said with surprise. "Well someone must have. Otherwise, how do you even know there is a God?"

"We have to have faith," Cass admitted. Erin just scoffed and shook her head.

Again, there was a long pause before Cass spoke, his voice soft, "This will be a Pyrrhic victory."

Erin looked at him sharply, a fire lighting behind her eyes that hadn't been there before. Cass saw it there, where no one else would. It made him rejoice and despair. Again, he prayed, literally, that it would be enough.

###
Meanwhile, Dean drove the Impala ahead of the Mustang, leading the way, the radio thrumming some song none of them was paying attention to. Ruby was perched sullenly in the backseat still ticked over her unfair treatment. Sam had the translation of the prophecy out and was reading it over again, still trying to figure out Cass's cryptic allusions. He'd begun murmuring the lines in a kind of chant trying to trigger something in his mind.

"As two shall bend so shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces. With these pieces and faith alone shall the sinner consume him and he be destroyed by the power of God. So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true," he droned. Then, "This is ridiculous. I can't make heads or tails of what Cass was talking about. I get the faith reference, sort of. The sinner part makes perfect sense now, but who's supposed to bend and why? What path? I don't get it. I hate prophecies."

"Cass said pay attention to the order. Whatever that means. Maybe that's what's important not what it all means," Dean reminded his brother. "Be nice if we could just kidnap Chuck again and pull the same trick we did with you and Lilith, huh?" Dean observed bitterly.

"You'd think an Archangel would have the juice to smite Ahriman without breaking a sweat," Sam admitted.

"I don't know why you are obsessing over it. It means exactly what it says. Erin dies, Ahriman dies and the world is saved. End of story," Ruby said.

Dean looked at her in the rear view mirror. "If I didn't know any better I'd say you didn't want Erin to live through this," he said in accusation.

"I'm just pointing out the obvious to the mentally challenged. You can't stop fate," Ruby argued.

"That's crap. We've done it before and we can do it again," Dean retorted.

"You're fighting a losing battle guys. Can't you see that?" Ruby prodded. She was intent on keeping things exactly as they stood. It was the perfect set up. Then Erin didn't live to prevent the Gathering, Ahriman bought the farm and the demons would have a perfect opportunity to turn the Immortals to their will as soon as they got rid of Duncan MacLeod.

"Maybe. But have you ever known us not to try?" Sam said.

"There's always a first time," Ruby snipped back.

"Yeah well, it's not today," Dean promised.

###

Later, Dean was walking the length of their paltry, two singles, peeling, free love wallpapered, shag carpeted hotel room while Erin showered. The bathroom door was warped from decades of use so it wouldn't close all the way and Dean couldn't stop himself from attempting to catch a glimpse of Erin every time he walked past.

Cass was sitting on the end of the bed patiently waiting, hands clasped serenely, though that was
anything but what he felt. He kept waiting for the boys to figure out the prophecy on their own but he didn't dare to elucidate further. He didn't know how much information would invalidate their efforts, he had to have faith.

Ruby had, again, been relegated to standing outside, though without the aid of salt to keep her there. Sam had made her promise to just deal with it. She had reluctantly and angrily agreed. She would much rather have been able to overhear all that went on and keep a sharp eye on any possible problems she might need to head off at the pass. But Erin's vehement and sudden hate of all things demon was preventing that. She'd have to make due, but Ruby was very good at making due.

Inside, Dean passed the door of the bathroom again, leaning not so surreptitiously to try and gain a peek inside. Sam, who was still reading the prophecy over for the millionth time, caught him out of the corner of his eye.

"Dude, stop being a peeping Tom," he admonished. Dean tried the hand slide along the side of his head, rub the back of his neck, I'm-not-doing-anything act. Sam gave him a put upon look and sighed. Dean, threw his hands up.

"What? It's not my fault God made me this way.... Or her," he said in his defense, trying to peek around the door again, even as he said it. Cass completely missed the subtext, looking perplexed as he so often did when it came to the Winchester boys.

"Dean is himself. Who is Tom and what is he peeping at?"

Dean and Sam exchanged amused looks and both fought not to laugh outright at their friend.

"Dean is definitely being himself," Sam said and shook his head, returning to reading through the prophecy.

"I'm confused," Cass said, oblivious. Sam reached over and clapped him on the shoulder while Dean returned to his voyeuristic pursuits.

"Cass, sometimes it's better that way," Sam observed with a grin. Dean was as oblivious to the conversation's ongoing progression as Cass had been to what started it.

"Are there towels in there? Maybe I should get her a towel. I'll get her a towel," Dean muttered, turning to fetch one as an excuse to advance his possibilities of ogling success.

"Dean!"

"What!?"

Sam just looked at him again.

"Don't look at me like that."

Sam didn't even blink. He kept staring his brother down for his transgressions.

"Oh fine. But you can't blame me for trying."

Sam just rolled his eyes and changed the subject, as much to bring up something that was bothering him as to get Dean to stop hovering around the bathroom door like a pervert.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you that Erin hasn't really reacted to Beth dying? I mean that was the whole point of going after Ahriman knowing we couldn't beat him and yet she hasn't mentioned her, hasn't
shown a single sign of grief over it."

Dean grew serious again and shook his head. "No. She's just pushing it down. Burying it to keep going. What choice does she have?"

"Yeah but shouldn't she shed a tear or something?" Sam reasoned. Sam unlike Dean wasn't a lock box when it came to his feelings. He wasn't a well of psychobabble either, or at least not all the time, but he wasn't afraid to show them.

"What good would it do? It won't bring Beth back. Won't make Christian change his mind or send Ahriman back to hell. This is her grieving," Dean explained.

"You're transferring your emotional template onto her Dean. You're saying she's like you," Sam began to psychoanalyze. Dean cut him off.

"She is," he said with a tight edge to his voice. She was like him, too much like him maybe. It was like looking in a warped mirror at his own reflection on some level and it was disturbing as hell.

"Dean," Sam began to argue again. This time it was Cass who interrupted.

"Dean's right. Erin suppresses, denies her emotions. She's a warrior in every sense of the word, a weapon. Grief now would only blunt her. She knows that. Emotions are doorways to vulnerability. It's not a luxury she can afford right now. If you doubt her compassion I assure you it runs deep."

"Alright. That sucks but alright. Her life is as screwed up as ours. I don't envy her," Sam said.

"No one would," Cass responded a bit dismally to their surprise.

After a moment of awkward silence at the unexpected speck of emotion, Cass had shown Dean cleared his throat. "Speaking of, you drive the rest of the way," he said fishing his keys out of his pocket and tossing them to Sam who caught them without even thinking about it. "I'm riding with Erin. We need to have a little intervention."

"Intervention? She seems pretty set on this. I don't think you're going to be able to change her mind," Sam said, stashing the keys in his own pocket.

"I couldn't," Cass confessed.

"Yeah but you're not me. Erin and I have a lot in common. Maybe I can get through to her," Dean said seriously, then he grinned, "That and I'm adorable."

Sam gave Dean a dubious glance and snorted at him. The shower in the bathroom stopped running and they all stopped talking about it. A silent, unanimous 'shhh' passing between them. Erin wouldn't react well if she knew what they'd been talking about.

###

Dean, Sam and Cass remained quiet as Erin dressed. She either didn't notice or was so focused on her course of action she didn't feel words were necessary. She had donned what outer clothing she could in their presence without appearing immodest, like her socks, boots and coat, with swift efficiency. Then she walked out the door without a word and they followed.
"We're going to Sewall's Point. It's a small peninsula near the St. Lucie inlet to the Atlantic. We'll be relatively out of the way there," Erin said with a clipped voice, speaking like she would to a group of soldiers about to march across the land.

"Wait, if Christian is in on this, won't he know where all your safe houses are?" Sam asked.

"Yes. It's likely but there's nowhere else for us to hold up without attracting attention," Erin admitted. Ruby pounced on the comment eagerly. Here was a chance to prove she was on their side or at least to make them think she was.

"I can take care of that. I can make up some hex bags; neither angels or demons will be able to find us as long as we have them."

Erin cut her a sharp look, unwilling to take anything the demon said at face value. Dean canted his head in reluctant agreement.

"She can do it. We've used them before."

"Alright," Erin agreed begrudgingly. Ruby gave her a sardonic smile in return. Erin said nothing else; she stepped away and got in her Mustang. Dean delayed long enough she wouldn't know what he was doing as Sam opened the trunk of the Impala and tossed a duffel bag at Ruby, full of everything she'd need to make the hex bags. "Make 'em on the way."

"Sure thing Gigantor," Ruby piped, happy her suggestion had been so readily accepted. Of course, as she'd done before, the second she wanted Ahriman to find them... she'd burn the hex bags.

Cass, reluctantly got in the passenger's side of the Impala. He didn't favor riding in the same car as Ruby but he knew Dean needed to talk to Erin alone if he were to have any success. Ruby ducked in a second later followed by Sam.

Erin had just turned over the Mustang's engine when Dean slipped into the vehicle quickly. She gave him a startled look for it but he didn't give her a chance to respond, he leaned across the seat and pulled the driver's seat belt across her and snapped it. She'd pulled both arms back in surprise, hands off the wheel, and he was a hair's breadth from her, so close he could feel her warm breath, his body pressed against hers. Hormones took over for a split second and his eyes flickered over her, considering kissing her again but he kept his urges in check, only giving her a sly grin before he hastily snapped his own seatbelt on. Erin wasn't unaffected by the encounter she blinked once before she gathered her wits enough to notice what he'd done.

"Afraid I'm going to get slung through a windshield?" she asked.

"Nope," Dean answered.

He hadn't strapped her or himself in because of some notion about their safety while driving. At least not from a possible accident. He'd done it because now Erin would have to get the seatbelt off to throttle him if she got it into her head and with him strapped in as well she couldn't just shove him out the passenger side door if he ticked her off. Erin's brows took over for a split second and his eyes flickered over her, considering kissing her again but he kept his urges in check, only giving her a sly grin before he hastily snapped his own seatbelt on. Erin wasn't unaffected by the encounter she blinked once before she gathered her wits enough to notice what he'd done.

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"I'd prefer to drive alone," she said, realizing he'd strapped himself in and didn't look like he intended to go anywhere. He heard Sam start the Impala and rev the engine for good measure, just in case Erin missed that they were ready to go.

"Yeah and I'd prefer to be in a bar with a bottle of whiskey and a gaggle of lonely women," Dean countered, perfectly at ease with his remark. He knew Erin well enough by now to know she
wouldn't take the least bit of offense to the comment.

She gave him a pointed look, "Fine, whatever floats your boat," and put her foot on the gas, turning the wheel and then correcting before she put the car in drive and pulled out onto the highway. Sam followed in the red glow of her taillights as she headed north onto A1A.

Dean began to reach casually for the radio knob but she stopped him, flicking a cassette tape into her hand as she drove and slipping it into the deck.

"My car, my music," she cautioned. Dean sat back and didn't rebuke her when it turned out to be a tape of David Gray music. Not classic but still good and back to basics music. After a moment of silence, Dean cleared his throat.

"This is the worst plan I've ever heard."

Erin rolled her eyes and gritted her teeth. "Dean," she began to argue.

"No, don't 'Dean' me. It is and you know it."

"First Cass, now you. If you can't change my mind are you going to send Sam in next? Maybe write me a letter you all read in a group?" Erin complained mockingly. Dean wasn't fazed by it.

"If that's what it takes."

"What part of I've made up my mind didn't you understand?" Erin snipped.

It meant more than she could say that all of them were insistent on standing by her, on trying to dissuade her of her suicide run but she saw no other way out of this. She wasn't sure she wanted to find another way out. What did she have left to fight for but the survival of Duncan, Sam and Dean, of the masses of hapless victims Ahriman/Christian would kill and maim if they succeeded? She didn't have anything else left to hold on to. Dean answered her question with one of his own.

"What can I say? I'm hard headed. Tell me something, is this really you playing the martyr without a cause or is it redemption equals death?"

"It's not without a cause and there are somethings you can't redeem," Erin answered tightly.

"Oh, I relate, trust me."

"You can't possibly," Erin insisted, her eyes on the road.

"You can't possibly," Erin insisted, her eyes on the road.

"You'd be surprised," Dean retorted.

"I doubt it," Erin snipped back, refusing to look at him and wavering between anger that they wouldn't accept her decision despite it being the only solution and faith and trust because despite it all they were still doing their damnedest to save her, when she couldn't be from the beginning. It had just taken her this long to realize it.

"Really? Well, try this on for size. I've been to Hell, for four months. But time runs different there. There it was more like forty years. This demon, Alistair, had me on his rack and he sliced and carved and tore at me until there was nothing left," Dean confessed, his voice strained. This was not something he cared to talk about, something he'd had a hard time discussing even with Sam but, Erin had been there too in her own way and he had a feeling this was the only way to bridge the gap between them. He saw Erin's throat convulse as she swallowed hard, listening.
"He did things to me I can't even begin to describe and then, suddenly... I would be whole again. Like magic. Just so, he could do it again. And Alastair, at the end of every day would make me an offer. He'd take me off the rack, if I put souls on, if I started the torturing. Every day, I told him to go screw himself. For thirty years, I told him. But, then I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't, I tried and I couldn't," Dean continued, tears making his lashes damp and fighting them. Erin's jaw flexed and her knuckles turned white on the steering wheel.

"I got off that rack. God help me, I got right off it, and I started ripping them apart just like I had been. I lost count of how many souls. The things that I did to them," Dean said, shaking his head as the memories replayed like a degraded movie reel, yet in perfect clarity in his head, his lips tight.

"I tried Dean. I swear I tried. But after three hundred years. I couldn't do it anymore. I begged God, somebody, to tell me why, to give me a reason and no one answered. I wanted to die but Trajan wouldn't let me and the only way out was to become what he made me and I took it. I killed and I tortured and I maimed with utter perfection and he relished every second of it," Erin said looking at him as damp eyed as he was, her voice breaking.

"The two specters you saw, they were my first victims. A couple of newlyweds, Cynan and Enid. Trajan found them, thought they made a nice offering to his godliness. When it was over, we staked them at the entrance to their homes like holiday decorations, so no one could ever be mistaken about what happened to them and who did it and it only got worse. I tried to get away from him. I did. And he'd let me think I had, he'd let me believe I was free, that it was over and then he'd swoop back in and it would start all over again. He'd kill anyone I got close to and make me watch him do it. I was his little bird, his wounded sparrow, he called me. Dean, there are some things you can't be redeemed for. You were in Hell. I was here. I knew the torture wouldn't kill me and I still did it. That makes me a monster no matter how long or how hard I try to atone for it or how many people I save. I can never undue it. I can never..." she explained, her lips pulled back in a tormented grimace as she drove, words bitten off and trailing because she'd never told anyone, not even Christian this, it hurt too much. Dean placed a warm hand on her knee and squeezed gently, it hadn't the slightest shade of sexuality or lust in it. It was just one trodden on, broken soul holding up another.

"Fill the hole," Dean finished for her, then added, "If you're a monster then so am I."

"I wish I couldn't feel..." Erin said with a morose shake of her head.

"A damned thing," Dean finished for her again.

Erin sucked in a harsh breath as a few tears slid down her cheeks and her lip quivered.

"Dean, I...I liked it. Two hundred years, all the blood, all the pain, all the death. It didn't matter to me that they were innocent. It was someone else on that rack. Someone else who had to suffer. And the pain I felt, it just..." Erin forced out through gritted teeth.

"Slipped away. You finally got to deal some of it back and it didn't matter who Trajan wanted you to hurt as long as it wasn't you." Dean answered. It was like talking to himself, nearly word for word what he'd told Sam. No one but someone who had been there, could ever understand. He did, implicitly.

Erin sniveled unable to form words as he said it. She hadn't expected anyone to get it, to relate that closely. She'd thought she felt something there, that he was a kindred soul but this was more than she could have imagined. He understood. Maybe more than Cass did.

"But, you found your line Erin. You couldn't do it anymore and you killed the douche bag. Even though you knew the chances were against you, you did it. That's not something a monster does.
Trust me, I've killed enough of them to know. So, tell me how throwing yourself under a train is going to make one iota of difference in the guilt you feel. Because we both know it won't. It can't. Nothing can. Ever."

Erin squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, thankful that A1A at this hour of night was relatively light on traffic, lest she swerve out of her lane.

"I don't have anything left, Dean. I've lost it all and if I don't do this people die. Lots of people. You die. Sam dies. Duncan dies. I have enough blood on my hands. We're talking about six billion lives. This is my line, Dean. We don't have time to try and find another way. Ahriman and Christian will just find someone else to kill and I can't let him do it. Enough people have died because of me."

"Erin," Dean began to protest.

"Don't tell me you wouldn't do the same thing if you were in my shoes. I haven't known you long Dean but I know enough about you to know you'd walk into an inferno before you'd let someone else do it. Only this time, you can't because it won't do any good. I don't have anything left."

"There's still us," Dean said with great weight. He didn't mean only that they'd chase the dark with her. He was rewarded by Erin blinking once in surprise, the taut lines of her face softening, her eyes vibrant green in the dark of the Mustang's interior and that fire in them burned a little stronger still. Dean looked back, steadfast. His own green eyes hell-bent and determined it was not going to end this way come hell or high water. Only the sound of wheels on pavement surrounded them. The radio had gone silent.
They arrived at Sewall's Point just before midnight. They pulled into the circular drive of a large, custom-built Villa style home. The breadth of the place impressed Dean and Sam alike. Unlike Between the Lines, this place was new. It was probably not more than ten years old, if that and it didn't have the quaint middle class charm the book shop had. This place reflected money without a single apology for it.

The house itself was beige stucco with terracotta shingles, but something glass-enclosed rose from the back of the building, peaking over the house's second story. Another high enclosed place, Dean thought. Erin seemed fond of high places for some reason. The front lawn was planted and landscaped with tropical palms and flowers in a rainbow of colors lit by a myriad of lawn lights leading up to carved oak double doors at the entrance. Behind the building, Dean knew, lay the beach and the soft lap of waves. He'd caught a glimpse of it as they turned onto the road that lead to the home. They were on the very tip of Sewall's Point, the home's front facing the road they'd traveled down and its back merging with the small beach beyond. This was luxury vacation living at its finest.

There was a large three-car garage attached on the left hand side, that Erin opened with a press of a button on a remote Dean hadn't noticed before, attached to the driver's side sun visor. Neither of them had spoken after their short but emotionally charged exchange on the way here. She pulled into the garage and Sam followed parking the Impala with ease in the spacious area. The car doors echoed, reverberating off the walls as everyone got out.

"Wow, the modesty is over whelming," Ruby snarked as she stepped out, she held an arm load of hex bags and tossed one to Erin, who caught it silently, her gaze caustic.

"I could live here," Dean commented coming around the front of the Mustang to stand at Erin's side and caught the hex bag Ruby tossed him. She tossed Sam and Cass one as well and still had several more.

"This place is something," Sam agreed with Dean as he collected things from the trunk of the Impala.

"Two thousand years of accumulated money. I gotta spend it on something. Haven't been here in a year, things were just too busy. This was one of mine and Christian's favorite places. No one to bother you, just the sand and sea," Erin answered as she pulled her own bag from the trunk of the Mustang and moved for a side door that led into the main house.

Dean and Sam could think of nothing to say to that. Erin's face had looked bleak when she said Christian's name. This place held memories that had once been happy. Some of the few happy ones she had.

Cass said nothing. He gave Dean a questioning look. Dean didn't have to ask what it was for. He gave the angel a half shrug. He hadn't been able to talk Erin out of her suicide run but he felt he'd made some sort of headway. He just wasn't sure towards what. Cass's forehead furrowed and his eyes looked worried. Dean knew exactly how he felt. Nothing they were doing seemed to be making the difference they needed.

Erin led them into the house as Dean grabbed another duffel from the Impala's trunk. The garage side door opened into a tiny mudroom and that let out into the kitchen of the home. The floor plan was open, they could see across the kitchen with its stainless steel appliances and Italian tiled floors to the open dining area and beyond that the living room. To their right was another door, partially blocking
their view of the short foyer that led into the house from the front doors.

As everyone crossed the threshold, Erin let them pass and stepped in front of Ruby just as she started to enter, her hand out.

"Give me the hex bags. You're not coming in here."

Ruby rolled her eyes in exasperation about to say something scathing when Sam came to her rescue.

"Erin, she's helping. I know you don't like her because she's a demon..."

"That's an understatement," Erin interjected.

"But she can't do her job if you keep throwing her out the door like a mangy dog."

Erin looked at Sam, biting the inside of her lip, then at Cass and Dean looking for their opinions. Cass looked back without blinking. Sam was, unfortunately correct. Dean shrugged again in helpless agreement.

"I know I'm going to regret this," Erin sighed heavily and rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she stepped aside for Ruby to pass. Ruby smiled smugly as she waltzed in. Erin had just let her death in through the front door. Leave it to Sam to unwittingly play right into her hands.

"There's a bathroom on this floor, living room, dining room, and behind the kitchen there's a small salle. That door," Erin said pointing at the one blocking their view of the foyer, "leads to the basement. Kitchen's stocked, help yourselves." "There's an enclosed roof where the attic would be, bedrooms up stairs, and two more bathrooms. Take your pick. Except you," Erin continued looking pointedly at Ruby. "You stay in the living room unless you're doing something and it had better be supervised."

Ruby fought not to scream in frustration. She'd jumped the gun. Erin wasn't as trusting as Sam. Dean looked down at his feet to hide the withheld chuckle and smirk that order provoked. Erin tossed the bag she was carrying on the kitchen table.

Cass stepped forward and withdrew her sword from his coat, flipping it in his hand easily and presenting it to her hilt first. The sword was free of the blood, her blood, that had marked the blade and the edge was finer and sharper than Erin had ever seen it. She didn’t ask how it had been done and neither did the boys. She curled her fingers around the hilt and paused, looking directly at Cass with such intensity it made Dean and Sam exchange a concerned look and Ruby started wondering if she shouldn’t hide before Erin took another swipe at her.

"Thank you, Cass," Erin said. The simple display of gratitude meaning more than it would first seem. "You could have been killed going into that fight with me. When Ahriman used that sigil I thought you had been. I just don’t know why I wasn’t banished with you."

"Neither do I. You should have been affected much more than I was. Something," Cass said, his gaze as direct as hers and enunciating with a heavy emphasis on the next words, “or someone, kept you there.” Then he released his hold on the sword and Erin took it, balancing the blade lightly in her hand as if she were playing with a counterweighted toy. She turned and looked at Dean and Sam with as direct an expression as she had given the angel.

“Both of you went in with me knowing we might all die and you did it anyway. Thank you.”

“Uh, yeah. You’re welcome,” Sam said unsure if that was the right thing to say or not. The intensity of Erin’s gaze was unnerving. Somewhere between the skyscraper and here, something had
drastically changed in her and it was a little disturbing.

“Yeah, what he said,” Dean mumbled in agreement, giving his brother a befuddled look. Sam could only shrug.

“I expect you don’t need my help setting up? I know you’ll need torture equipment to get the information you need from Ahriman and I’d rather not see it before hand.”

Dean blanched. No one had explicitly mentioned the fact she’d have to be tortured to get the information. She’d figured that out on her own and she said it with such matter of fact, no nonsense objectivity. It was chilling and it brought to bear everything Dean was avoiding.

He wouldn’t, couldn’t do the job. So who would? He wouldn’t let Sam do it. He couldn’t let his brother experience even a taste of what he’d been forced to endure in hell. Cass then? Could the angel even bring himself to do it, given the circumstances? Or would Ruby have to suffice?

Dean immediately discarded the idea. Ruby would enjoy it and there was no way he was letting Ruby anywhere near Erin. It set his teeth on edge to even think about it. Dean swallowed and pushed the thoughts aside. They still had a long way to go before it came to that. An idea began forming in his head and he let it simmer. He’d find a way around this whole thing.

Sam answered since Dean wasn’t. “Yeah, I guess.”

Erin’s gaze had never wavered. She nodded, “Good. Let me know when you’re done. We may be hidden from Ahriman and Christian for now, but he will come hunting us and he will know where to look. I already have a contingency plan for that.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned smartly on her heel and strode away toward the salle, leaving the lot of them to stand there stupefied. All but Castiel.

“What was that?” Dean asked.

“Who she used to be,” Castiel answered solemn. He wasn’t sure if this was a good thing or not. But Erin’s focus was steel hard now.

###

Ahriman had haunted the rooftop of the building across the way from Between the Lines since he’d disappeared from the half constructed skyscraper, Beth Middleton’s blood still staining his hands. He had watched, perched like a gargoyle, as the Winchesters and the trenchcoated angel argued vehemently.

He was a little displeased that the sigil he’d so recently learned from a not so cooperative informant, hadn’t done more than excommunication the celestial for a few minutes. He was also considering the fact that the sigil hadn’t done more than give Erin a moment’s painful pause. He knew why it hadn’t banished him, bound as he was to Christian. He couldn’t be stopped unless he wanted to be. However, it should have torn Erin apart like a Christmas cracker. Why hadn’t Erin, at least, been banished along with their erstwhile uncle?

He’d seen the lovely but traitorous Ruby in their midst and snarled. If he was a pariah to his kind, she was a snake. There was no one in hell who had a good word to say about the demon. She’d betrayed her own in favor of a human, and worse still, one that had failed to be the masterful leader they all hoped for. It wasn’t that he despised what Ruby had done. In fact, he found it quite funny that she’d
thwarted hell’s plans for Sam Winchester on a number of occasions. It was that her shifting allegiances made her a wild card he couldn’t predict. Ahriman didn’t particularly need an unknown variable at this juncture of his scheme. Was she aiding them? Or wasn’t she? She’d had every reason to know the hex bags she’d thrown at him would cause him no harm but might hurt her. It was perplexing.

He’d watched with baneful glee when the rag tag group of fighters had returned with Erin, still bloodied and disheveled. He’d taken a sort of ironic pleasure in the way Erin had drudged, broken and beaten, into her beloved little building but she’d surprised him when she’d wrenched Ruby through the door and back out again in rage.

He knew Erin was utterly defeated now. She had nothing left, nothing to hold on to and soon she’d come crawling, begging him to be done with it. Just as he’d promised her she would. Christian was a fool, asking her to join him. It was as if he didn’t know his teacher, his sister, at all. He should have known she was too weak, too under achieving to grab real power when she saw it.

Ahriman had followed them to the Deer Motel, patiently waiting for Erin to come to the realization that she had no recourse but death to end her suffering, but he’d arrived too late to watch the maudlin festivities. He’d assumed Erin was trying one last ditch effort to avoid her fate, running. She was fond of running, all Immortals were. It was essential to their survival amongst mortals when things were made public against their will. Run away, become someone else.

Then, he simply lost them. They disappeared off his supernatural radar like ghost echoes on sonar.

Enraged, he barreled into the seedy motel’s office, eyes blazing neon red. “Three men and two women were here. Where did they go?”

The check in clerk, a man in his early forties, bespectacled with prematurely white hair and the very image of a bible thumper, reeled back in terror. “What? Who?” he babbled. Ahriman reached across the pathetic fiberboard excuse for a desk and grabbed the man by his neatly pressed short-sleeved button down shirt, causing the man’s coke bottle glasses to slip sideways on his face.

“What? Who?” he babbled. Ahriman reached across the pathetic fiberboard excuse for a desk and grabbed the man by his neatly pressed short-sleeved button down shirt, causing the man’s coke bottle glasses to slip sideways on his face.

“Black Impala, blue Mustang? Ring any bells?”

“Ro-ro-room 413. MacGillacutty, bu-but they haven’t checked out sir,” the man stammered wide eyed.

Ahriman tilted his head, blinking like a vulture and his face contorted in grotesque anger. They’d ditched town without checking out it seemed. He released his hold on the man’s shirt and grabbed him by the head twisting viciously. The check in clerk’s neck snapped with a repulsive sound and Ahriman dropped him. He slumped over the desk like a sack of potatoes. It gave Ahriman no satisfaction to kill the man, no pleasure as it usually did. He didn’t even bother carving his name into the man’s inert body. He just spun and stalked out, heading for room 413, intent on searching for possible clues to where they’d gone.

Perhaps it was time to rethink his strategy. It might behoove him to get rid of the Winchesters ahead of schedule. They were becoming more of a problem than he’d anticipated. It had to be their handy work that was hiding them from him. After he killed Erin, he would rid himself of the Winchesters before he finished seeking his revenge on Duncan MacLeod. But first he had to find them and he knew just who to ask.
Dean was just shutting a bag of rock salt as Castiel opened the door into the basement and emerged from within. He wasn’t looking up as he exited the shadows thrown into high relief by the wobbling light bulb on a string that hung overhead. He was dusting chalk from his long fingered hands, his mouth drawn tight and a line etched between his brows.

“It’s done,” he announced. Dean didn’t have to ask what ‘it’ was. Cass had been the one to set up the torture equipment. The same set up that they’d used on Alastair. Dean had offered to help him but Cass had refused and Dean was grateful. The thought of seeing that pentacle again with its iron chains, the Enochian lettered Devil’s Trap beneath it and that wretched cart of tools made his stomach knot and his bile rise. The closer the possibility loomed that he would have to go through with it, the more he tried to find a way out of it. Maybe that’s why, now, he was grasping at straws.

“Salt’s down too,” Dean said, his voice unnaturally deep with strain. He and Cass shared a long pensive look and Cass’s face softened into an expression more reminiscent of tribulation than the anxiety it had held a moment before. Dean didn’t have to say anything Cass could read it on his soul and Dean, for once, could see it burning in the angel’s eyes. This was the endgame and they still didn’t have a way out that didn’t end tragically. Dean broke the gaze, casting his eyes away and giving a nervous grin. “Place has more windows and doors than Trump tower.”

Dean had been steadily turning over options in his mind and he thought he had one. Maybe. It was insane, but insane had worked before. He was willing to try anything at this point. It wasn’t just that he didn’t want Erin to die. God knew he didn’t. There was some sort of tether there between them and as much as he hated to admit it, he cared about her. It was also because he didn’t think he could do it. It had taken everything he had to do it with Alastair, and Dean hated him. This was beyond repugnant, beyond incomprehensible. He wasn’t sure he’d survive it in one piece if he did.

“Devil’s Traps are done,” Sam declared, walking in at that instant with Ruby on his heels and stopping a little short. Dean and Cass looked at them at the same time and Sam wondered what he’d missed.

“Hex bags are set out too…should we let you guys get a room?” Ruby asked, bolder than Sam. All of them gave her an annoyed glare.

“Just saying,” she excused with a shrug. They kept up the annoyed glare and she stepped back a pace. “Touchy,” she observed.

“Cass, I know you told us everything you could about this prophecy but it’s getting us no where trying to get around cryptic hints. Can’t you give us something?” Dean asked desperately. None of them had had time to review the prophecy again, though Sam had been repeating it to himself by rote the entire time he worked, still getting nowhere.

Cass shook his head in commiseration, “No, Dean. I’m sorry.”

Dean gritted his teeth, giving a headshake of his own. Nothing seemed to be an option. It was like they were being forced to take the path of least resistance by some outside force. “Immortals, if they’re half angel, shouldn’t Erin be able to use her angel juice to fight Ahriman/Christian?”

“Cass is all angel and he can’t fight this thing,” Sam pointed out. Then added, “You can’t right Cass?”
"No. If I could, I would have done it by now. Immortals' angelic traits are passive. They aren't in control of them. They cannot use...angel juice," Cass answered with a deep sigh, using their own lingo and avoiding the term nephilim. It seemed to be a term Erin and the boys didn't favor, and Cass agreed with them. Nephilim had become an epithet.

“Can’t you turn it on or something?” Dean nearly pleaded.

“No,” Cass said, wandering to the kitchen table where Dean had been closing the bag of salt and slipping his hand into Erin’s bag. He began picking over the weapons there, disregarding the guns and favoring the swords with scrutiny. “You must have faith Dean.”

“Faith… Sorry, all out of that,” Dean scoffed.

“Dean, Cass is right. There’s a prophecy for a reason. We’re out of choices here. We’re going to have to go with what we’ve got and pray it’s enough,” Sam argued, though his voice was sympathetic.

“Prayer is an excellent idea,” Cass suggested, but it was lost in Dean’s flare of anger.

“So it’s okay with you if Erin walks into this fight knowing she’s not going to walk back out?”

“No! Of course not. But what choice do we have?” Sam said despondent.

“You don’t have a choice. It has to be Erin’s choice,” Cass stressed, pushing a Bastard sword out of the way and eyeing a Katzbalger short sword, a kind of German arming sword.

“And she already made her choice,” Ruby interjected, in another attempt to get them off the current topic. They just wouldn’t let it go, they were still trying to find a way out of this. Talk about belligerent. Again, they all pinned her with the same steely look.

“Shut up. When we want your opinion, we’ll ask for it,” Dean snapped. Ruby crossed her arms and cocked one hip out, petulant, but she closed her mouth. “We are not giving up,” Dean said looking at his brother.

“No. We’re not Dean. I’m still trying to make sense of that prophecy and I’ll keep doing it until either, we find a way out or we lose. But you’ve got to face facts, man. We might not be able to find it in time. We’re down to the wire. Like Cass said, it’s her choice,” Sam explained.

“Don’t give me that crap, Sammy. ‘Choice’. What ‘choice’? She never had a choice,” Dean railed. He looked like he was in deep thought, pissed off and almost on the edge of screaming in frustration at the same time and that meant one thing.

“Dean, you’re not going to do something stupid are you? You’ve got that look,” Sam asked worried his brother was contemplating some harebrained ploy that had no hope of succeeding.

“No,” Dean responded defensive, deflecting by suddenly taking a keen interest in arranging all the remaining salt containers on the table neatly.

Cass, in a rare instance of consolation, stopped overlooking Erin’s sword collection and placed a hand gently on Dean’s shoulder. Dean looked back at him, his brow furrowed and his eyes glassy, a tormented expression on his face. “We will never give up.”

Dean swallowed hard, once, and then that wall of his went back up tenfold. “We done here?”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Sam answered, casting Cass a concerned glance.
“Yeah.”

“Then, I guess we better tell Erin,” Dean said with reluctant contrition.

“We’re not quite done,” Cass corrected, pulling the Katzbalger from the bag. It would serve well enough for what he had in mind. His own Angel sword was too risky. They had one final thing to do to prepare.

###

Ahriman threw the bathroom garbage can across the tiny enclosure with a roar of anger. It was so dented already the damage the act caused was barely noticeable. He’d searched the entire room, overturning the beds, flinging the nightstand and dresser drawers around like debris in a hurricane… and found nothing. No matter how pressed they may have felt Erin and the Winchesters had left nothing behind that gave a clue to where they could have gone.

The demon clenched his teeth until his jaw felt like it would break. In the back of his mind, he could feel Christian scrabbling for a foothold. Fear overriding his initial desire for power. He’d been this way ever since Ahriman had allowed him to see the damage they had caused Erin. Ahriman had finally boxed him off in a corner of his mind, leaving him to bat helplessly at the walls that kept him confined while Ahriman had complete control of Christian’s body. Immortals, nephilim…weak half-breeds, all of them. Incapable of anything greater than their human relations. Nothing more than storage units for their angelic progenitors.

Ahriman leaned on the bathroom sink, his hands gripping the lip so hard it cracked beneath them and stared into his reflection, releasing the essence that was Christian. The reflection changed, the stance shifted, the blue eyes staring back were worried and fearful, the expression wary.

“Where would she have gone?” Ahriman growled, sneering at him.

Christian shook his head from within the pane of silver. “You don’t want to go after her now. Didn’t you see her?” he pleaded with his partner in crime. His reaction to seeing what Ahriman had wrought had not been perverse pleasure. It had been foreboding. Erin had taught him everything he knew about being an Immortal. They had been by each other’s sides for three hundred years before now, and the one thing she’d taught him above all rules but one was, watch your head. Erin’s actions might be because she was falling right into Ahriman’s trap, bereft and anguished to the point of a suicide run, but he knew his teacher, his sister, well enough to know her reaction might not be submission. Erin had taught him once; there was nothing more dangerous than someone with nothing left to lose.

Ahriman snarled, he didn’t have the patience for this. “Where has she gone?”

“I don’t know. She might have gone out of state. She might have just gone north to Sewall Point,” Christian answered, exasperated. He wanted the power their plan promised. He wanted it like he’d never wanted anything in his life. He’d always been the little brother figure, the protected one, the one Erin looked out for. Always the tag along, never the leader. He’d thought her the strong one until he’d learned who she used to be, what she had squandered and banished from her life. He wanted what she had wasted, real power, but he didn’t intend to die for it. Power was useless if you were dead. Erin might be weak but she wasn’t stupid.
“What’s at Sewall Point?” Ahriman pressed, ignoring Christian’s imploring.

“Aren’t you listening? She’s not crawling back, begging you to kill her. She’s running. She’s setting her own trap,” Christian warned.

“I don’t have to ask for the information, you loathsome little cockroach! I can tear it out of you! Be grateful I allow you any measure of involvement at all,” Ahriman threatened. To make his point, his eyes flipped to red and the reflection of Christian began to clutch at his throat, his knees buckling slowly in excruciating pain.

“We have a house there. It’s the closest safe haven she’s got,” Christian choked. Ahriman released his hold on the Immortal’s psyche and the reflection regained his footing, his hand to his throat reflexively, though he had none in reality. Ahriman started to turn away, to shove Christian back in his mental storage box, when Christian confronted him outright.

“You’re afraid,” he said as the realization hit him.

Ahriman swung back toward the mirror, one hand clenched into an infuriated fist. “I am fear. Don’t presume to tell me what I am.”

“The dagger cut you, Erin didn’t disappear with that angel like you expected, the Winchester’s are more of a challenge than you anticipated. That other demon is a fluke you can’t predict. And you don’t know where they’ve gone or why. You’re scared.”

Ahriman seethed. He was not afraid of a couple of puny humans, a near renegade angel and a traitorous demon bitch and a weak, broken Immortal. He didn’t feel fear, he was fear. He was the one with the power here and once revenge was his, there would be more power for his taking. Just as he and Christian had planned. He wasn’t afraid.

“Kill the Winchesters first. You have a chance if Erin hasn’t got a leg to stand on. Kill the other demon. Kill the angel. She’s nothing without them to back her up. Then kill Erin. Before she kills us.

“I don’t think she is going to come begging for you to kill her. She taught me everything I know. That doesn’t mean she taught me everything she knows. If she had, she would have told me about what she did with Trajan. Taught me to wield that kind of power. She didn’t spend two hundred years torturing and killing under a master without knowing how to manipulate her victims,” Christian went on.

Ahriman snapped, smashing his clenched fist into the sink mirror with the tinkle of glass. Christian’s reflection fragmented, reflecting in each shard of the mangled mirror. “I can’t be killed and I can’t be manipulated you ass. Your pathetic teacher, your sister,” he ranted saying the words with utter disdain, “doesn’t have the conviction to wear that mantle again. She thinks it made her a monster.”

Christian disregarded Ahriman’s rage and pressed on, convinced he was right, “We’ve taken everything from her. She hasn’t got anything left to lose. Erin might be weak but she’s not stupid. She’ll take any advantage she can get.”

Ahriman had had enough, with a wrench he reigned Christian in. he fought it and a fight ensued. To Ahriman’s surprise, dark quickening and all, Christian’s ability to resist him was more than he would have thought. It took a few minutes for him to mentally throttle the Immortal into submission and lock him back in his cage. Then Ahriman, looked at his reflection in the mirror, twisted his neck so it cracked and straightened his jacket. His eyes still blazed blood red.
“You’re either with me or against me. Know your place. No one can defeat me. Not now,” he smirked, confident.

Christian managed to rise above Ahriman’s control long enough to snap back, “Only because you’re in me. You’d be as vulnerable as any other demon in a human.”

Ahriman gagged him viciously and shoved the Immortal’s mind as far back as he could, silencing him. Another outburst like that and Ahriman would rip him apart and leave nothing behind. He felt Christian relent, his need for power too great to resist. Ahriman had given him a taste of what it meant to have power and now he was as addicted to it as a drug addict to heroin. Ahriman smiled and muttered to his reflection as he patted a stray hair back into perfect position.

“There’s a good boy.”

###

“What haven’t we done?” Dean asked. Cass looked at each of them in turn and lowered the sword he’d selected by his thigh. He thought, perhaps he could accomplish two tasks with one action. Perhaps it would give the boys a nudge in the right direction with the prophecy and hopefully make the last effort he could with Erin beyond trying to encouraging her to have faith. Maybe, it was time he played by her rules.

“Come with me. Perhaps this will help you understand,” he said and set off across the kitchen for the salle with a purposeful stride. Dean shrugged and Sam quirked his brow, but they followed the angel as ordered. Castiel was never much on lengthy explanations if it wasn’t absolutely necessary. Whatever he meant, they’d figure it out soon enough. They hoped.

Ruby shuffled along with a weathered sigh. She didn’t see the point in all this even if she wasn’t trying to steer things where she wanted them to go. Why not just get it over with already?

Castiel had stopped at the entrance to the salle, watching, and the others gathered behind him. It wasn’t a huge expanse, but it was substantial. There was nearly nothing in the space. A polished wood floor, worn smooth by use until it was nearly impossible to tell it wasn’t one single piece of wood but many planks. In the center of it was emblazoned a rather macabre image of a man, half skeleton, half skinless musculature, like an anatomy drawing in an old medical text book. Over it laid a circle within a diamond, crisscrossed with intersecting lines and at certain points where the lines met, lay a footprint. It was quite small and if Dean and Sam hadn’t been Hunters they might have thought it some sort of witchcraft. If it were, it wasn’t one they knew.

The walls were bare plaster with no windows save the floor to ceiling ones that made up what would have been the front wall. Hung from them, but tied neatly up were simple bamboo shades. The open glass door where Cass stood slid over the backside of the glass paned wall on rollers. A stereo was set in one corner unobtrusively. A few padded mats had been rolled against the opposite wall and nothing else. The room was for all intended purposes, empty.

In the middle of the emptiness was Erin. Her long gold hair wild, seemingly not realizing they were there. Her sword in one hand and what looked like a long dagger with upturned quillons, in the other. She moved with deliberate grace, the sword and dagger, a main gauche used as an offhand and parrying weapon, flashing as she went. The sword swept down, then thrust forward, Erin moving along the straight line it provided, the dagger crossing and darting. She spun and whirled, the
sword flipped and thrusting back behind her as they watched. She turned in place and the dagger flicked through the air like a silver streak.

“She looks like she’s dancing,” Sam said without thinking.

Dean, who’d fallen into a near trance watching, snapped out of it. “Yeah, it kind of does.”

Whatever Erin was doing, it was strangely beautiful and ominous at the same time. Even Ruby was taken in by it, her voice low. “Does she even know we’re here?”

“It’s called the Dance of Death, but it’s not a dance. Look again. Imagine there are opponents. She knows we’re here. She would know if an ant crawled across the floor,” Cass said, though his eyes never left Erin. He watched every move she made like a bird of prey, cataloging every nuance of her movement.

Dean did as Cass suggested, and from the look of concentration on Sam’s face, he could tell his brother was doing the same. It took a bit of imagination and then, Dean saw it. Every move Erin made had a purpose, ever stroke of her sword or strike of her dagger landed a blow on, or a parried an imaginary opponent.

“There’s three of them,” Sam said in a quiet voice. It had that effect, without realizing it they were all speaking in whispers. None, of them could have explained why it just seemed right to whisper.

Dean looked again and saw what Sam saw. It was like she was fighting three people at once. “So, that’s why it’s called the Dance of Death.” He paused a beat. “It’s beautiful,” he noted without an ounce of sarcasm and a little surprised he’d admitted it. It wasn’t just the movements that were beautiful. Erin was wild. Feral. Deadly. She looked right there and it was beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

“It has its own beauty, yes,” Cass agreed, observing that Erin’s shoes were on. That meant he didn’t need to take his off to avoid offense. He was unnaturally still. His attention was so focused on Erin and what she was doing, taking into account how she placed her feet, the way she balanced the sword, that he moved naught at all.

“In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the morning and the night. Fair as the sea and the sun and the snow upon the Mountain. Dreadful as the storm and the lightning. Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair,” Sam quoted. He like everyone else couldn’t take his eyes off what was in front of him.

Dean looked at his brother askance. “Yeah, okay Frodo.”

“Galadriel,” Sam corrected. Dean just looked away in amusement at his brother’s odd encyclopedia of knowledge. He knew Lord of the Rings but not Highlander. Typical. Then Sam’s quote sunk in and he realized what it meant.

“She’s done it hasn’t she? Taken up the mantle Christian wanted her to wear again?”

“Yes, but she hasn’t taken it up again to stand by his side. She’s taken it up to stand against him. She’s a weapon. She has always been a weapon. Every moment of her life, every event, every horror and loss she has suffered, has led up to this. She was born to it. She’s been stripped of everything and now there’s nothing but the weapon left,” Cass explained, looking Dean and Sam both in the eye with a penetrating gaze, willing them to understand.

“There’s no way back now, is there?” Sam asked.
“No. She’s made her choice. Now we have to make sure it’s the right one.”

“The hell there’s not,” Dean murmured through his teeth. He saw it. He understood what Cass was saying, he thought. He was giving them roundabout information about the prophecy again, not that Dean quite got what he was driving at, but Dean refused to believe there wasn’t another option. He’d make one.

Dean could hear his own voice ring in his head right before he’d walked through the door to torture Alistair. You ask me to open that door, and walk through it? You will not like what walks back out. He knew what this would do to Erin and he wouldn’t let it happen.

Cass took a step into the salle and Dean reached to stop him. “Where are you going?”

The angel gave him a look that was equal parts deep regret and fierce conviction. “To hone the weapon.”

###

Ahriman sat behind the wheel of the check in clerk’s vehicle. A clinky, Toyota Corona that was completely unremarkable, except that it was puke green… and the engine knocked. It was amazing the thing still ran at all but the demon hadn’t had time to select a fitting mode of transportation. He had more pressing concerns.

He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles were white, heading north toward Sewall Point. He was afraid, though he would never admit it. He was too arrogant to concede that, maybe, he hadn’t thought this out as well as he had hoped.

Christian railed and screamed in fury inside the little box Ahriman had trapped him in and Ahriman ignored him resolutely. He stared straight ahead, intent on his destination and convincing himself that Erin was not off laying a trap for him. She was hiding and licking her wounds.

He refused to even consider the fact that the peculiar dagger Erin had carried had been able to harm him. It was a petty parlor trick and nothing more. He was Ahriman. He could not, under any circumstances, be stopped. All roads led to the same destination. He would win.

Despite his protestations to the contrary, it niggled at him. What if he was wrong?

###

Cass moved with schooled calm. Erin never broke from her routine, weaving through a thicket of imagined foes. He knew she knew he was there and he stepped into her path invading her personal space and crowding her. Erin stopped, dropping back a pace. Obviously wary seeing the sword in his hand. Instinctively, she assumed an en garde stance. Dean, Sam and Ruby watched from the doorway, three abreast, and waited with bated breath. What exactly was Cass doing?

Castiel’s expression never changed, his voice monotone and without inflection. “I can find no fault with your technique. It’s flawless.”

Erin’s eyebrow went up and she moved her head in a way that said, “Okay, then why are you four
inches away with a sword?"

"Flawless, if you are fighting a human or Immortal opponent. Ahriman is neither. The rules you follow do not apply and following them will get you killed," Cass said stern and unblinking. Then with blinding speed, he attacked her, stepping forward in a half advance and bringing the short sword up in an inside arc.

It forced Erin to either retreat or have her blade pressed away to the outside, leaving her midline vulnerable. She couldn’t move fast enough to retreat and Cass’s sword hit, shoving her blade away. He could have impaled her, then and there, by stepping into the space it left and thrusting, but he didn’t. That was too mundane, too human and fighting an opponent bound by the laws of physics was not Erin’s weak point. He pulled his heel into en garde and waited.

Erin fell back in surprise. She hadn’t expected that and if it had been another Immortal she’d be headless. She should have spun back on her heel, away from the attack and caught Cass’s blade in the quillons of her dagger. Erin cross-stepped, Cass matched her and they circled. Both looking for a chance to attack.

Outside the room the others watched. They said nothing as they waited for someone to make a move. To figure out what exactly was going on. Again, it was like there was a conversation going on between angel and Immortal they had no clue about.

Erin wasn’t sure if Cass meant this as a sparring session or if it was more. She was certain he wasn’t attempting to kill her but she couldn’t read him. He gave no indication what his next move would be and he kept his eyes locked on her every second. It had been a very long time since Erin had crossed blades with someone so far above her own skill that she felt true fear.

Cass tired of the waiting. Erin was hesitant to attack and so he pressed her hand again, lunging with a simple straight attack. She was ready for it and parried then, advanced with a counter attack but he was no longer there. He was behind her, in the space she had just occupied.

Erin came up short but adapted quickly. She back spun as Cass brought his own blade down in an overhead strike, catching his sword on her own and shoving down toward the hilt, locking the swept hilt of her rapier with the simple flattened guard and two quillons of the Katzbalger. Now, in the normal realm of sword fighting, she had him. The logical next move was to thrust her parrying dagger between his ribs, into his heart. If he were human, it would kill him. If he were Immortal, he’d be disabled enough for Erin to take his head. That’s not what Cass was trying to teach.

"Adaptation. Improvisation. Good. But that’s not the problem here. You’re adapting to the wrong thing," he instructed stern. Erin’s brow furrowed in confusion. She didn’t understand. She had him dead to rights.

Then, Cass’s sword arm still trapped by Erin’s blade, he shoved her backward with the flat of his free hand with only a fraction of his real strength. It lifted Erin off her feet and flung her several feet before she hit the floor in a skid. To her credit, she rolled into the fall, never losing her grip on her sword and used the force of the roll to bring her back to her feet and into position to defend against another attack.

"Cass!" Dean yelled in shock and reprisal, he almost stepped into the room to object and thought better of it. Cass wouldn’t hurt Erin. He was as determined to save her as Dean was. Besides, other than appealing to the angel’s better nature, what defense did he have? For that matter, what defense did Erin have?

Cass could tell the blow had knocked the breath from Erin, her ribcage heaving in an unsteady
breath. He didn’t give her the chance to recover. He advanced and she automatically backed up, putting her sword arm forward in a long defensive line, her parrying dagger drawn back like a bowstring.

It was the right strategy. Her rapier, with its long slender blade, was intended to keep opponents at a distance. Armed with a short sword, Cass’s reach was hampered. In order to strike he’d have to get in under her blade. But she was missing the point of this exercise. She was still reacting like she would to an average opponent.

“Do you really think you can win this way?” Cass growled, crossing the room in a few long strides, his sword down in an unthreatening manner. Erin didn’t waver from being on guard. She wasn’t taking the chance it was a bluff. Cass approved but that wasn’t enough.

He kept coming and Erin did exactly what she’d been trained for two thousand years to do. She took the advantage his open advance gave her. She corrected her stance and brought her arm toward her, sweeping it out in a wide cut that would have caught in him the midsection. Cass side stepped it and slashed at her exposed back as she passed him. His blade hit, slicing along her back in a diagonal line.

Erin yelped in pain as blood saturated the back of her shirt, her back bowing. The cut had been fairly deep. Cass was holding back most of his strength, but he wasn’t going to spare her either. You did not hone a weapon with gentle hands.

“Do you think Ahriman is going to play by your Rules? That he won’t use every advantage he has no matter what it is?” Cass asked.

“Do you think I won’t?” Erin said angry as she got her balance and faced him, teeth gritted.

“You’re not.”

Dean reacted in outrage the moment he realized that hadn’t been a pulled blow, his words stepping on theirs. “What the hell!” He stalked in between them a hand out toward each to stay them.

Erin’s head canted in an uncanny imitation of Castiel, the cut on her back crackling with blue white electricity as it healed, leaving only a bloodied rent in her clothing. “So you’re the teacher?” she asked as understanding came to her. For the second time in her life, she was the student and Cass was the teacher training her to fight what she didn’t have the skill to beat.

“Yes,” Cass answered dropping into position, and bringing his sword up. Erin started to do the same thing but Dean interceded, horrified.

“Stop it!” Dean demanded, “Stop right now. This is insane. You call hacking somebody up teaching?”

“Dean,” Erin reproached.

“You want to do this?” Dean asked in disbelief. He didn’t get it. Why would anyone want to be cut into bits? Surely, Cass could teach her whatever he was trying to teach without drawing blood.

Erin only looked back at him unblinking. Dean couldn’t understand this. No matter how hard he tried. He wasn’t an angel and he wasn’t Immortal. It was unfathomable that two people intentionally wound each other in the pursuit of learning anything.

“Dean,” Cass intoned in the same reproachful voice Erin had used. Dean looked at him, then back at Erin and realized this was an argument he couldn’t win from the get go. Mouth open, head shaking
dubiously, he threw up his hands and stalked off.

“Friggin’ angels and Immortals,” he complained as he took his spot at the door again. Just to make his point he looked up at Sam and said, “This is insane.” Sam could only nod in wide eyed agreement. Ruby looked enthralled, her shoulders high and her pose anticipatory as if she were watching a boxing match.

Erin dropped into position and looked Cass in the eye. “Teach.”

Then, the lesson began in earnest.

“Attack me,” Cass ordered. Erin came for him, striking hard. He was forced to block the blow or be hit. He disengaged and went in for a counter attack that Erin pulled into her line and used to feint. She darted in with the parrying dagger and Cass avoided it, grabbing her wrist and twisting it under, making her sword arm useless. Flipping his sword point down, he hit her with a metal braced fist.

Erin’s head snapped to the side and she went down on one knee, spitting blood but she caught on fast. She completed the twist and came out of his grip but Cass was already prepared. He grabbed her by the front of her shirt as she came up and threw her across the room. She slammed into the plaster wall with a loud bang, sliding down it to crumple onto the floor. The wall had cracked and plaster dust drifted down on her like snow.

At the door, Sam and Dean winced in sympathy. This wasn’t exactly what they’d imagined a training session to be like. This was brutal.

Erin groaned and tried to get up, but something had broken and wasn’t responding to her will. Cass approached her and offered his hand. She looked at it wary for a second and then accepted. He pulled her to her feet and reeled her in closer, until he was literally nose to nose with her.

“You’re holding back because you don’t want to hurt me. Stop it,” Cass commanded. He understood and it heartened him. She cared, and that meant that whatever faith there was, whatever trust in him that was still in her, it was deeply seated. She didn’t want to risk harming him.

Again, they squared off, Erin favoring her left side a bit. Immortals healed quickly but it wasn’t instant. And that vulnerability could be deadly. Cass chose to prove it.

He disappeared from where he was and appeared behind her without a sound, intending to hit her from behind. Erin reacted. He expected her to whirl around again in search of him. Instead, she adapted, flipping her sword backward and thrusting. Cass barely kept from being skewered. As it was, she sliced a deep gash along his side that would have disabled anyone else.

“Better,” Cass acknowledged, stepping out from behind her to her side.

This time Erin attacked him without warning. No sooner had he gotten his praise out than she struck, diving into him with her blade. Cass let her, deflecting her blade with his own and grabbing her with the other hand. Using her own momentum, he flipped her over his shoulder and she hit the ground like a ton of bricks, all the wind knocked from her lungs. He emphasized his point by swinging around in one motion and pressing the sword point to her throat.

“It’s like a Holy Immortal Fight Club,” Dean observed still incredulous about the whole thing.

“What are you waiting for? You’re better than this. You’re faster. Stop thinking in terms of the Rules and The Game or you are going to lose your head,” Cass lectured sharply.

Erin’s eyes were wide with real fear and she couldn’t get a good breath. She had been taught to be
terrified of a blade at her throat. It was the only truly vulnerable spot an Immortal had. Any message sent home with a blade at your throat had a particularly strong impact.

Relenting, Cass removed the sword point and offered her his hand again. She grabbed his wrist and started to rise, then at the last second she snaked her leg between his feet and twisted her body, pulling down on his arm at the same time. Cass, taken by complete surprise, lost his balance and pitched forward. Erin slid away from the path down and Cass hit the floor where she had been.

He immediately tried to flip over, but Erin had gotten the message loud and clear that time. The second he was on his back Erin plunged her parrying dagger into his heart.

Cass gasped loudly. It wouldn’t actually kill him, but even Castiel was still capable of feeling pain. His vessel was not impenetrable. If it had been Ahriman Erin was fighting and the angelic dagger instead of a main gauche he wouldn’t be able to recover fast enough to stop what came next. She rose to her feet, straddling Cass’s prone form and leveled her sword point at his throat. She’d won.

Cass pulled the dagger out of his chest, the wound not even bleeding and Erin stepped back, offering her hand to him this time. He didn’t need it to get up, he was unscathed, but he accepted. It was only good manners. He straightened his clothing and gave her a proud nod.

“Very good. Again.”

Twice more Erin managed to get the better of Castiel. Each time, more creative and more vicious, than the last. Many more times, Cass thwarted her or got her into a position to be killed. Every time Erin won, he’d make her do it again.

The fighting got faster, harder, more intense. Cass steadily hit with more force, allowing himself to fight with more strength as they went, forcing Erin to compensate. Erin’s blood slicked the floor in a few places. There were cracks and person sized holes in the walls it would take a construction crew to repair.

Once, Ruby, so into the competition side of it, forgot that she wasn’t part of the team, that she was against it, and screamed out “Kick his ass!” at Erin. It had earned her a weird look from everyone. Embarrassed she’d gotten caught up in the fervor of it she turned red and shrugged. “What?” They all just shook their heads and went back to what they were doing.

The next bout got so intense and so brutal it was hard to tell who was doing what and where. One second it seemed like Cass had the upper hand the next, it was Erin. She’d quickly forgone only using her blade and Cass was having to ward off brawl attacks as well as a sword blade.

He tried to hit her with his fist and she ducked. Springing back up and stabbing him through the back with her dagger. Cass’s knees gave way and he looked up at her panting. Her sword was at his throat. She grinned, despite the rivulet of blood running from the corner of her mouth, courtesy of the last blow he’d managed to land. It wasn’t friendly and it wasn’t cute. It was completely savage. The smile of a killer. Even Cass, who was in no danger of being harmed, much less killed, had an expression of wariness.

Dean felt a chill travel down his spine. This is what Erin was deep down. She was a weapon; the sword was just an extension of it. And Cass was honing her, to razor sharpness. It wasn’t hard to imagine the fear the intense gleam in her eye or the bloodstained smile provoked in her opponent when they realized she had them and their death was imminent. He never wanted to be on the other side of a fight from her.

“She scares me, Sammy,” he muttered to his brother, pointing at Erin for emphasis.
“Dude, you’re the one who has a thing for her,” Sam retorted jokingly, but he knew exactly what his brother meant. Then, Dean was his usual horndog self, his eyes traveling the length of Erin’s body. She was drenched in sweat and most of her clothing was shredded, exposing a good amount of flesh that was perfectly whole, thanks to her nature. He couldn’t help where his mind went.

“Wonder if she’d let me be on top?” he mused. Sam looked at his brother sideways.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I can’t help it!” Dean insisted.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what incorrigible means,” Sam pointed out.

Ruby just rolled her eyes at them.


Cass attacked her without holding back this time, blinking out and reappearing in the same spot, in an attempt to trick her. It didn’t work. When he swung his sword blade she avoided it and went around him. Using skills she’d learned as an acrobat in the circus, she ran up the wall two steps and back flipped over his head. Cass saw it and frowned. She was wide open.

Erin hit the floor in a perfect landing and Cass lunged. She surprised him and ducked the swing. She spun out of his eye line so quickly it was almost as if she’d suddenly become capable of the teleportation a full angel could do. Before he could compensate, he felt her sword blade cut along the back of his knees and again he was down. She swung. Cass was suddenly unsure she was going to pull it in time.

Instinctively he threw his arm up defensively, intending to catch the blade, but at the last second she stopped the blade dead. She’d beaten him at his own game superbly. They were both breathing heavily.

Cass got up, his vessel unharmed but his clothes were going to take a moment of tending to make them whole again. He looked like he had gone through a fan made of razors. Erin looked worse, though in body she was as whole as he was. Blood soaked more of her clothing than not, and to be frank, he was surprised she still had a shirt to wear.

“Excellent,” Cass panted. “You’re as ready as I can make you,” he said and weighed his next words carefully. “The rest is up to you.”

Erin’s eyes fell and she nodded solemnly. Cass understood. Despite the fact, she’d been able to beat him in training, she was still going to have to face her brother on the battlefield and kill him. No matter what she knew she had to do, it would never take the pain out of knowing she had to kill Christian.

“Now, we’re done,” Cass said to Sam and Dean. He didn’t bother to address Ruby.

“Good,” Erin said, pulling her cell phone out of her pants pocket. Dean couldn’t believe she hadn’t lost it in the sparring session.

“What are you doing?”

Erin was already dialing the phone. “Setting my plan in motion. If Ahriman had any sense he’d have killed all of us back there in the skyscraper. He didn’t. He’s arrogant. He can’t just get rid of his
“opposition efficiently, he’s got to make them suffer. Arrogance is a dangerous thing to have in a fight. He wants me to beg for him to kill me. I’m going to give him what he wants. He said ‘call me’, which means he’s got Christian’s cell. I’m calling.”

“You’re baiting him,” Sam realized.

“Never fight a battle on unfamiliar ground if you can choose the field,” Erin said, pressing send. They all waited.

“You win. I have nothing left,” Erin sobbed into the phone as soon as it was picked up and hit the speaker button. They could all hear the conversation now.

Ahriman’s malicious laugh answered her. “I told you you’d beg me to kill you.”

“I just want it over,” Erin wailed again in perfect imitation of someone who just wanted to die.

“Oh, poor little broken winged sparrow,” Ahriman taunted.

Erin snarled into the phone and had to beat down the urge to say something dangerously stupid. “Please,” she begged instead.

“Oh, very well. When and where?” Ahriman said as if the request bored him. He did a poor job of hiding his pleasure. It was apparent in his voice.

“Evans McCrary Bridge, Ocean Boulevard, 3 a.m. tomorrow.”

“Why so long? Why not now?” Ahriman pushed.

Dean and Sam suddenly realized, they’d worked through the night. None of them had slept or eaten and it was now early afternoon. They hadn’t been paying any attention to the passage of time, they’d been so busy.

“The bridge will be empty at that hour. We won’t be seen. Or do you want to play Duck Hunt with the cops?” Erin snapped.

“Oh, still some fire in there after all!” Ahriman exclaimed and laughed. “Have it your way. I suppose I can let you have that little consolation prize,” Ahriman sighed arrogantly. Erin rolled her eyes and was grateful cell phones hadn’t evolved to video transmission yet.

“Thank you,” she sobbed and hung up.

“That guy is such a dick,” Sam remarked. Erin said nothing at all, she walked out of the salle and turned to go up the stairs.

“Wait. Hey, where are you going?” Dean asked perplexed. That was it?

Erin looked down at herself confused by his reaction. “To take a shower,” she said as if the answer should have been obvious and disappeared up the stairs.

Dean threw his hands in the air, “I do not understand her.”

“When do you ever understand women?” Sam picked.

“Oh, shut up,” Dean retorted.
Despite his joking, Sam he was just as confused as Dean was by it. Erin was nonchalant about the whole thing and, as it stood, she was going to die before the next dawn.
Chapter 17

Ahriman drove down the long seaside stretch of A1A with smug satisfaction. Christian had been wrong. Erin had done exactly what he thought she had. She’d gone into hiding long enough to lick her wounds and realize she had nothing left to live for.

He was invincible and the only thing she had left to look forward to was watching Duncan MacLeod die or dying herself. She’d chosen the latter. Stupid, weak Immortals. No doubt her last ditch run was to protect the Winchesters. Her final, feeble attempt at sparing them. Let her. The Winchesters had a notorious habit of running head on into situations that should get them killed.

Ahriman didn’t doubt that either they would drop back and leave Erin to her fate, in which case he’d kill them after he’d killed Erin, or they would try and stop Erin when the time came. In which case, he’d kill them before they could interfere again. He had been forced to rethink his plans a little. The Winchesters would have to die earlier than planned, but, no matter how you looked at it, they all died. It was just a matter of when and how.

As for the angel, well, he could take care of him the same way he had before. The dagger concerned him naught at all. Or that’s what he kept telling himself. The dagger was actually very worrisome. If it could cut him what other tricks might the ragtag group have up their sleeves? Come to that, the Winchesters didn’t just have a bad habit of getting into situations that should get them killed, they had a worse habit of surviving them. But, he refused to think about notion.

He wasn’t fool enough to walk into the beach house that Christian had said was Erin’s most likely destination, where doubtless it was protected like a lock box, but he was too arrogant to believe he didn’t have the upper hand. Things were happening just as he’d thought they would after all.

Erin had come begging and he’d won. Nothing else mattered. Not even the flare of warning that had erupted from Christian when Erin had snapped about the location for their little meeting.

Ahriman didn’t care for waiting, but she had been right. At night would be best. While he wanted the world to know who he was and what he was doing, he didn’t want them to know it until he wanted them to. A battalion of cops in broad daylight wouldn’t be conducive to his plans or Christian’s.

A bit of patience and the pleasure of victory would be all his. He ignored Christian’s consciousness rising up within and screaming, She’s baiting you! Ahriman’s arrogance, superiority and pride overrode the warning of someone he saw as so far beneath him.

###

Dean waited for several minutes after he heard Erin close a door, presumably to one of the bathrooms before he said anything else. Then he turned to Cass, who was looking over his attire. Sometime in the last few minutes, it had mended itself. Dean didn’t bother asking how. He’d become used to it. No matter what kind of damage the angel’s clothing took, shortly thereafter, it was back the way it started. Slightly rumpled but whole.

Dean rethought what he had been about to say and looked at Ruby and Sam, who were standing there wooden, at a loss for what to do now that everything was in place.
“Why don’t you go clean up the mess Cass and Erin made? Sam can keep an eye on you,” Dean suggested to Ruby, though it was anything but a suggestion.

“I am not mopping up blood like some water boy at a cage fight!” Ruby insisted angrily. It wasn’t just the demeaning task. If she wasn’t there she couldn’t hear what was said. She didn’t like not knowing what was going on when she was trying to ensure Erin didn’t survive this. Dean Winchester had a habit of pulling a rabbit out of his hat at the worst possible moment, albeit with horrendous consequences later.

“Right now you’re whatever I tell you to be and I’m telling you go clean it up,” Dean snapped. Ruby snarled and began to snap back but Dean cut her off.

“Don’t. Because so far you haven’t done a thing we couldn’t have done ourselves. You might as well be useful for something.”

“It’s okay Ruby. You can help me go over that prophecy again while we’re at it,” Sam consoled. Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, because she’s so invested in finding a way out of this,” he muttered.

Sam heard his brother but he said nothing. It was no secret that Dean didn’t like Ruby any better than Cass or Erin did. Ruby glared daggers at Dean for a moment longer before stalking off at Sam’s side. Sam cast a look behind him at Dean, wondering why he wanted Ruby out of the room suddenly. Again, he worried his brother had some ludicrous scheme in mind.

“I keep telling you, the thing says exactly what it says.”

Dean heard Ruby say behind him in a put upon voice as they disappeared back in the salle.

“Yeah, well humor me,” Sam said back.

When they were gone, Dean looked to be sure they were well within the blood-strewn room. “I need to talk to you,” he said as he shouldered past Cass, heading into the living room.

Cass followed wordlessly in his wake with a look back over his own shoulder. It wasn’t like Dean to exclude his brother unless it was about him, or he was afraid Sam would interfere.

“What if I do it?” Dean asked without preamble, stopping in the middle of the cozy living room. “I need to talk to you,” he said as he shouldered past Cass, heading into the living room.

Cass followed wordlessly in his wake with a look back over his own shoulder. It wasn’t like Dean to exclude his brother unless it was about him, or he was afraid Sam would interfere.

“What if I do it?” Dean asked without preamble, stopping in the middle of the cozy living room. It was a contrast to Erin’s apartment, full of tasteful but over stuffed recliners and a couch that could have seated an army.

“Dean,” Cass began to dissuade him. Dean ran him over, stern.

“No I’m serious. What if I do it?”

“You can’t. You aren’t Immortal. I’ve already explained this,” Cass said in a barely tolerant voice. He hadn’t spent the last hour sparring with Erin because he thought there was a back way out of this. Why couldn’t Dean just accept that they had to do it the way Cass had told them for once?

“So? The prophecy says a sinner. Erin’s guilty of the same crimes I am. Why does it have to be her? Why not me? The man upstairs seems to think I’m pretty important, I don’t think he’s going to just let me kick the bucket and call it a day. If I die doing it he’ll just have you bring me back,” Dean insisted.

Cass inhaled deeply and shook his head. Dean never listened. Never. It didn’t matter what he asked Dean to do he always did the opposite.
“Even if you did Dean, you can’t absorb a quickening.”

“Yeah? And? There’s two of them in there and the only one we’re really worried about is Ahriman. Christian and whatever other immortals’ souls he’s collected can go back to The Guff or wherever. The ring makes Ahriman possess me, we gank the son of a bitch and everybody wins,” Dean argued almost pleadingly.

“The ring will bind Ahriman to the primary soul in whatever vessel he inhabits. It can’t be undone, you couldn’t be brought back. It’s permanent Dean. And that’s overlooking the fact you have an anti possession talisman tattooed on you. You cannot get around this. It’s prophecy,” Cass explained losing patience.

“There’s gotta be a way. Screw fate and prophecy! Screw the whole damn thing! Why should Erin’s fate be decided by some caveman that lived thousands of years ago? It’s just words on a page Cass,” Dean snapped.

“What is written can’t be unwritten. As it is written so it shall come to pass. I gave you the key. You need to understand why order is of the utmost importance,” Cass tried again to get Dean to see what was right in front of him.

“The whole faith thing? Get off it Cass. You don’t like this anymore than I do.”

Cass snapped, his voice low and trembling with barely repressed…something. Dean couldn’t figure out what it was. He came no closer but Cass’s mere presence seemed to swell and encompass the whole room. “No. I don’t. Do you think if I thought there was any other way, even for a second, that I wouldn’t have suggested it?”

“No, of course not Cass.”

“We are playing by her rules now. It’s her choice not ours. It never was. Do you think I honed her just to see her fail?” Cass said with a tinge of worried despair.

Dean sympathized. “I can’t do it Cass.”

Cass didn’t have to ask what Dean was referring to. He knew Dean meant the impending torture Dean would have to do if this worked but there was more to it. Cass looked at the elder Winchester and then he looked. As he’d done the first time he’d met him. Seeing what Dean either couldn’t or wouldn’t say. His head tilted like an inquisitive cat’s and his eyes narrowed before widening again.

“You care for her.”

Dean gave him an odd look. “Well, yeah. Of course. That’s the whole point isn’t it? She’s doesn’t deserve to go out like this. Nobody does.”

“No, it’s more than that. You’re,” Cass paused looking for words that fit, “becoming attached.” It wasn’t the best definition but he couldn’t come up with one in the English language that covered it adequately and wouldn’t make Dean balk out of pure habit.

Dean reacted on instinct. “Attached? No, no I’m not attached. We’re just, what’s the word, kindred spirits,” he scoffed, unwilling to admit that the something he kept wondering about between him and Erin had the first thing to do with attachment or anything else remotely in the realm of romance related terms. Lust, he could freely admit to that but nothing else.

“You do have affection for her,” Cass said. It wasn’t a question, it was a statement of fact and no matter how much Dean denied it he knew the angel knew better. Of course the angel’s definition of
‘attached’ and ‘affection’ might be completely different than his, but Dean wasn’t risking exploring it.

“She cares for you as well. It’s why she’s doing this. She is protecting you and Sam along with Duncan MacLeod.”

Dean looked considering for a moment at that revelation and then changed the subject before Cass could pry any further. He wasn’t even willing to pry that far, he sure didn’t want Cass laying it all out for him on a silver platter and then smacking him in the head with it.

“Cass, we’re talking about family,” Dean said. Cass opened his mouth to say something in response and Dean kept going before the angel could infer something else. “Your family at least. And you don’t just let family go kamikaze. You do whatever you have to do even if it is reckless or pointless because that’s what a family does for each other.”

“It’s a fool’s errand Dean,” Cass cautioned.

“Yeah, well, fools go where angels fear to tread.”

Cass didn’t have a response. He clamped his mouth shut without a word. Erin had said the same thing only days before and he had to wonder if it wasn’t taking on a new meaning.

###

While Dean and Cass discussed whatever it was Dean didn’t want him to hear. Sam had found a bare spot that didn’t have blood smears over it on the salle floor and sat down cross legged. He pulled the crumpled piece of paper with the prophecy translated on it out of his pocket and stared at the writing. The ink was already faded, the paper looked like it was months old, he’d gone over it so many times in an attempt to decode Cass’s cryptic clues. It was hard to believe they hadn’t been in Florida a week yet.

Ruby stood in the middle of the floor and crossed her arms defiantly, “I’m not doing it.”

Sam looked up at her briefly then returned his eyes to the paper, “I don’t think Dean really wanted you to. It was just an excuse so he could talk to Cass alone.”

“Oh, don’t kid yourself. Dean would love to come in here and find me on my hands and knees scrubbing away like a scullery maid,” Ruby snorted in derision. Sam looked up again.

“Scullery maid?” he asked amused by her choice of descriptive language.

“You know he’s never liked me. None of them like me. They don’t understand Sam. They can’t,” Ruby went on, choosing her words carefully. Now that she had Sam alone, she was using the opportunity to dig her claws in a little deeper. To increase that rift between him and his brother. To push him a little further down the path Sam had to take to fulfill the plans Lucifer had in store for him. To keep him and his brother from preventing the chain of events that had to happen here.

Sam’s face tightened. He knew she meant the fact he had been drinking demon blood, her blood, in an effort to become strong enough to kill Lilith. It enhanced the powers he already had, made them stronger. Powers he didn’t want but he felt should be used for something good. Sam didn’t miss the irony that he was using the powers given to him by Azazel, against the very monster he’d intended
Sam to use them for. There wasn’t another option. Dean wasn’t Dean anymore. He’d comeback from hell broken and Sam firmly believed that Dean didn’t have what it would take to kill her. He was too weak.

But with the demon blood, the power it gave him, Sam could. He might even be able to stop this whole mess in its tracks. He’d had the strength to kill Alistair without much effort at all, to the astonishment of Castiel. It had been him who’d gained them the knowledge they needed to find who had been murdering angels despite Dean’s thorough and horrendous torture of Alistair. The demon hadn’t broken until Sam had forced the information out of him and then killed him.

If Dean had qualms about torturing the demon who had tortured him for thirty years in hell, how could he possibly do it to Erin once Ahriman had possessed her? Dean had made it perfectly clear he didn’t think he could do it, that he wouldn’t. If Sam could kill Alastair, the Master Torturer of hell, surely one pathetic cast off demon like Ahriman would be a walk in the park. If it all went wrong he could get the information out of Ahriman long before Dean could, if Dean could even bring himself to make the first cut. He knew his brother more than lusted after the Immortal. The fact he’d refused to talk about them kissing, the way he was bent on ensuring she didn’t have to die told Sam that. Sam could spare his brother and Erin as much pain and anguish as possible. If Sam had the blood he needed.

The craving for it flared up in him, setting his veins on fire and his gaze flitted to the vessels pulsing in Ruby’s wrists. She obligingly sat down next to him, pulling her legs up beside her until her knees brushed one of his. He could smell the blood. It had been weeks, he needed it. They needed it, he told himself.

An unspoken conversation passed between the two. One they’d had before and Ruby had to fight not to smile. Sam followed along like a dog on a leash and she didn’t have to push him at all. Sam didn’t even have to ask.

Ruby pulled the small dagger she kept strapped to her leg under her jeans from its sheath and handed it to him. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come before now. I was trying to get information on Ahriman and Lilith,” she apologized.

Sam took the knife, he needed no further persuasion. He dropped the paper the prophecy was on, it drifted to the floor like a shed feather. Sam grabbed Ruby’s wrist and sliced it deftly.

Ruby hissed once softly and then Sam’s mouth was clamped over the wound. She could feel the gentle pull as he sucked. She moaned. It wasn’t a sound of pain, it was one you’d expect to hear from a lover in the throes of passion.

Sam drank like a leech. He could feel the blood course through him like liquid energy. The sickly sweet taste that should have made his stomach turn, forgotten in favor of the rush of power that filled him with every swallow. Ruby cradled his head with her free hand.

“It’s okay Sam. You know Dean won’t be able to do it. You’re a good brother. I know you’re trying to help Erin and it’s commendable. But prophecy is prophecy and she’s already chosen her path.”

The blood running down his throat in a hot torrent, Sam’s mind lit a tiny light in the dark corners of his mind. \textit{She’s already chosen her path}. Something about what Ruby said rang in his head as vitally important but before he could catch the thread and weave it into a thought, another rush washed over him from the demon blood and he lost himself to it. The prophecy could wait.
Erin came padding down the stairs with a hop in her step. Her hair hung down her back in still damp, loose, waves. She had dressed almost exactly as she had been before, redorning her low biker boots and the daggers she’d been keeping in them, save the one Cass had brought. Dean still had possession of that one. She’d put on fresh jeans and her shredded t-shirt had been exchanged for a gray tank top.

It wasn’t that Erin was in a particularly happy mood. She wasn’t. In fact, she was resigned to what she was doing and she wouldn’t let anyone stop her. She’d made her choice and that was it. She was going to face Ahriman in a few hours and then she’d be dead. But, Erin had been raised among a warrior race. You didn’t sit around whining about your last hours. You sucked it up, paid a little homage with food, drink, music and merriment and you went out having celebrated with your family and friends in your last moments. If Erin was going, she was going her way. The ancient Celts had taken “eat, drink and be merry” literally, long before they’d known it was a passage in the bible.

She paused at the foot of the stairs and looked around. No one was there. Apparently, the group had wandered off somewhere else in the house. Erin turned the corner and peered into the salle wondering if they were still all in there. She stepped into viewing range of it just as Sam let go of Ruby’s wrist. Erin’s brow crinkled and she frowned, they were at an angle so she couldn’t really see what was going on but she didn’t like it.

Here Sam was cavorting with Ruby, whom she hated on principle alone, and it didn’t exactly look like they were having a study session. Erin cleared her throat.

Ruby, lowered her arm rapidly and Sam jumped at the sound. He scrambled with something a moment before turning to face her but other than looking a bit startled nothing seemed amiss. It still didn’t sit right with Erin but she didn’t know why.

“Sorry, am I interrupting?”

“Oh no. No. Ruby was just going over the prophecy with me. Just trying to make sure we haven’t missed anything,” Sam said flashing her a bright smile.

Erin still looked skeptical. “In the middle of a blood smeared salle?”

“Uh, yeah we were gonna clean that up,” Sam said a little sheepish. Erin gave him an odd look and Sam felt his stomach drop. Had she seen anything? How long had she been there?

“Sorry, am I interrupting?”

“Oh no. No. Ruby was just going over the prophecy with me. Just trying to make sure we haven’t missed anything,” Sam said flashing her a bright smile.

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“Uh, yeah we were gonna clean that up,” Sam said a little sheepish. Erin gave him an odd look and Sam felt his stomach drop. Had she seen anything? How long had she been there?

“Yeah, okay,” Erin said and then shook her head. She probably didn’t want to know. In fact, she knew she didn’t. Whatever Sam and Ruby had been doing, it was their business. She had enough to worry about at the moment. If it had nothing to do with their current situation she wasn’t going to press the issue and she wasn’t letting an awkward moment ruin her last night on Earth.

“Well, leave it for now. Come on,” Erin said motioning out the salle doors toward the interior of the house. She waited until she saw Sam trade a befuddled look with Ruby and start to get to his feet and then she walked off in search of Dean and Cass.

She found them standing across from each other in the living room giving each other a significant look but not saying anything. First Sam and Ruby, now Dean and Cass.

“Okay am I missing something here? Because all this awkward silence could make a girl think you’d been talking about her.”
Erin’s voice got their attention but unlike Sam they didn’t look awkward. They just stopped. Cass started to speak, intending to tell Erin they had been talking about her. Naively unaccustomed to the fact that talking about someone when they weren’t there was considered rude by human social standards.

“Nope. Just discussing Cass’s lack of fashion sense,” Dean diverted before the angel could get words out. Erin didn’t buy it for a second but she let it slide. No sense in rocking the boat. Cass looked down at his clothes perplexed by Dean’s statement; he pulled at his trench coat and surveyed his attire.

“Is there something inappropriate about my apparel?”

Dean winced and half grinned. Cass wasn’t always the quickest study.

“Oh no. It’s great.”

Erin caught Castiel’s confusion and in the spirit of what she was trying to accomplish. A night without the burdens that waited for her. She joined Dean in his teasing of the angel.

“Perfect for a holy tax accountant.”

Cass looked more confused than ever.

“That’s exactly what I said when I met him,” Dean kept it going.

Now Cass’s expression became dour. He realized he had somehow become the butt of some human joke he didn’t understand. Dean and Erin looked at each other and laughed at his expression. Real laughter, not the forced or nervous variety used to cover the craptastic, no win, situation they were in. Cass was pleased to hear the sound but he didn’t understand what was so funny.

“What’s so funny?” Sam asked joining them.

“Just Cass, being Cass,” Dean explained. Sam grinned and Ruby looked disinterested. There was a moment of quiet and Erin pipped up in a jovial voice.

“So who’s hungry? I’m starving.”

It caught everyone off guard but she hadn’t waited for a response. She was already half way to the kitchen before anyone could react.

“What’s with her? She’s going to sacrifice herself in a few hours and she wants to cook dinner? Isn’t that a little disturbing?” Sam asked of no one in particular, watching Erin drape an apron over her head and tie it around her waist. It was creepy. If he knew he was going to die he didn’t think he’d be playing Martha Stewart.

Dean understood, he got it. It was Erin’s last night on Earth and she didn’t want to spend it moping. She was grabbing on to the only normal thing in sight and making it hers. They were there, for tonight, they were her family. It made Dean want to smile and frown all at the same time. It was at once heartwarming and tragic.

Despite Cass’s warnings to the contrary Dean was still set on his own plan but Erin didn’t and couldn’t know about it. He knew his was a foolhardy plan at best. He wasn’t going to ruin what might be her last night of life.

“Last night on Earth Sam.”
“So we’re just accepting it now?” Sam asked incredulous.

“No. But she has and we might not be able to figure this thing out before it’s too late. She’s driving this boat.”

Sam’s face contorted in sadness. He understood, he hated it but he understood. He gave his brother a nod. Cass was quiet. He understood but it didn’t hearten him like it seemed to Dean. If Erin was just simply accepting that she was going to die, what did that say about the faith that was so important for her to survive?

“I fail to see how this is beneficial.”

Dean clapped him on the shoulder and edged closer, speaking so there was no chance Erin would hear. “You wanted faith. This is how you get it Cass.”

Cass gave Dean a look. That didn’t make a bit of sense to him. But, Dean was human, he would have to trust that Dean knew what he was talking about.

Erin was setting out pots and pans. One of which was a pie pan. She’d already taken out a bag of flour. Dean’s eyes got big.

“Oh pie,” he muttered enthusiastically and dashed off after her.

Erin turned back and shrugged in impatience at the rest of them. “Are you going to stand there all day or what?”

Sam grinned and joined Erin and his brother, Ruby on his heels. Erin opened a bag of blackberries and Dean snaked his hand over her shoulder, pilfering one. Erin smacked his hand and he feigned pain as Erin admonished him. Sam helped himself while she was busy berating Dean and Erin smacked him too. The three of them laughed.

Cass paused for a moment and took it in. Perhaps Dean was right. Then, he too, joined them.

###

“So this is how we’re gonna spend the rest of the day?” Ruby remarked watching the three with disdain. Erin put down bag of blackberries. Dean stole another one as soon as her eyes were off it, passing a second to Sam. Who popped it in his mouth before Erin could catch him.

“Nope this is how we are going to spend the rest of the day. You are leaving,” Erin said, opening a cabinet door and tossing a box she found there at Ruby. Ruby caught it and snarled. It was a box of Twinkies.

“I can’t leave. Devil’s traps are all over the place not to mention the salt. Hello, what keeps Ahriman out keeps me in.”

“I’m not having a demon at my table. There’s plenty of TV’s in the bedrooms upstairs, pick one. Maybe you can catch a rerun of The Exorcist. Should make you feel right at home,” Erin snarked back.

Dean choked on the latest blackberry he had swiped as he laughed at Erin’s comeback.
Ruby started to argue but Sam shook his head in warning. Her mouth fell open. He was just going to let Erin do this? Ruby seethed. When it was obvious that Sam did not intend to nay say Erin, Ruby gritted her teeth and stalked off upstairs. Let them do what they wanted. It was the perfect opportunity for her to get a leg up on her game.

“Enjoy the twinkies!” Erin called after her. Ruby could hear Dean give a stifled laugh. She really hated Erin Morgan.

With Ruby gone, Erin resumed what she’d been doing without a moment’s break in mood.

“Somebody wanna put on some music?”

“Oh I got it,” Sam said, snitching another blackberry as he danced out of reach as Erin tried to grab it back.

“Stop eating the ingredients! Mannerless heathens,” Erin protested. Sam shrugged and headed for a stereo in the adjacent living room. Dean unabashedly took another blackberry and shoved it in his mouth.

“So we got food in the making. We got music, though with Sam picking it I can’t promise it’s gonna be good. We need drink, especially if Sam puts some sappy crap on,” he declared around the mouthful.

“Top cabinet, third from the left,” Erin answered him, looking at what she’d gathered so far. She had everything out to make a pie, she had out potatoes and toppings for loaded baked potatoes, what else did she need?

Dean found the alcohol. He took down a bottle of Maker’s Mark and three glasses pouring them full. Erin pushed a fourth at him and Dean gave her a questioning look. She waved at him to fill it too and he complied. He didn’t know what for. Cass didn’t eat or drink.

Dean passed out glasses as Sam came back in the kitchen and the first cords of a rock guitar filled the air. It was an upbeat tune and not one Sam would have chosen.

“It was already loaded and on shuffle all I did was turn it on,” Sam excused as if the selection was a terrible idea. But Dean didn’t think it was. It was a good solid rock song and Erin’s head was already bobbing with the beat. Sam accepted his glass and Erin took both her own and the extra, pushing it toward Cass.

Cass looked at it like it was a foreign object. “I don’t drink.”

“Unless it’s gonna clog up a motor or rust your gears, tonight you do. Not only do you drink, you eat,” Erin said with absolute certainty.

“I don’t have a motor or gears. This is a human vessel,” Cass explained innocently.

“Great, then you can drink yourself under a table like the rest of us,” Erin said and pushed the drink at him again. Cass looked at Dean for help and only got an amused smirk.

“Why would you want to drink under a table?”

“Drink a few of those and you’ll figure it out,” Dean laughed.

Cass still looked dubious.
“Humor me,” Erin encouraged. Cass gave the glass of amber liquid another wary look and drank the whole thing at once.

“Alright that’s more like it!” Erin praised. Dean grinned at her, this was who Erin could have been without all the crap she’d had dumped on her shoulders.

“Sam, grab the steaks outta the fridge please?”

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” Sam said in anticipation, fetching a Styrofoam tray from the fridge with four Porterhouse steaks in it.

“I got this,” Dean told them, snagging the tray from his brother. Sam gave him an incredulous look.

“You’re going to cook?”

Dean shrugged. “It’s red meat. I’m a man. I can cook a steak.”

“Yeah right,” Sam argued good naturedly.

“Hey go for it,” Erin encouraged, taking a bottle of frozen water out of the freezer and putting it into the fridge to thaw out.

“What’s that for?” Dean asked.

“You’ll see,” Erin said with a mischievous smile.

“Where’s the grill?” Dean asked with a cant of his head. He didn’t know what was so special about ice but this was Erin’s last hurrah so what ever worked for her.

“He’s going to poison us,” Sam insisted.

“Shut up Sam,” Dean shot as he carried off the steaks in search of a grill.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Sam cautioned jokingly.

“He can’t be that bad of a cook,” Erin laughed. Sam gave her a pointed look. Erin looked seriously concerned.

“Oh boy.”

###

Ruby threw the box of twinkies on the bed and paced the length of the bedroom she’d chosen. It hadn’t been a haphazard choice. This room was on the backside of the house, with a window facing the beach beyond and as far from the main part of the house as you could get.

Salt was laid in a thick line along the window sill but that wasn’t a problem. Salt only kept a demon out...or in as long as the line remained unbroken. While the Winchesters, Erin and Cass were downstairs having a good time, Ruby was going to secure her stake in this whole thing.

Taking the hex bag she’d placed in the room she stashed it in her pocket, patting her jacket to be sure she had a lighter on her. Then she used one of the decorative pillows from the bed to sweep away the salt from the window sill. She opened it and peered out. It wasn’t but two stories down but Ruby cursed Erin under her breath anyway.
She couldn’t wait for this whole thing to be over. Ruby climbed out the window, half in and half out, the sea breeze ruffling her hair and smirked in satisfaction. Erin was going to get quite a surprise.

###

Downstairs, the rest of the meal preparation went much the same way it had started. More fun than productive, more like a roomful of friends on holiday than, two hunters, an angel and a two thousand year old Immortal on the eve of a doomed battle. The process was as much a part of the festivities as the dinner itself would be. If they ever actually got it made.

Dean had proved that he had no real experience with a grill by putting too much lighter fluid on the charcoal and causing a small nuclear explosion. He yelped like a five year old and batted at the flames with tongs uselessly. There was momentary panic that Dean was going to burn the house down but he resolutely insisted he had it under control and Sam, Erin and Cass had left him to it. Albeit the fire extinguisher was within arm’s reach at a moment’s notice.

Erin had recruited Cass’s help with the less complicated preparations that turned out to be much more complicated than she thought with an angel at the helm. Battle tactic he knew, food…not so much.

Cass put the ears of corn, husks still on, in the pot Erin had given him and filled it with water. When he handed the pot to Erin, she did a double take and burst into gales of laughter. The outburst brought Dean and distracted Sam from his job wrapping the potatoes in tinfoil to be baked after washing them.

“You have to shuck it first Cass.”

“What’s goin’ on?” Dean asked standing beside Erin, whose hands were covered in pastry dough and flour.

Cass looked at the pot dumbfounded. “Shuck it?”

“Yes shuck it,” Erin said her shoulders still shaking with giggles.

“I have to shuck it?” Cass repeated.

“You have to shuck it,” Sam confirmed biting his lip. The alcohol had been flowing freely by now and while Cass remained completely unaffected, the same could not be said for the other three.

“How do I shuck it?”

Dean was snickering under his breath and it didn’t look like Erin could breathe. Sam put his head on the table and tried to contain himself. Cass would never understand but all three of their minds had taken a hard left into the nearest gutter.

“You shuck it,” Dean said through clenched teeth to keep from going into a laughing fit.

“Yes Dean. But how do I shuck it?”

Sam couldn’t help himself, “Anyway you like. Maybe ask it out for a drink, first.”

Erin shook harder and began to lose her ability to stand she was laughing so hard in silence.
“I can’t like anything in any way if I don’t know what you’re talking about. What’s shucking?” Cass asked in exasperation.

Erin came unglued. She laughed so hard she couldn’t stand and Dean was the nearest thing to hold onto. She threw her arms around his neck and buried her head in his chest, laughing hysterically. Dean put his arms around her to keep them both from sinking to the floor and came unhinged himself. They set Sam off and all three of them laughed until they cried.

Cass looked on in utter confusion. “What’s shucking?” He insisted seriously.

They stopped for a split second and the laughing fit started all over again. Cass gave up, throwing his hands in the air and setting the pan down on the counter.

“All I asked is what shucking was.”

That did it again and the three laughed until they gasped for air.

Once they’d gotten a hold on themselves, Dean noticed that Erin had gotten pastry dough and flour all over him. “Hey, keep your dirty mitts to yourself,” Dean teased. Loosing one hand, scooping up a dollop of the blackberry pie filling she’d made and plopping it on her nose with a grin.

Erin was dumb struck for a moment and then she retaliated. Completely straight faced, she grabbing a finger full of the pie filling herself and swiping it on his nose.

“Oh, this means war,” Dean proclaimed. He flung a cup of flour at her and she dodged. It got Sam in the back of the head, poofing into a white cloud around him.

“Hey!” he protested, flinging a wad of tinfoil in his brother’s direction. Dean took it in stride and tossed a lump of discarded dough at his brother. He pegged him in the forehead. Sam snorted and got up, the chair he’d been sitting in screeching across the floor menacingly.

Dean backed up and Erin was ready to bolt. “That’s it,” Sam said, picked up a measuring cup of flour and the fight was on. Cass could only watch in stupefaction. Food flew and they ran, screeching like kids.

At one point Sam got the bright idea of putting the flour in a dishtowel and beating anybody he could get his hands on with it. Erin had just whacked him in passing with an ear of Cass’s still shucked corn and he stalked after her like a bear. She ran, seeking shelter behind Dean who was wielding a mangled potato as a throwing rock in one hand and a cup of flour in the other.

“I’m not gonna save you. It’s every man for himself sweet heart,” Dean warned her. Sam tried to get Erin, knocking the ear of corn from her hand. Weaponless, she grabbed Dean’s cup of flour and tossed it in Sam’s general direction. She over shot and it sailed across the room and landed directly on Cass’s head.

He didn’t move, he didn’t blink, all you could see was white and Cass’s blue eyes through the dusting of flour. He was glaring at them, put upon; the way a parent glares at children caught misbehaving.

They all froze, unsure how the angel was going to react about being bombed with flour. Finally, Cass brushed the flour off his head and sighed. “This is childish,” he pointed out.

“That’s sorta the point Cass,” Sam said. Cass glared at him. Sam shut up. Dean chortled nervously. Behind him, Erin was peering around in apprehension. Cass gave her a reproachful look and she composed herself like the two thousand Immortal she was.
“Okay, we better try to get this done or we’re never going to eat.”

The last word was drawn out in a startled yelp as Erin slid on a patch of the thrown flour. Dean grabbed her before she could hit the floor and he slid as well. It took a second of flailing but he managed to keep them both from breaking something. They paused, panting and locked eyes. Erin was helpless in his arms, her back bent like a dancer’s, her heels had little purchase on the floor and her mouth was centimeters from his. Her breasts heaved teasingly against his chest and for half a heartbeat, they both considered kissing the other again for the second time, that connection tugging at them both.

Dean swallowed hard and righted Erin. “Yeah. Wouldn’t wanna waste good pie,” he muttered but the comment was absentminded.

“Yeah,” Erin muttered back, straightening her apron. Dean shook the flour out of his hair and returned to the grill and Erin smoothed the creases of her apron and tried to avoid looking at Sam or Cass as she resumed making the pie.

Sam couldn’t have missed what had just happened if he’d tried to. He cast a glance at his brother who was ignoring them as hard as Erin was. This would never end well.

“What just happened?” Cass asked.

“Dean’s falling for her.”

“Falling?” Cass questioned.

“And she’s falling for him,” Sam breathed sadly. The whole thing was doomed from the beginning and they knew it. Cass caught on but said nothing. Sam wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know.

###

Ruby stood in the shelter of a copse of palms that braced the edge of the sand on the small beach, out of sight of the house. The breeze had come and gone, leaving her standing in the dark in the sticky Florida humidity, with nothing for company but the faint sounds of insects.

She flicked the wheel on the Zippo she carried and lit the hex bag. It caught like kindling and she dropped it, letting it burn. The flames glowed blue in the shadows. The insects dropped into sudden silence. Burning the hex bag left her completely exposed to Ahriman. She’d be easy to find and that’s exactly what she wanted him to do.

She waited. In the distance she could hear the shrills and laughter of Sam, Dean and Erin. They sounded like children on a playground, their trouble forgotten for a moment. Ruby grimaced. They should all be so far in the depths of gloom they couldn’t find the light. The sounds held too much hope in them. But, Ruby was about to ensure their faint prayers went unanswered. Angel up their sleeve or not.

Ahriman took his time. When he finally showed, Ruby had been waiting for at least twenty minutes. One second the space before her was empty, the next he was there. He looked as put together and calm as ever, but his eyes were cautious. He didn’t trust her.

That was the thing with demons. They didn’t trust one another. They couldn’t. Another demon would slit your throat in a blink if it served their own purposes and there wasn’t one who didn’t
know it.

“Well, if it isn’t Ruby Benedict Arnold,” Ahriman hissed. “I must say I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Cut the crap. I know you don’t trust me. Let’s be honest, I don’t trust you either. But you’re walking into a trap and Erin Morgan is going to hack your head off like a chicken for the soup kettle.”

Ahriman’s lip lifted in a sneer. That had come dangerously close to being a veiled insult to his ego. “Erin’s done. I took everything she cares about. She’s got nothing left. She can’t hurt me. None of them can. They already tried with that pathetic little dagger.”

Ruby could tell from his overeager bravado that despite his façade Ahriman was concerned. She wondered what had caused the concern but she didn’t show any interest. It would show her hand.

“You’re wrong. The dagger isn’t the weapon you have to worry about. It’s Erin,” Ruby warned. Ahriman scoffed.

“Erin? You think Erin can harm me? She tried you stupid little ingrate.”

“She wasn’t strong enough then. Now she is. That angel you banished, Castiel, changed her, made her something else. You face her now and you’re good as dead,” Ruby twisted. It wasn’t an outright lie. It was so far mangled so as not to be anywhere near the truth but it wasn’t actually lie. It was economical with the truth.

Ahriman stepped closer to her but kept enough distance that she had no chance of getting near him.

“And why should I believe you? You aren’t exactly the poster girl for demon of the year now are you? You’ve been aiding and abetting the Winchesters for months. You helped them protect an angel and get her back her grace. Give me one reason why I should give a single word you say credence?”

“Because I’m the one holding the chips,” Ruby smirked. Ahriman shook his head and laughed at her.

“Chips? What chips? I could kill every last one of you right now if I wanted to.”

“Then why don’t you? If you’re not even a little worried Erin might have some trick up her sleeve why not end it now?” Ruby pushed. Ahriman glared in anger.

“As if that house isn’t sealed up tighter than Fort Knox.”

“Really? Then how did I get out? Rock salt bullets didn’t hurt you. Neither did an exorcism or holy water. So if you’re so badass, why don’t you just walk in there and finish it?”

Ahriman seethed like a slowly smoking kiln. She’d pushed the right button.

“I’ll tell you why. Because you’re not stupid. You’re not willing to take the risk that Erin and the Winchesters, along with their little angel buddy, are going to snag you in a devil’s trap and gank your ass. Because somewhere in that ego filled ether you call a brain you have better sense.”

“What if I do? It all ends the same. Here, there, anywhere. Erin has already submitted. I win,” Ahriman shrugged.

“You didn’t take as much from Erin as you think you did. Are you really willing to take the chance
she’s got one up on you and that I’m not lying about her being the weapon you should be worried about?” Ruby queried. Ahriman shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo jacket.

“What’s in this for you?”

Ruby was straight with him then. However, she left out the more pertinent bits. Like the fact the real threat to the demons gaining control of the Immortals was Erin not MacLeod. He was just supposed to be the last man standing.

“You know how this works. The rest of us demons don’t want Duncan MacLeod alive anymore than you do. We’ve been trying to get the nephilim on our track for centuries. He wins the Prize and we are all seriously screwed. The angels will have control of the nephilim and it won’t matter if we do break the seals, kick start the Apocalypse and win. They’ll sic their half breed kin on us and we’ll bite the dust permanently.”

“I didn’t ask what was in it for the rest of our kind. I asked what’s in it for you,” Ahriman said forcefully. Ruby sighed. Ahriman was either an idiot or he needed somebody to draw him a map.

“Look I know all about your little plan. Kill the Winchesters, derail the prize fight for both sides. Just because you can. Take revenge on MacLeod and be the last Immortal/demon standing, win the prize and conquer the world. You aren’t that good. Daddy already knew what you were up to the second you possessed an Immortal and started taking heads. And yeah he’s probably pissed but I don’t care. All I care about is my own hide.

“So you know what. I will show you every salt line and every devil’s trap they think is keeping them safe. You can have Erin. I hope you make her last moments a living hell. I hate the bitch. You can even send that blasted angel back to Heaven for all I care. But Sam and I walk.”

“But not Dean?” Ahriman asked intrigued. She had him now.

“No. You get Dean Winchester on a plate. Like I said, you didn’t take everything away from Erin. He’s her Achilles heel right now. The dumb slut went and got all moon eyed over him,” Ruby confirmed. “We both know you don’t need Sam and Dean dead to throw the Apocalypse of its tracks. Kill one and the whole thing’s off. You get what you want, I get what I want and the rest of the demons get what they want more or less. Everybody wins. Well, except for Erin and Dean and maybe Castiel but who’s counting?”

Ahriman licked his lips. The offer was tempting. He’d still get what he wanted, Erin would be completely alone and the demons wouldn’t be as hot to get their hands on him for derailing the apocalypse if he were doing them a favor at the same time. Besides, he could always renig and kill Sam Winchester and Ruby anytime he liked.

“I think I like those terms.”

Ruby smiled widely.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

###
Dinner did, finally, end up on the table. Sam had taken charge of the food fight clean up, Erin had finished the pie and cooked the potatoes and corn after Cass had been recruited to complete what Sam left behind. This time succeeding in completing the task without sparking another laughing fit. Dean pulled a plate of steaks off the grill just as the rest of the meal was completed and they didn’t look nor taste, like the poisonous abomination Sam had feared.

All in all, it was a fine meal. Even Cass had eaten, humoring Erin. None of them were falling down drunk but they were several sheets to the wind. The mostly empty bottle of Maker’s Mark and the missing half case of beer were testament to it. Cass had yet to be affected by any alcohol he’d consumed to their great amusement.

Now, they were joking idly around the kitchen table over the last dregs of their beers, as the clock ticked inexorably closer to 3am. No one looked at a clock. No one wanted to be reminded.

“What?” Dean said incredulous, around the last bite of his blackberry pie. Pie he was very pleased with. It seemed every time he tried to get his hands on pie Sam either, forgot it, ruined it or they had to cut and run before he could eat it.

“There’s no comparison,” Sam insisted.

“Comparison? Chuck Norris could kick Jet Li’s ass!” Dean insisted.

“You’re both wrong,” Erin put in, as jokingly argumentative as they were.

“Excuse me?” Dean said daring her to disagree.

“John Wayne would beat the shit out of Chuck Norris and Jet Li…at the same time!”

“He’s not even in the same category!” Sam shot.

Erin shrugged and downed the last swallow of her beer. “Just proves how much more badass he is compared to your two.”

“You’re all wrong,” Cass said. Everybody stopped in mid argument and looked at the angel. He looked back with complete seriousness. “Goliath far exceeds any of your choices.”

The three of them looked at each other and then back at Cass. He didn’t bat an eyelash.

“Cass… did you just make a joke?” Dean asked in shock.

Cass looked a bit abashed. He’d been attempting to join in what seemed to be customary behavior for the event.

“Oh my God he did!” Sam breathed.

“Cass, are you feeling okay?” Erin asked, snickering.

“We’ve corrupted him!” Dean said in awe.

“I feel fine,” Cass insisted.

All three of them rocked with laughter.

“My attempt at humor failed apparently,” Cass observed.

Dean clapped him on the shoulder, shaking his head between guffaws. “No, no Cass it was perfect!”
They laughed for a moment longer and then Erin pushed back her chair. Rising she went to the refrigerator and fetched the bottle of frozen water, now only regular ice cold water, a box, four silver utensils and four odd looking glasses.

“Time for something special,” she announced, setting a wide mouthed, short stemmed glass with a line etched about one third of the way from the bottom in front of each of them. On top of each, she placed a silver flattened spoon with intricate slots cut into it and on top of that, she placed a sugar cube from the box she’d brought to the table.

“We’re gonna have sundaes?” Dean hazarded a guess. He hadn’t a clue what Erin was doing.

“Oh this is much better than any sundae you have ever had,” Erin said with a grin. She walked away from the table again and stood on tiptoe, pulling down a bottle from the cabinet. It was filled with emerald green liquid but none of them could see the label, since it was turned toward her.

“What’s that? We’re celebrating St. Patrick’s day early with green whiskey?” Dean asked.

“Close, but not quite. We’re going to take a walk with the green fairy,” Erin said uncorking the bottle, and pouring the green fluid to the etched line in each glass, careful not to let any touch the spoon on top or the sugar.

“Absinthe?” Sam asked wide-eyed. Dean looked at his brother with the same bewildered expression Sam had.

Cass seemed either not to know what absinthe was or he had no opinion. At least not about what the drink was anyway. “The preparation is very ritualistic.”

“It is. It’s all part of the experience,” Erin said as she poured the last glass, her own.

“Wait, won’t that stuff kill you?” Dean asked concerned.

“That is a myth perpetuated by those who either, abhorred Absinthe in general because of its effects or from plain ignorance. Properly made, Absinthe is nothing more than a fine drink for the ages with a particularly adept ability to take you places you’ve never been.”

“Poetic,” Sam conceded.

“Truth,” Erin corrected, twisting the cap off the bottle of water and pouring it ever so slowly over the sugar cube in each glass.

The absinthe changed before their eyes, the water gently and gracefully making the emerald green fluid change to an opaque, opalescent, milky color. It was quite beautiful to watch actually and Cass had his head down watching it change with fascination. Even Dean couldn’t deny it was intriguing watching the sugar slowly melt under the constant trickle of water, the ebbs and flows, as the absinthe changed like a magic trick.

“What’s it going to do?” he asked.

“It’s different for everyone. You won’t be drugged if that’s what you mean,” Erin said picking up her glass with reverence. Sam was eyeing his glass warily and Dean was skeptical.

“Yes, it’s very much like a spell working,” Cass decided, straightening up.

“I don’t know about this Erin,” Sam said.
“It will do you no harm. Though I understand the psychological effects are considered impressive,” Cass assured him, picking up his glass and peering through the bottom of it.

“Isn’t it supposed to be an aphrodisiac too?” Sam said looking at the glass with less trepidation.

“Is it?” Dean muttered in an absentminded voice, but his eyebrows had crept up his forehead considerably. “Okay then,” he added picking up his glass.

Sam shook his head at Dean and Erin gave a half grin and stood back, raising the glass part way in the beginning of a toast. They all stopped and waited politely. It took her a moment of thought and composure before she spoke.

“Here’s to you guys, family and friends where I expected to find none. You know the worst of me and yet, here you are,” Erin said with emotion. Then with a wicked grin, “And here’s to Ahriman. May the son of a bitch get what’s coming to him, eat shit and die.”

That hadn’t been the toast they were expecting. It was abrupt, brief and moving all at the same time.

“I’ll drink to that,” Dean agreed lifting his glass, though he had every intention of ensuring it wasn’t Erin who paid the price to see Ahriman that way.

“You should have been a Winchester,” Sam said raising his with a smile. With a toast like that, she would have fit right in with their gang of hooligans. He missed his brother’s wince the observation provoked.

“Hear, Hear!” Cass said using what he had heard used for centuries as a proper response to a toast and tossed his back, his mind again on his concern that Erin hadn’t the faith to make it out of this in one piece. The others followed suit as if it were a shot, even Erin. She didn’t bother to tell them Absinthe wasn’t a drink you bolted. It made no difference, it meant the affects of the thujone in the Absinthe, what gave it its pet name of The Green Fairy, would hit them faster and given what they had to face... that was probably a good thing.

With that, they all slammed their glasses down on the table with a thud.

Dean was surprised at the taste of Absinthe. It tasted like he had a mouthful of licorice. He loved it. Licorice was one of his favorite candies. Sam however, looked horrified by it. Given his dislike for licorice that came as no surprise. Cass just looked thoughtful.

“We should get some sleep,” Erin said lightly. She had allowed their reverie to run as long as possible but now it was time to step back into reality. Her eyes betrayed her real melancholy, flooding back with full fervor.

Erin’s suggestion brought them all back to the present with a painful jerk. The clock on the kitchen wall read 10pm. Five hours left. A pittance of time.

Erin walked off toward the stairs, disappearing up the staircase without a word. They could only watch her go.
Chapter 18

Ruby lay on the bed on top of the sheets, propped on the pillows, one hand behind her head as she surfed channels with the remote in the other. She'd carefully finagled the salt line over the window she'd left through, back into place using one of those aforementioned pillows. No one would ever know she'd stepped foot outside the room. Ruby wore a self-satisfied grin.

Her plan was perfect. Sam, Erin, Dean, they were playing their parts like a symphony orchestra and not one knew it. Even Castiel danced to the tune. He couldn’t interfere or he’d throw off the tenuous balance he’d created and any hope he had of seeing this through to a reasonably good end would vanish like smoke.

Ruby had weaved and seduced with Ahriman, forming their plan into easy perfection. Once the Winchesters and Erin were asleep, everything would turn upside down. Of course, the plan she’d laid out with Ahriman was a ruse. Ruby knew Erin would not react the way Ahriman hoped. Erin had come too far, stepped onto the other side of the barrier between despair and duty with the Winchesters and Cass’s guidance. When Ahriman struck, she wasn’t going to crumble, she was going to be pissed. That ensured she’d play her part and kill Ahriman but he would have a bargaining chip. Erin wouldn’t be able to just walk into the fight and kill him. She’d have to make a deal.

Sam was the easiest. He was so pumped up on demon blood, so sure of himself that when Ahriman went forward with his and Ruby’s plan. He’d be hell-bent on making sure Ahriman was stopped, no matter what the cost. Even Erin’s life. With Ruby’s influence and the demon blood, she was keeping him from figuring out the key to the prophecy.

Dean was of little concern. He’d done everything required to put him right where Ruby wanted him because of his stupid need to play the hero and his debilitating empathetic response to someone with a history similar to his own. His inability to stomach the concept of torturing again to gain information, especially someone he didn’t hate, struck the final blow for him. When he refused, as he had already done, to go through with it, Ruby would encourage Sam to. She knew he already didn’t believe Dean strong enough to pull it off. Dean had failed with Alistair. He knew his brother wouldn’t be able to get the job done with Erin as the packaging for Ahriman. That would drive Sam even further down the road Ruby had made for him. It would push him and his brother further apart even though it “had” to be done.

They would never discover that Ahriman had never known anything about what seals Lilith would break next. He’d die and they would be left believing that he’d taken his secret to his grave. They couldn’t torture him forever.

Ahriman would think himself in control of the pieces on the board, right up until the moment Erin took Christian’s head and the relics Castiel had brought trapped him inside Erin’s body. Erin didn’t have enough faith to see her through a week of bad hair days. There was no way she had enough to see her this through.

Ahriman died no matter which path the prophecy took. Erin wouldn’t survive it Ruby was certain. That left the Immortals free for the taking to the demons. Without Erin, the Gathering wouldn’t go to the good guys, not when Duncan MacLeod had a sudden and tragic death in the near future. The angels would have lost a massive weapon against hell. With Erin gone, they wouldn’t even have the hope that the Immortal to win the Prize could be persuaded to fight for their side. Sam would be further in Ruby’s clutches. And Dean and Castiel would have taken a tremendous blow to their morale when their favorite little Immortal bit the dust. Demons -- 1. Good Guys -- 0.
Ruby, stopped the clicker on a reality show and chuckled to herself. This was starting to be fun.

###

The gang had broken up after Erin left. Sam had gone up to a bedroom once he had emptied out the dishes and stacked them in the sink but didn’t bother with washing them, saying he felt a bit surreal. Cass had retired to the living room, Dean figured to do whatever angels did when they were waiting. When Dean had gone upstairs to find his own bed, he’d been sitting on the couch in contemplation.

Now Dean was lounging on the bed, with its muted taupe and beige background overlaid with a motif of palm leaves. He knew what Sam had meant by feeling surreal. The absinthe hadn’t drugged him or made him more drunk. He wasn’t seeing visions of green fairies or hallucinating but every sense he had, sight, sound, smell, touch, were utterly, completely aware in ways he’d never thought possible. He could feel the weave of the comforter under his fingers, the complex crossing of threads felt organic to him. When had he ever bothered to notice the way the thread count of a comforter felt? He could hear the gentle sounds of crickets outside with astounding clarity. It was like his mind was vibrantly awake.

He couldn’t sleep. He’d tried for an hour. With the effects of the absinthe and the looming fight, his mind worked in overtime but oddly, while none of the conviction or sadness it evoked left, he was calm. It didn’t change his mind one iota though. He wouldn’t let Erin martyr herself. He remembered that moment in the kitchen with absolute clarity. Remembering details his mind had only unconsciously observed.

The way Erin’s weight had felt good in his arms. The thrash of her pulse in the hollow of her throat. The particular shade of green her eyes were. The curve of her mouth. Suddenly he wanted that again. That moment. But it was dampened by the inevitable path they were walking down. In a few hours Erin would go after Ahriman and when she succeeded Dean would be the one who was forced to torture Ahriman for information. He had to tell her. He couldn’t spring it on her, he was horribly aware that she would probably be awake while she was possessed. She deserved to know what he was supposed to do to her, even if he’d never be able to bring himself to do it.

Swinging his legs off the bed, he got up and went to find Erin. He had only a few hours to pull his plan off and even if he couldn’t, he wasn’t going to leave her alone at a time like this. No one should spend what might be their last hours alone.

Dean crept down the hallway, quietly opening the door at the end of the hall. Ruby laid on the bed sheets, asleep. Dean shut it and passed on wondering…did demons even need to sleep? It was something he’d never considered before. Angels didn’t. Why would demons?

He peeked into the bedroom across from his. Sam was ensconced under the covers sound asleep. Dean moved on. One room had the door slightly ajar, so he quietly pushed it open and peered in. It had to be Erin’s bedroom. It was neatly organized, full of personal affects and obviously much more frequently used than the others. But the bed was undisturbed and the room was empty.

Creeping down the stairs so he wouldn’t wake anyone, he passed the living room on his way to where he thought Erin might be. Cass was still in the exact same place Dean had last seen him. Sitting in the middle of the couch, looking in the direction of the inert television. He didn’t seem to notice Dean was there.

Dean padded into the kitchen and rummaged through his duffle bag, putting the dagger Cass had brought in the bag and pocketing something else, then rounded the staircase and went out the back
doors past the salle. A more utilitarian staircase lay just beyond the doors, leading up to the glass
enclosed area they’d seen from the front of the house. He didn’t see Cass turn his head and watch
him slip away with an intense and knowing look.

Dean made his way up the stairs and looked into the enclosed roof from the landing. Erin was there,
her back to him. The only light illuminating her was a large overhead globe that hung like a second
moon at the center of the room. It cast a soft, diffuse light. Erin was curled up on a futon much like
the one on the roof of her apartment in West Palm Beach. The bottle of absinthe sat on the ground
within arm’s reach. She had a glass in her hand and another was slowly preparing nearby. On the
futon in front of her, Erin was turning the pages of a large book with great care while sipping the
absinthe. Her sword was propped against the side of the futon, reminding him that no matter what it
looked like. There was never a moment in Erin’s life that she wasn’t slightly on guard. Always
waiting and watching. He pushed the glass door open and stepped inside.

“I thought I might find you here,” he announced.

Erin, turned to look at him. She didn’t seem surprised to see him there. “I like high places,” she said
with a light shrug and turned back to her book.

Dean crossed the distance between them and stood at her shoulder. He could see now, what the big
book was. It was a photo album. The pages were open to a miniature painted portrait of Erin and
Christian. Dean couldn’t place the era, but it was late 17th century. Erin stood in a frock coat and
lawn shirt, her hair loose but threaded with trinkets, baubles and braids beneath a cavalier hat with an
ostrich plume curling along the brim. Christian was just behind her right shoulder, his black hair fell
past his shoulders and was held back by the red bandana wrapped around his head and a tricorne hat.
His face made to look older by the sparse goatee and mustache he sported. They both looked defiant
and free, even happy. Only the shadows in Erin’s eyes betrayed her. The painter had captured the
mirth in the two Immortals eyes, where they couldn’t a smile, given how long a painting took back
then. Pirates. A captain and her first mate.

On the page opposite it was a modern photograph. In it, Erin and Christian sat at an old battered
round table littered with beer bottles. In a bar maybe. Four other men and a woman were with them,
al smiling, arms around each other’s shoulders. Dean recognized Duncan MacLeod, Methos and Joe
Dawson. Beside Erin, his arm draped around her neck in a slightly more than friendly manner, was a
reddish blonde man Dean realized was Richie Ryan. He looked exactly like the actor who played
him but his face hadn’t aged like the actor’s. He was frozen in perpetual youth. The other woman
could only be Amanda Darrieux, her hair dark and shorn in a short bob. She was nest to MacLeod
her arm around his waist.

Christian and Erin looked less young, it wasn’t their faces, they were still exactly as the painting
depicted them three hundred years before. It was their eyes. Christian looked impossibly young clean
shaven, younger even than Dean or Sam, but his eyes held a dullness, colder than the eyes in the
painting. Erin’s looked tired, weary. The smile she wore hiding the torment that showed in the depths
of her eyes. Despite it, they looked content and blithe. It was more subdued, but it was there all the
same.

Erin turned the page, her finger tips sliding over the surface of the photographs in memory. This set
of pages held a picture of Erin, Christian and Beth, here at the beach house, out on the beach. All
three of them were laid out in lounge chairs beneath umbrellas with ubiquitous tiny umbrella bearing
drinks in hand, bedecked with sunglasses and grinning like idiots. But there was a distance between
Erin and Christian. Even side by side in such an idyllic setting Christian seemed to pull away.

Beside it was a photo, older than the others, in sepia tones. Erin and Christian were at the very end,
mounted on horseback, saddlebags bulging, rifles tied to their saddles, guns on their hips and a long wrapped package tied next to the saddlebags. No doubt their swords, hidden from view. A different set of bags were thrown over their saddle horns. They were in a lineup with seven others. Everyone wore standard western garb, but Erin’s hair had been shorn in a boy’s crop, her chest was oddly flatter and hidden by a threadbare jacket, a wide brimmed hat set on her head. All of them looked somber but focused. Behind the group, Dean could just make out a sign that read “Sweetwater, Wyoming”.

With Dean’s love of Westerns he knew immediately what time period it was set in. The mid 1800’s. He even knew what the photograph was of. Pony Express riders. That explained why Erin looked like an effeminate boy. They never would have accepted a woman, so she’d pretended to be a young man.

Any other time Dean wouldn’t have noticed the nuances of expression. The subtle way there was an ever-increasing distance between Erin and Christian. But with his senses so clear he noticed everything. This was Erin’s life laid out in still frame and paint. A history of a hodge podge family, pasted together over centuries. In all of the pictures, Erin was at the forefront, with Christian behind. She was the leader and he was the follower, the little brother. Protected and over shadowed by Erin.

Dean swallowed, his jaw tense.

“Maybe, if I had told Christian what I did, it wouldn’t have come to this. Maybe it would have taught him the difference between power and cowardice. Maybe it never would have gotten this far,” Erin said softly.

“It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have seen this coming,” Dean whispered, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Erin took another drink of absinthe and looked up at him. “Isn’t it? I was his teacher, his sister. It was my job to protect him. Don’t get me wrong, he could fight with the best of them. I taught him to survive, taught him every trick in the book. But I kept him too close. I wanted to keep him safe. Keep him from ever knowing how bad it could get, what you could become if you weren’t careful. I wanted to keep him from ending up like me.

“I was always the leader, the one who made the choices. It was me who decided where we went and why. I fought the hard battles. Some older immortal, one who had too much experience, who was a real threat to him, would come for his head and I’d make the challenge before they could get near him. I screwed up. I should have let him fight his own battles. I should have told him the truth. I blew it,” Erin said shaking her head.

“Erin, you did what you thought was best for him. You were trying to protect your family,” Dean consoled sitting down next to her, his shoulder brushing hers. She reached down and picked up the second glass of absinthe and handed it to him, then shook her head again, her mouth tight as her eyes welled.

“He was right. I’m weak. I always have been. I gave in to Trajan. I ran from what I’d done, thinking I could somehow make amends for it. I never taught Christian the difference between evil and power because I was too afraid he’d be seduced by it. That he wouldn’t understand. I was afraid he’d hate me for what I’d done and I couldn’t bear the thought. I let him down, Dean. I let Beth down. If I hadn’t been so obsessed with saving Christian, she might still be alive. That’s what I do. I let people I care about down. How am I supposed to live with that?”

“So this fight isn’t just about stopping Ahriman. It’s your way out,” Dean said solemn. Erin looked at him, a tear sliding from her lashes, which she quickly brushed away and tried to cover up by taking another swig of absinthe. Dean winced.
“Don’t do this,” he pleaded.

“I don’t have a choice. You know I don’t.”

“Yes you do.”

“Either Ahriman kills me and then goes after Duncan and you or I kill him and die to make sure the dick can’t go through with it. Even if Ahriman didn’t exist, Duncan’s the One, he always was. There can be only one, Dean. No matter what I do, I die. It’s not a matter of if, it’s a matter of when and how. I’d rather go down fighting for something than have an off day and have some up start, fledgling Immortal take my head.”

She had him there. Fate had played her foul from the day she was born. Her fate was sealed no matter what she did. But, Dean refused to accept it. It couldn’t end this way. He wouldn’t let it. He couldn’t let it.

“I get what you’re saying Erin but…,” Dean started his voice trailing off as he fought to find the words to tell her. He swallowed half the glass of absinthe at once trying to muster up the nerve to say it. “What Ahriman knows about the seals, once he possesses you… I’m the one who’s supposed to get it out of him. It’s me who’s going to have to strap you to a rack and torture you and I can’t,” he managed to confess.

He expected her to be appalled, to recoil. But she didn’t, she didn’t even seem surprised that he was supposed to be the one to do it. Her gaze shifted out over the beach, focused on the sea glimmering like a bucket of spilled stars.

“I figured as much after you told me what you did in hell. It’s okay.”

“It’s okay? No, it’s not okay. I can’t,” Dean wailed. He couldn’t believe she just accepted that. She’d been tortured, she’d tortured, she knew what it meant to be on either side of the knife. Didn’t she understand what she was asking?

“Yes, you can. You have my permission if that makes it easier. I want you to do it,” Erin said.

“No.”

“Please Dean. He has information you need. You’re talking about six billion lives if Lilith breaks the seals. The friggin’ Apocalypse. I need my life to have meant something,” she pleaded, looking him in the eye.

Dean couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t be asking him this. She couldn’t really think he could do it. “No, I can’t,” he said again his voice laced with heartbreak.

Erin favored him with a bittersweet, understanding smile. “Alright. But when the time comes. If you change your mind, I’m okay with it. Just so you understand,” she said, then looked at her glass of absinthe. She finished it and sat the glass down.

Dean felt like someone had lifted a huge block of cement off his chest. She wasn’t going to try and make him promise to do it. She’d had him scared for a moment.

“Trust me, I’m not going to change my mind,” Dean promised.

Erin gave him that slightly sad smile again and they sat there in silence for a while, lost in their own thoughts. He thinking about the fact that things would never get to him torturing her because he didn’t intend to let her go through with her plan and her thinking about things he couldn’t phantom,
her eyes on the sea beyond and nothing but the sounds of the waves for company.

Dean drank the last of his absinthe and sat with her, watching the waves crest gently and wash over the sand, wiping anything on the sand until it was unmarred, perfectly smooth. Wouldn’t it be nice if life were that way? Wipe the slate and start over, wash it all away.

“Eat, drink and be merry. For tomorrow we die,” Erin murmured suddenly, and looked at Dean again, catching his eye.

Her expression was completely different now. Dean knew that look and he couldn’t breathe all over again, his heart began to race. The absinthe hadn’t worn off yet or the second glass had boosted the first, he didn’t know which. He could see every shade of color in her eyes. He could hear her breathing, the tiny exhalation of air as her lips parted slightly, the rustle of fabric as she leaned toward him.

Erin pressed her lips to his, warm and lush, still tasting of licorice. It all came rushing up. All the pent up desire, all the withheld emotion, everything he’d been denying. He fought it. Dean gently disengaged, his hands on her arms and looked at her. Really looked at her. Her eyes were filled with a deep need.

He searched her eyes looking for a clue as to what that need was. Her lip trembled. Whether out of fear of rejection or just that her emotions were running high, he didn’t know. His fingers drew a line down the side of her face. Her eyes closed when his thumb brushed her lip. She gave the smallest, plaintive sigh.

That tiny glimpse of vulnerability he’d seen before became completely visible. It was an open and bleeding wound, a well of emptiness. She needed him. It was such an open emotion, so unexpected. It was a seductive call and Dean couldn’t fight it anymore. He answered.

Dean slid his hand along her jaw line, behind her neck and kissed her slow and deep. She responded by twining her fingers in his hair and returning the kiss with such complete abandon it pulled Dean in like a riptide, the pure intensity of Erin’s yearning too much to resist.

Dean felt for the glasses and the album, managing to set them on the ground without breaking the kiss. Then he pulled himself up on his knees and slid his hands up Erin’s back, underneath her shirt. He enjoyed the sensation of the strong muscles and the silken skin under his hands. She wasn’t a soft girl, this was a woman honed and molded to perfection. Dangerous and beautiful.

Erin bowed her back under the touch and Dean’s blood pulsed through his veins like he was on fire. With a bolt of absolute clarity, he realized he needed and wanted this as much as she did.

In one fluid motion, he griped the hem of her tank top and pulled it off over Erin’s head. Then, shed his own. He wrapped his arms around her and held her to him. He could feel her heart beat against his chest, fluttering like a bird against its cage bars.

Dean dipped his head and kissed her again, trailing them under her ear, along her neck, until he buried his lips at the hollow of Erin’s throat. He could feel the thrum of her pulse against his lips, fast and hard. Erin moaned low in her throat, her fingers gliding down the back of his neck and massaging his shoulders.

When he moved his head, she looked at him, her eyes following the line of his throat. She moved to put her lips to his neck and hesitated as if asking permission. Dean ran his hands through her hair in encouragement.
Dean was shocked at how submissive she was. She’d kissed him but once he’d accepted, she became pliant. He had expected boldness and dominance from her, as she was in every other aspect of her life. It struck him then, that this was the only place, the only time, she could be submissive, let her guard down. Tenderness was not a normal part of her life, as much as it wasn’t a part of his. And inviting any man into her bed had to be an act of trust, with Dean more than others because he knew what she was, if he chose he could exploit that knowledge to kill her. She trusted him. Enough to relinquish complete control to him.

Shyly at first, he felt her lips on his throat. Dean groaned softly with pleasure and Erin responded by trailing white hot kisses the rest of the way to his chest. Instinct took over and Dean pressed her back onto the futon, kissing her passionately as he deftly stripped her of her bra and cast off his jeans. He straddled her, holding himself up with one arm and hungrily moving down her neck, his free hand cupping a breast as his thumb caressed over it. She gasped, her mouth open in a soft ‘O’. The sound sent a shot of wild desire through him.

Dean slid the rest of the way down her body, his mouth closing on one breast then the other, his tongue tasting her skin. It was as sweet as he’d thought it would be. Erin wrenched beneath his ministrations, her hands clutching at his hair. He wanted her, all of her. With a quiet moan he slid to her waist and pulled her jeans off, flinging them somewhere into the darkness behind them.

Gently, he parted her thighs, placing one knee between them and settled his weight on her. Her bare breasts against his skin, he pried her with a wild kiss. Her tongue probed his hotly, earnestly. Erin’s hands slide down his back, her finger tips gliding over his skin, then over the fabric of his boxer briefs. She squeezed tenderly and Dean groaned against her lips.

He aided her and got rid of the fabric inhibiting her hands. Then, hooking a finger in the waistband of her underwear, he slid them down. She obligingly pulled her legs from them. He stopped, taking her whole body in with his eyes. Every inch of it his. He ached. He needed her. Desire rose like a roar in him, he could have taken her then but he didn’t. He needed to fill the hole in her soul, in his. He wasn’t going to abandon himself to wanton lust.

She was drinking him in too, her cleavage heaving beautifully with heated breath. Erin put her hand on his chest and let it travel over his skin tantalizingly. Dean bent and kissed her, his hands roving ever plane and curve of her body, while Erin explored his.

Dean spread Erin’s thighs further apart and moved between them. He looked into Erin’s eyes as he lifted one thigh and hooked it on his hip, without prompting her other leg wrapped around him. Her hips rose against him and Dean felt like he was in blissful agony. Erin’s eyes begged him. Dean succumbed.

Slipping his hand behind her neck he kissed her deeply, interlacing the fingers of his other hand with hers and took her with deliberate care, savoring the rapture as he joined his body to hers, his eyes sliding shut with a soft moan. Erin arched against him, her arms wrapping around him, clutching him, gasping with pleasure.

He moved and she moved with him, her hips rocking in counterpoint with his. It was ecstasy, both of them lost in each other. He thrust slowly, enjoying every stroke, his mouth constantly in motion, hands running through her hair or tenderly caressing her body.

“Dean,” Erin breathed in a husky voice against his ear as he pressed himself along the length of her body to nuzzle the soft flesh below her earlobe. Her hands brushed through his hair, down his neck and back longingly.

Dean growled in pleasure and pulled Erin upright, his mouth finding hers as he got her into position.
She kissed him with more passion than he thought he’d ever felt, and he returned it urgently. She rocked her hips and Dean threw his head back in bliss. Erin latched onto his neck, lips trailing another string of white-hot kisses down his throat to bury her mouth in the join of his shoulder, her hand running tenderly over Cass’s scarred handprint on his arm.

Fevered, he pulled her head back and devoured her mouth with his, his hands twined in her hair as she moved with all the skill of a woman who has had two thousand years to learn how to be a lover.

“Oh God, Erin,” hissed. He couldn’t last much longer. He knew he couldn’t, the need that drove them both was too intense, too powerful. Dean pulled her down on top of him.

Erin’s body moved sinuously and Dean’s roared with pleasure, his hands caressing her breasts, teasing the taut peaks of her nipples. She felt so right there. Like a missing piece, he hadn’t known he’d been lacking and he knew she felt it too. There was some tether between them he didn’t have a name for. He didn’t care. All he wanted was her and he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, he was all she wanted, all she needed.

Erin bent, her hips still swaying, and kissed her way down his chest, her mouth covering a nipple and sucking gently. It sent a spike of want through Dean. He ached for release. The hot, sleek feel of her around him, the passion there, the way she throbbed with the same ardent desire. It made him felt like he might go euphorically mad.

Erin moved to the other nipple and Dean stopped her, catching her face in his hands and bringing her mouth to his. He rolled until he was back on top of her. He let go of everything he was and he felt her join him. He couldn’t tell anymore where he ended and she began. Body, mind, soul, it was all one blissful nebulae of sensation. He never wanted it to stop.

Dean’s heart seized. This was the only night they’d have together. Their one moment. He wanted to remember every touch, every breath. He redoubled his efforts, desperation driving him and she responded with as much passion.

He took in every bit of her, filled her with all the passion he had, their mouths locked in a wanton kiss that knew no depths, their bodies moving in harmony until the rapture was one continuous joy. Dean felt something build inside him. It wasn’t just lust it was something else. He groaned low in his throat and Erin’s moans synched with his, arching her body against him, trembling with pleasure. He moved deeper and she lifted her hips, meeting him halfway. He didn’t think he could stand more without dying. Erin was crying out with every stroke in ecstasy and he realized the deep moans belonged to him.

She writhed, clutching at him, the futon, anything. Dean threw back his head, roaring with the same unbound bliss. He kept moving and just as he felt his own pinnacle reached, he felt her burst into a thousand convulsions around him. Erin screamed his name to heaven itself and Dean exploded with such ecstasy he thought he would combust. His voice crying her name, adding it to the exaltation.

When neither of them could stand anymore and their bodies subsided into exhaustion, Dean collapsed atop Erin, propping himself up on his elbows and kissed her tenderly, long and deep. He spent a long moment just gazing into her eyes as he brushed her tumbled hair from her forehead, trailing his hand down her cheek and throat, between her breasts to her abdomen, unknowingly touching the point where a sword had ended her mortal life and given her this one. She stopped him with one hand, reached up, and caressed his face with the other.

“I never wanted to live forever. I wanted a mortal life, to meet someone like you, have children, grow old,” Erin whispered with raw emotion.
In that instant Dean realized with a jolt of fear and grief, he’d gone and done the unforgiveable and so had she. He’d fallen in love with her and she with him. He couldn’t say it, it would hurt too much. He knew she couldn’t either. It would rip their souls and hearts apart.

Dean winced deeply, his face clench in anguish and kissed her again lovingly eyes shut against the mist of tears the epiphany caused. He wanted that too. God did he and he knew it would never happen. They found each other too late. Their lives were too dangerous, their paths set. It was out of their hands. If Erin’s plan worked she wouldn’t just die, she’d be utterly destroyed. Gone forever, not even her soul would remain.

He couldn’t bear the thought. With absolute conviction, he vowed Erin would not do what she planned. He’d stop her before he lost her.

Dean laid down beside her, pulling her to him so her head laid on his chest and stroked her hair. Cherishing what time they had left, pained that there was so very little of it.

Listening to his heartbeat, Erin wrapped her arms around Dean and vowed the same thing. She would not let Dean die, no matter what it took to stop it.

###

Ruby waited until the noise she could hear from the roof stopped. Then she waited a while longer to be sure. She’d had to listen to Erin and Dean in the throes of passion half the night. They certainly weren’t quiet about it, that was for sure. It was nauseating to listen to, full of desperate, sugary, crap. The horror of it. Ruby shivered in disgust. She was surprised it hadn’t woken Sam. Which would have made Ruby’s plan more difficult.

But she spared a moment to lament that it hadn’t, biting her lip in contemplation. It would have been delightfully sinful for her and Sam to have waged a contest on who was louder. A measure of who was having the better sex. But, she couldn’t worry about that now. She had a job to do.

Quietly she crept past the bedrooms, checking to be sure Sam hadn’t woken. He was still deeply asleep, buried beneath the covers of the bed, his tall form nearly hanging off the end. Ruby supposed the group’s little soiree had tuckered the boy right out. That or the intense studying he’d been doing. The prophecy hung limp in his hand. He’d kept working despite the partying they’d done but the fact he was asleep meant, he’d still not figured out the prophecy. Oh, but it was fun when the people you were manipulating made it so damned easy.

Ruby padded down the hall and down the stairs, looking over the banister to find the angel. She didn’t see Cass anywhere. Slinking along she searched for him and through the front windows of the house, she saw him. He was sitting on the front stoop looking up at the sky as if he were having a conversation with the air. Probably talking to his angel buddies or whatever angels did in their spare time. It didn’t matter. He was occupied elsewhere. That’s what mattered.

Stealthily Ruby slipped out the back doors and up the stairway to the roof. Again, she cautiously threaded her way there; pausing to be sure Dean and Erin were as asleep as they looked. She opened the door a crack and neither seemed to notice her.

“Aw, how friggin’ sweet,” she thought with disdain. They were wrapped around each other like love-besotted idiots. Come to think of it, they were idiots or she wouldn’t have been able to pull this
Tiptoeing, she hastened over to one of the glass panes. They were the same kind as Erin had installed on the roof of her apartment. Ruby had noticed them when she and Sam had been demon proofing the house. Salt lines laid over every single one. Sam had been thorough in his protection of the place; there was no doubt in that. But he hadn’t expected someone inside to deliberately thwart it either.

Taking a deep breath, Ruby bent and blew hard. The salt scattered from the sill. With a little hip wiggle of anticipation, Ruby unlocked the pane and hurried off down the stairs to the ground landing. Dean and Erin never stirred.

With a quick glance to be sure the angel was still preoccupied, Ruby covertly sprinted across the back quarter of the house across the beach to where she’d first summoned Ahriman. Again, she pulled a hex bag from her jacket pocket and lit it, the blue flames engulfing it instantly. Ahriman was there almost before Ruby could drop the hex bag. He smiled wickedly, his eyes involuntarily flicking to red for a moment.

“They’re on the roof. Third pane on this side. You want to pull this off, they can’t know I’m involved. Understood?” Ruby said cutting to the chase. Ahriman’s gaze traveled to where she’d indicated and his smile got wider.

“Of course,” he purred.

“When this is done Sam and I walk, right?” Ruby asked again confirming. Ahriman looked at her with a put upon but tolerant expression

“A deal’s a deal,” he answered. Ruby licked her lips and nodded.

“Give me ten minutes.”

“Sure,” Ahriman shrugged but his gaze was again on the roof not on her. Ruby didn’t wait for him to say anything else. She snuck back the way she’d come and into the house, through the living room and kitchen, toward the front doors. Now she had to get the angel back inside and distracted, so none of the blame fell on her when Ahriman made his move.

###

Forty minutes after he and Erin had subsided from their lovemaking and curled up together, Dean awoke sprawled supine on the futon, most of his clothing back on. He’d donned his shirt and boxers again at least. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep but it seemed he had. Erin was asleep on his chest, her bra, shirt and underwear once again clothing her. Dean had lain there, running his fingers through her hair until he was sure she was asleep, her arms encircling his neck. It hadn’t been until she’d dozed off that her grip had loosened.

Dean liked the weight of her there. The way her hair fell in a warm cascade over his chest. The easy way she breathed in rhythm with his heartbeat. He could get used to the feeling so easily. His mind entertained pure fantasy for a moment. He could see being with Erin long term. They’d fight evil Immortals and everything that went bump in the dark. The Gathering wouldn’t come to an end, they’d keep moving, avoid it. They’d stop Lilith from breaking the seals. He wouldn’t have to worry about Erin the way he did a mortal woman. Erin could hold her own, she was hard to kill and she
was a helluva fighter. He and Sam would have another person to hunt alongside, one who got it. He wouldn’t be alone anymore. And every night would end like this, with Erin in his arms. It was a wonderful fantasy but that’s all it was. A fantasy.

Dean shoved it down, he’d dawdled long enough. Time had run out and he wasn’t going to let her throw herself to the wolves. He suppressed the nagging knowledge that he had done the same thing when he’d sold his soul to bring his brother back and been dragged to Hell. He ignored the guilt that he knew what he was doing was probably wrong. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have hidden his plan from Sam or Erin, he wouldn’t have gone against Cass’s warning that this was a futile and foolish plan, and he wouldn’t be doing this under cover of darkness while everyone slept so they couldn’t stop him.

Dean sighed deeply and savored the moment, committing it to memory. Then, he kissed the top of Erin’s head and gently slid from beneath her. She stirred and Dean froze, afraid she might wake. His shoulders slumped with relief when she curled up into the warm space he’d left behind, still sleeping.

Quietly he moved across the room and fetched his jeans, rummaging in the back pockets for what he’d stashed there just before he’d come up to the roof. The faint light from the overhead globe glinted off the two pairs of handcuffs he’d hidden. Padding back to the futon he slipped one of the bracelets onto her wrist, making the grating click as soft as he could for fear of waking her. He knew if she discovered what he was doing, she’d be furious. Cass had been right about her, once she made up her mind she didn’t change it. But then, neither did Dean. They were both stubborn as an ox.

When the first cuff didn’t wake her, he let it dangle and clipped one of the rings from the second pair on her other wrist. Then moving as silently and carefully as possible, he wedged the adjoining ring through the metal frame of the huge futon’s base and snapped it onto the other set of cuffs. Dean paused to see if the position he’d trapped her in would cause her to wake up. Her arms were over her head but she had enough play in the length of chain the two sets of cuffs gave her, that he hoped she wouldn’t notice until she awoke naturally. When she kept sleeping, he let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and kissed her forehead, stroking her hair one last time.

“Sorry sweetheart but I can’t let you do it,” he apologized to her slumbering form. One hurdle jumped. Now he had to get down stairs past Cass with the relics and his car keys. He rose to his feet and slipped into his jeans and shoes.

###

Castiel sat on the front stoop of Erin’s elegant beach house and looked skyward. The breeze combed through his hair languidly as the stars shone like pinpricks in the curtain of the night. Once Dean had wandered up to the roof after Erin, Castiel had come out here to seek revelation. He’d had no illusions what the sounds he’d heard from above him meant and it worried him. For someone who refuted his affection, it didn’t sound as if Dean was avoiding the subject now. At the worst possible time for it.

So far, Castiel’s efforts had proved unfruitful. He knew what he was after wasn’t really revelation, not as he knew the word. What he wanted were answers, a confirmation that this was the right thing. Because he was beginning to doubt.

“Father, am I showing Erin the right way? I’ve tried to instill faith in her, in the Winchesters. I fear I am failing. Erin is ready to sacrifice herself to protect the boys, the world. Dean cares for her, deeply.
I worry this will not bode well for his state of mind given his destiny. I’ve tried to prepare Erin, to hone her for this fight but I confess I harbor—affection—for her. I don’t want her to die. Is this the right path? Tell me what to do,” he asked the air pleadingly.

There was only the sound of the waves and the gentle breeze to fill the void his voice had left behind. Castiel’s jaw clenched.

“Dean is on a fool’s errand to subvert Erin’s plans. I don’t believe Erin has the faith, that the boys have—,” he paused in aggravation, “Why would Zachariah—my brother—do this? I don’t understand. Father, please. I’m asking for you to give me a sign,” he begged.

Still there was no answer. Castiel’s shoulders sagged drearily. For whatever reason, God had left him on his own with this one. Anna’s words echoed back to him. Erin isn’t the only one who has to have faith Cass. So do you.

Behind him, Castiel heard the front door to the house open. He turned his head to look back and saw the demon Ruby’s head poke through the open space.

“Hey angel boy, got a minute? I had a thought about the prophecy.”

Castiel gritted his teeth and glared.

“Okay sorry, Cass. Can we talk or what?” Ruby said with a roll of her eyes.

Castiel still glared. The only people who’d ever called him by the diminutive were the Winchesters, other angels, and now, Erin. He didn’t like the sound of it on the demon’s tongue. With the boys and Erin it was a nickname, maybe even a term of affection between friends. From her mouth, it was a blatant show of disrespect.

“Fine, Castiel. You wanna stow your ego for a minute and try and figure this thing out?”

He didn’t particularly care what the demon thought about anything. But, the battle was nigh, he’d take anything he could get that might ensure this ended as he hoped. He rose reluctantly to his feet and went back inside. Ruby shut the door and Castiel turned to her without preamble.

“What is your thought?”

Erin came violently awake, her head swimming with an animalistic scream of ‘Immortal’! Dean was no longer beside her. Where was he? Automatically she tried to sit up and lunge for her sword at the other end of the futon but found she couldn’t. Surprised she looked up at her wrists and realized she’d been cuffed to the futon. What the hell?

She cast around for help and saw Dean just stepping into his boots and turning to leave.

“Dean?” she said, in a shocked voice. Had he done this? Dean flinched at the sound of his name and stopped, looking back at her guiltily.

“Sorry Erin, but I can’t let you do it,” he said mournfully. Erin’s eyes widened. What was he thinking? Was he going to try to keep her on lock down while he went after Ahriman?
“Dean, let me go!” Erin demanded, frantically pulling at her restraints in a feeble attempt to get loose.

“I can’t,” Dean said and turned away, his mind and course decided.

“Ahriman’s here,” Erin spat. She’d managed to scramble up onto her knees in her effort to get free. The sense of an Immortal nearby grew in intensity. He was getting closer.

“That’s not going to work Erin. Sam proofed this place, there’s no way he can get near it,” Dean insisted. He’d known she’d react badly when she realized she couldn’t go anywhere but she’d just have to deal with it. He wasn’t going back on his plan now.

Erin clenched her teeth and growled, “Now Dean!”

“I’m sorry,” he said soulfully and strode for the door. At the same moment, Ahriman appeared out of nowhere behind him.

“Dean!” Erin yelled in warning. But it was too late. Dean whirled around and saw the brief glimpse of Ahriman’s sadistic grin before he was picked up bodily and thrown across the room by an invisible hand. Dean hit the floor like a bag of sand with a sharp bark of pain, rolling onto one side and clutching his ribs. The impact had to have broken, or at least cracked, a few of them.

Erin, braced one bare foot on the frame of the futon and pushed, trying to dislodge it, and thus the cuffs, furiously to no avail. She cursed sharply. Ahriman had dismissed Dean’s presence as soon as he’d cast him across the room, and was pacing delightedly toward Erin, picking up her own sword casually as he passed.

“Well, look at you. All trussed up for me. How thoughtful,” he chuckled thrusting the sword under her chin. Erin swallowed hard with fear. All he had to do was swing and it was over. How could Dean have been so stupid?

Behind him, dazed but still functioning, Dean got his feet and sprinted for the demon. He tackled him like a linebacker, taking both him and Ahriman to the ground in a tumble but the tactic cost him, with busted ribs he was barely able to breathe.

“Cass! Help!” Erin screamed at the top of her lungs, wrenching the chains on the cuffs.

###

Below them, Castiel stood impatiently listening to Ruby.

“What if we’re wrong about the prophecy? What if it doesn’t mean what we think it means?” Ruby proposed. Castiel looked back at her with a set jaw.

“Speak plain,” he commanded.

“Fine, what if this whole thing is dependent on the sequence of events?”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed. The demon’s observation came dangerously close to the true nature of the prophecy. But how did she know that?

A muffled thump sounded from above them and Castiel looked up at the ceiling.
“What was that?” he asked rhetorically.

“You couldn’t have missed all the noise those two made earlier. They’re probably doing an encore performance,” Ruby deflected. Castiel considered it a moment. That was a possibility. He leveled his gaze back on the demon who mistook his disdain for her for confusion as to what she’d meant.

“Come on. You do know they were up there bumping uglies? Ya know, sex?” she said as if Castiel were a complete idiot. He gave her a sideways glare. Just because he didn’t get human mating rituals didn’t mean he didn’t understand the concept of sex or the implications that came with it.

“I’m aware,” he said tersely. There was another thud from above them and Castiel wondered if Erin and Dean were really involved in intercourse or if something else was going on. The noise was immediately followed by Erin screaming for his help.

“Get Sam.”

Castiel spared a single look at Ruby that was an obvious demand to assist and disappeared with a rush of wing beats.

An answering shuffle and thud sounded from up the stairs, followed by the staccato sound of Sam scrambling to get down them. Ruby ran to join him. She had to make this look good.

###

Dean had managed to wrestle his way on top of Ahriman and punch him hard in the face but he might as well have been punching an angel. All it did was piss Ahriman off and make Dean’s hand explode with pain.

Erin was still futilely struggling to get free, dividing her attention between the fight with Ahriman and her bonds. On second thought, handcuffing an Immortal to a futon when there was a demon possessed one after their asses might not have been the best idea. But how had Ahriman even gotten in to begin with? Sam would never have made a mistake with the demon proofing.

Ahriman roared in rage and flung Dean off of him. Dean tucked and rolled. It still hurt like hell when he hit the ground but at least he wasn’t flat on his back. Looking around for some sort of weapon he could use, his eyes fell on the absinthe bottle.

Ahriman had gotten to his feet and had Erin’s sword raised above her, ready to strike. Dean scrambled up and snatched the heavy glass bottle as he launched himself at the demon, whacking Ahriman on the back of the head as hard as he could with it. It burst, sending shards of glass and absinthe everywhere. Ahriman flinched and rounded on him. Dean backed up, still wielding the rest of the broken bottle as a knife. Not that it would do any good.

Ahriman swung at Dean at the same instant Cass appeared in the middle of the fight. Ahriman’s hit connected, snapping Dean’s jaw up and back. It knocked him out cold and Dean collapsed to the floor.

“Dean!” Erin called worriedly. She had resumed trying to free herself and was a little afraid of the angel she’d summoned for help. He was monumentally pissed. He seemed to fill up the whole room and the aura he brought with him was holy wrath at its absolute highest intensity.
Ahriman had turned automatically to face him once he’d decked Dean and Cass struck with a wicked right hook. It sent Ahriman careening across the room like a child’s toy. He hit the glass panes so hard, two of them shattered and he was bleeding from the mouth. Cass dropped his angel sword out of his coat sleeve and into his hand, flipping it so it was held in reverse. He advanced on Ahriman who was struggling to his feet.

Sam came bursting through the door like a steam engine, gun pointing at anything that moved. He took one look at his brother lying in a heap on the floor and bolted for him.

“Dean?” he pleaded, rolling his brother onto his back and checking for a pulse. It was there, steady and strong. Ruby knelt beside him, showing concern for Dean and not really aiding in the fight.

Castiel stabbed down at Ahriman intending to drive his sword through him. He’d been pleased to see that now, given enough force, the demon could be injured. Though he doubted any of them had enough strength to do it but him. Perhaps the effects of the dagger were cumulative.

Ahriman jerked his arm sideways and sent Castiel in a rolling tumble.

“Is he alright?” Erin asked Sam tense, sparing a concerned look for the angel and demon fighting on the other side of the room. She had the handcuffs stretched as far as they’d go and was trying to dislocate her wrists so she could get out of them.

“Yes, he’s just knocked out,” Sam assured her. Sam slid his arms under his brother’s torso so he could drag him out of harm’s way. He didn’t want him trampled to death in the fighting.

Erin sighed in relief and then screeched incredulous, “Can I get a little help here?”

Ruby rushed over to her and looked for a way to help her get the cuffs off but without a key, she was no better help than Erin had been on her own. For lack of, or rather, an unwillingness to be of any real help, Ruby added her weight to the cuff’s chains and tried to help Erin break the futons frame.

Castiel had come up out of his roll in one motion, his blue eyes burning in fury. He’d had enough. He gathered his power.

Ahriman was on his feet and racing right for Sam and Dean. Why Erin had no idea, but she saw it and so did Ruby. Sam had almost gotten Dean out of the way of the fighting but he was encumbered by his brother’s weight as he lowered his brother to the floor.

“Sam!” they both yelled in unison.

He looked up just in time to see Ahriman’s foot as it connected with his head. Sam lost his grip on Dean and fell backward. Shoving with his feet, head reeling and seeing stars, he got out of the demon’s way and brought his gun to bare, firing. Rock salt rounds, rocked Ahriman and he slowed. Sam gaped for half an instant in surprise. That hadn’t done anything to the demon last time.

Castiel struck. Lightning shot straight down from the sky, shattering the roof of the glass enclosure, aimed right for Ahriman. Erin and Ruby ducked their heads to avoid the falling glass and Sam scrambled out of the way as the lightning hit its mark, searing the floor black. Everyone was momentarily blinded.

To Castiel’s utter frustration and anger, the demon somehow dodged the lightning strike and dove for Dean. Ahriman grabbed Dean’s limp body by the front of his shirt and hauled him up.

Castiel called the lightning again in an attempt to smite Ahriman. The others were huddled down avoiding Castiel’s wrath. The second bolt struck right on target, a millisecond too late. Ahriman had
disappeared… taking Dean with him.
Chapter 19

For a moment no one moved. There was utter silence. Then, Erin dared to peer from beneath the shelter of her arms. Around her Ruby and Sam were doing the same, brushing off bits of glass that had settled on them. Castiel stood, fists clenched by his side in anger, staring at where Ahriman and Dean had been.

Sam lunged to his feet looking for his brother, obviously distraught, “Where’s Dean?”

“He’s gone. Ahriman took him,” Cass said with barely contained rage.

This had gone entirely too far. Too much was at stake, too much of the world’s fate rode on Dean’s shoulders. If Ahriman killed him, yes, Castiel could—probably—bring him back. But the ramifications might be catastrophic. And he’d taken someone Castiel called a friend, someone he was charged with protecting.

“What?” Erin exclaimed, looking at Sam with the same expression of fear he had.

“Where’d he take him?” Ruby asked in feigned ignorance. Things had gone off without a hitch. She was absolutely thrilled but she made sure not to show it.

“I’ll find out,” Cass said, about to do exactly that.

“Wait!” Erin shouted hastily.

Cass paused in confusion. Why would she want him to wait? Dean might be in danger.

“For what? Ahriman’s got Dean! Look what he did to Beth!” Sam shot in anxious outrage.

“Exactly. Don’t you think this was just a little too pat? How’d he get in? He knows we’ll go after Dean, it’s a given. In fact, I’ll bet he’s counting on it. So can we just calm down a minute and think?” Erin pleaded, rattling the cuffs that still held her and cursing a blue streak. “Will someone please get these damn things off me?”

“Erin, Ahriman is going to kill him!” Sam wailed unable to think straight he was so upset about his brother.

Castiel thought about it a moment and agreed, “Erin is right. If we simply react, Ahriman will kill Dean. We need to make a plan.”

“Great, now how about somebody gets these cuffs off me?” Erin asked again. No one paid her any attention.

“Cass! You can’t be serious!” Sam gasped appalled. They couldn’t sit around coming up with a game plan, by then Dean might be dead!

“Sam, listen to me. It’s a trap. It has to be. Can’t you see that? Why else would he have taken Dean. I’m the one he wants right now,” Erin reasoned with him. Sam’s mouth opened and then closed. He ran a hand through his hair and paced in a tight circle, his bare feet narrowly avoiding the jagged edges of glass scattered on the floor.

“You’re right. You’re right. So what do we do?” Sam asked.

“Well first, will someone please get me out of these cuffs!” Erin asked in annoyance, yanking them.
Erin wasn’t nearly as calm as she appeared to be. She was furious and worried. She was furious they’d been ambushed, pissed Dean had pulled what he had and incredibly worried about his fate. Their lovemaking hadn’t been idle or frivolous. She really did love him, as much as that terrified her. She knew how dangerous loving anyone was for her and for them. It wasn’t something she’d expected to happen.

“So Ahriman wanted to get a little freaky with you first huh?” Ruby said sarcastically to Erin, taking in her cuffed state and the fact that she was in nothing but a tank top, bra and underwear, unable to resist the jab. Erin scowled at her still angrily fighting the cuffs.

“Ahriman didn’t do it, Dean did.”

Ruby looked genuinely surprised, “Wow, Dean’s got a kinky streak.”

Erin shot her another dark look as Cass stepped forward to free her. With a flick of his hand, the cuffs fell open as if they’d never been snapped into place.

“Thank you,” Erin muttered in relief.

Cass simply dipped his head in acknowledgment.

“Dean did this?” Sam said in shock.

“Yes, damn idiot!” Erin answered, untangling her arms from the contraption and flinging it down with a hard clatter on the floor. “He was trying to put me on lock down. He didn’t want me to go through with the plan.”

Sam’s mouth fell open, then his jaw flexed and his teeth clenched. Dean and his stupid ideas. Of course, he wouldn’t have told Sam. Sam wouldn’t have thought it was a good idea. Because it wasn’t!

“What was he going to do? Go after Ahriman himself?” Sam asked in exasperation.

“Yes. He intended to take Erin’s place and kill Ahriman. Then sacrifice himself to destroy him with the slim hope that I could raise him afterward,” Cass said in answer.

Erin had slid off the futon and was picking her way across the glass-scattered floor in search of her jeans, completely unabashed that she was half-dressed. Nudity didn’t count for much when you were in the middle of a kidnap situation. Come to think of it, Sam wasn’t much better off in nothing but the boxers and a t-shirt he’d run up to the roof in.

“You knew about this?” Sam railed at the angel. Cass’s brow furrowed in confusion. Why was Sam mad at him?

“I told him it was a foolish idea,” Cass explained.

“It’s Dean. If he thought it had a snowball’s chance of working, he’d try it. He’s in love with her!” Sam shot back, one arm waving in Erin’s direction.

“I am aware of Dean’s feelings for Erin,” Cass said deadpan.

Erin had found her jeans and was about to button them when she heard Sam. Thankfully, her back was to them, because she flushed a deep scarlet. For some reason she felt like she should feel guilty about that. Maybe because she felt that this was, at least partially, her fault. If Dean didn’t care about her, he wouldn’t have been willing to try something so foolhardy, so utterly stupid as risking his life,
and taking on Ahriman himself.

Erin didn’t feel that she deserved to be cared about. By anyone. Even if she loved Dean, it was one thing to love and another to be loved. Like every other person in her life, caring about Erin, in any capacity, put that person in danger. A lot of them ended up dead. Like Beth. Like her family. Like Alexander. Erin didn't believe that she was worthy of another’s affection. Even when it was given, despite the knowledge of who she was, and what she had done. Even when, deep down, it was something that she needed. She saw herself as a monster.

Dean was right. Erin facing Ahriman was her way of dealing with the guilt of her sins, of her very existence. You couldn’t be riddled with guilt or loss if you’d ceased to exist, body and soul.

“Can we argue about who knew what after we save Dean?” Ruby said. She needed them to still be off kilter, she didn’t want them thinking this through and figuring out what had really happened or that she was responsible for it.

“She’s got a point. We’ll lay blame later. Right now I want to know how Ahriman even got in here,” Erin said with a begrudging sideways glare at Ruby as she pulled on her boots and made sure her regular dagger was still there. Ruby smirked, Erin kept glaring.

“Well there’s not much chance of that since halo boy turned the room into a pile of glass shards,” Ruby snarked. She was actually glad of that. Now there was no way to tell that someone from the inside had to have let Ahriman in.

Cass gave her a hard look of warning and Ruby clamped her mouth shut. It wouldn’t do to push the angel too far. He could smite her without blinking and she knew it. Right now, he might do it just because he could.

“Rock salt didn’t do anything to him before,” Sam pointed out. “Neither did exorcisms or holy water. All the dagger Cass brought did was cut him by itself. Maybe he could come in the whole time and just didn’t.”

“I doubt it. He bled during our fight. He’s vulnerable or at least weakened. I don’t think he would have been able to have gotten past the protections unharmed. Perhaps the dagger has a cumulative effect,” Cass disagreed.

“Then we got him. If we can hurt him, we can kill him. You said so yourself,” Sam insisted.

“No Sam. I said the dagger would enable Erin to kill him. You’re just a man Sam, I’m an angel and even my strength did little more than draw blood.”

Erin picked up her fallen sword, spinning the tip on the floor in contemplation. The wheels in her head had started turning over what Cass had just said.

Sam grunted in frustration. “Okay fine. But that still doesn’t explain how he got in.”

“No it doesn’t,” Cass observed. How had Ahriman been able to get in? The protections inside would have had to be broken for Ahriman to enter in his current state. Erin wouldn’t have done it, neither would Sam or Dean. That left one possibility. Ruby. But Cass didn’t know that for certain and he would never be able to find out so he kept his suspicion to himself.

Ruby hastened to divert them from that line of questioning, it wouldn’t lead to anything good for her if they figured it out. “Who knows? Maybe Erin and Dean got too enthusiastic about their athletic indulgences and accidently broke a salt line. It’s all kind of moot now.”
Cass gave the demon a suspicious glance. She was certainly protesting too much.

“He’s scared,” Erin said suddenly, disrupting their pursuit of how Ahriman had gotten in.

“What?” Sam asked, thrown by the abrupt change in subject.

“Ahriman is scared or at least worried. It’s the only thing that makes sense. Otherwise why take Dean at the last second? I thought I had him convinced he had me by the short and curlies but I guess not. Dean’s his insurance that we don’t try anything or bait...or both.”

“Well that’s just great. So what do we do just give in?” Sam asked incredulous.

“Yes,” Erin said in complete seriousness.

###

Dean came to slowly, feeling his physical pain before anything else. His ribs on one side hurt and his breathing was painful but he was fairly sure they were only cracked not broken. His jaw ached and his head was a little muzzy from being knocked out but he was alive. That was at least a bright spot.

Once his mind had categorized his injuries, it started taking in his current predicament. He couldn’t move his legs or his arms and he was sitting up. Through hazy eyes he noted the reason he couldn’t move his limbs was because he was tied to a chair. Letting his gaze travel further, he saw that there was blood everywhere across the low rent apartment but he knew it wasn’t his.

It didn’t take much to figure out where it had come from. Across the room, discarded like unwanted refuse, was the body of a man who’d been ripped to shreds. It hadn’t been done with any finesse either, as if he’d been the victim of a sudden and brutal death. His murderer probably hadn’t wanted to bother with details and Dean already knew who the murderer was.

Raising his head, he saw Ahriman leaned against the door jam, arms crossed over his chest, one leg crossed at the ankle and looking pleased with himself. His immaculate tuxedo was in disarray, blood spattered across the front, probably his latest victims.

“What’s the matter? Motel 6 was full up so you offed this poor bastard for a room? Or did you just like the décor?” Dean snarked, glaring at the demon possessed Immortal.

Ahriman pushed off the doorframe and sauntered toward him, grinning evilly. “Ah, Dean. Charming as ever. I heard you were the false bravado type.”

Dean followed him with his eyes, glaring at Ahriman with vehement hate.

“Oh it’s not false, douche bag. You think taking me hostage is going to save your ass? You got another thing coming.”

Ahriman stood in front of him and smirked, then he leaned down until he was nose to nose with the Winchester. “Do I? You’re the Great White Hope, Dean. The man who’s supposed to stop the Apocalypse from happening. Now how does that stack up to one lowly little Immortal who’s already perjured her soul by wantonly torturing and murdering for two hundred years? Even if Erin would be willing to let you die-- which she won’t with her tendency to play the martyr and the sneaking suspicion I have that she’s grown sweet on you – I doubt your brother or your feathered friend want
to see you dead. You’re too important.”

“So that’s it? You’re forcing their hand,” Dean said. Then he thought about it a moment. Was he so important, compared to Erin? Not in his opinion, not when she was fated by prophecy to bring Ahriman down before he could become as big a threat as Lucifer if he got free. Granted, Dean had been trying to subvert the prophecy from the jump to keep Erin alive, up to and including Dean trying to take her place. So had Cass and Sam. But Ahriman should have known that, he should have known prophecy was a bitch to get out of. Unless he didn’t.

Dean realized suddenly that Ahriman didn’t have a clue about the prophecy about his own demise. If he did he’d have gone about things differently, if he was smart he’d have gotten as far away from Erin as he could. Erin had already submitted as far as Ahriman knew, it had only been a matter of arriving at the scheduled location. The only reason Ahriman had to take Dean now, was if he was afraid Erin could kill him and didn’t know about the prophecy. Dean certainly wasn’t going to inform the bastard he’d epically screwed the pooch.

“You’re afraid. You’re scared Erin is going to whack your head off,” Dean spat.

Ahriman snarled. Dean had touched a nerve. “You’re pressing your luck boy. I could kill you right now if I wanted to and still kill that annoying pimple of an Immortal.”

“You can’t do a damn thing to me. If you really thought you could take Erin you’d have done it already. Kill me now and you lose the only bargaining chip you’ve got,” Dean taunted. Ahriman stood up and punched him in fury. Dean’s head snapped to the side and a thin rivulet of blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

“I might not be able to kill you yet but I can make you wish you were dead.”

Dean licked the blood from his lips and glared at Ahriman in defiance, chuckling darkly. “Go ahead. You can’t do a thing to me that hasn’t already been done you chicken shit son of a bitch.”

Ahriman’s face contorted into a mask of rage and he hit Dean again, harder this time. Dean gave a grunt of pain. That one had hurt but he refused to let Ahriman see him acknowledge the pain. He just gave him a hard look back, daring him to do it again. “Alistair was much better at this.”

Ahriman paced away, agitated and then shook his head with a sadistic laugh, trying a different tactic. “You know I really do have to thank you. With Erin cuffed like that I almost had her. If the angel on your shoulder hadn’t stepped in your pet Immortal would be nothing but an empty corpse right now.”

It was Dean’s turn to snarl. That was a low blow and it hurt more than any amount of physical damage could. His inability to allow Erin to go through with her plan had nearly gotten her killed. It might still. If Dean hadn’t locked her down so he could try and take over, Erin might have been able to get to the relics and end the fight then and there. He should have expected Ahriman to bring it up to be honest. Demons loved twisting the proverbial knife.

Ahriman’s face cracked into a perverse grin. “Why did you have the little minx chained up? Decide she was a monster after all?”

Dean didn’t give him the satisfaction of an answer, he just glowered. Ahriman swaggered back to him and stood in a cocky stance that was reminiscent of every dick Dean had ever met who thought he had the upper hand.

“Or could it be, you decided to prevent her from committing suicide by giving in to me? Had a little
recreation with a woman who has more experience pleasing a man that any you’ve ever had the pleasure to hump and dump and let your libido do the thinking for you, huh? You went and fell for the bitch and thought you could save her by taking me out all by yourself didn’t you? Dean, Dean, Dean,” Ahriman goaded shaking his head, “You and your habit of sacrificing yourself for people you care about. When will you ever learn?”

Dean clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt all over again as what Ahriman said hit home. “Go to hell.”

“You first,” Ahriman taunted back and clenched his fist, twisting the air. Dean screamed as his chest exploded with pain. Ahriman gave a staccato laugh of enjoyment.

###

“Erin, this is insane,” Sam insisted for the hundredth time. He was following Erin around the kitchen while she tossed the place looking for her cell phone. Sometime between the salle and retiring upstairs she’d misplaced it. Ruby was standing aside and trying her best to be inconspicuous. She was waiting to see where this was all going before she said anything. Castiel had already given her suspicious looks. She didn’t want to give her game away.

“It’s not insane if it works,” Erin said rummaging through her duffle bag. “Where the hell is it?” she muttered to herself.

Cass was withholding comment as well, for a different reason. He knew Erin was plotting, but he didn’t know what she had in mind. He was still holding on to the hope that allowing Erin to make her own path with a nudge in the right direction, would be enough to keep the tenuous faith and trust they’d built alive. Dean being in Ahriman’s clutches made things look bleak. For all of them.

“Yes it is. This is so far off the map of demented that I don’t even have a name for it!” Sam argued.

“This is war tactics,” Erin snapped back, looking behind a stack of dirty plates.

“How does unconditional surrender equate to war tactics?” Sam railed.

“Sam, I believe we should listen to Erin. She has fought in many wars. She has two thousand years of battle knowledge to draw from,” Cass suggested gently. The two were dangerously close to this blowing up in to an all out argument.

“He has a point, Sam,” Ruby said.

“So, what? We just let her wave a white flag? Have a little faith?” Sam said in exasperation. Castiel gave the younger Winchester a look of dark warning for his outburst. Sam gave him look for look. He was upset and angry. It was going to take more than a look from Castiel to stop him.

“It has nothing to do with faith,” Erin said. She brightened when she laid eyes on her cell phone under one of the kitchen chairs. She must have dropped it during the food fight earlier. Erin snagged it up and started to dial Christian’s number. Sam snatched it from her and she swung around attempting to grab it back, but Sam’s extreme height advantage prevented her.

“It has everything to do with faith,” Castiel said with certainty, appalled by Erin’s words. Had they lost so much ground so quickly? Neither Sam nor Erin seemed to take notice.
“No. It has to do with you being as stupid as Dean. You think if you surrender and Ahriman kills you, he’s going to just let Dean walk free?” Sam fumed.

“I said we give him what he wants. Unconditional surrender. I didn’t say that’s all we were going to do,” Erin spat back, grabbing for the phone again. Sam lifted it a little further out of her reach. Erin glowered at him. She restrained herself from a swift jab that would put her phone back within her reach.

“Oh, because there’s so much more you can do dead!” Sam snapped with biting sarcasm.

“Ahriman isn’t stupid. He’s scared. If he didn’t think we had a chance of killing him, he wouldn’t have done this. He knows we’re not going to leave Dean hanging. He knows we’re going to try something to rescue him, but not what. So, we give him his unconditional surrender. He’ll know it’s a bluff and then we turn the tables on him with something he can’t see coming. While that knocks him off guard, Cass grabs Dean and we turn the tables on him again. Only that time, he won’t have Dean as an insurance policy. Bait, switch, switch,” Erin explained terse.

“You want to Kansas City Shuffle-- a demon?” Sam blurted. He was surprised enough he forgot to keep the phone out of Erin’s reach and she made a play for it again. He quickly jerked it back up into the air.

“Hello—former pirate? Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve pulled something like this.”

“It’s a pretty good idea actually,” Ruby said with real surprise. It was as convoluted as anything she was doing and it had the added benefit of keeping everything on the path Ruby wanted. If Ruby didn’t already have a plan going to ensure Erin and Ahriman ended up dead, she wouldn’t ever want to be on Erin’s bad side. The woman was tricky. Come to that, if she was this conniving alive, Ruby hated to think what kind of a demon Erin would have made. It was a shame she had to destroyed body and soul. The demons could have used someone like her once they gained control of the Immortals.

Sam gaped at Ruby. The hand holding the cell phone waved animatedly as he talked. “A good idea? How is it a good idea?” Ruby opened her mouth to respond but Sam had switched focus back to Erin. “What if he doesn’t buy it? We do this and it works, you die. If we do this and it doesn’t work, you die, Dean dies and Ahriman gets a free pass to do whatever he wants, to whoever he wants. He kills Duncan, wins the Prize and we end up with somebody at least as bad as Lucifer. Should I continue?”

“You got a better idea? It’s a chance we have to take.”

“We draw him out, trap him somehow.”

“It’s the same result as before, different path. I told you. My mind is made up.”

“We have to try.”

“Damn it Sam, no,” Erin insisted.

By now their voices had risen until they were nearly yelling at each other. The cell phone was forgotten and Cass tried to intercede. “Erin…” They ignored him.

“There’s gotta be another way. But this? This is the worst plan I’ve ever heard. We go in smart or we don’t go in at all.”

“We have no time and no choice, Sam! He can’t kill Dean right now because he’s the only playing
card he’s got, but Ahriman isn’t going to sit on his laurels forever waiting on us to make a move!”

“Sam…” Cass tried again. Again, they didn’t heed him.

“Okay, fine. Then give me another option, Erin. I mean, tell me what else?”

“Erin, Sam’s right. If you go into this with no…” Cass said with more force.

“NO! DAMN IT!” Erin screamed, hitting the table with clenched fists. “Stop trying to save me! I don’t deserve it!”

Cass and Sam stopped cold, utterly speechless. With those words, Castiel’s hopes that enough faith could be gained by Erin to survive this fled, leaving him pained and bereft. From Sam’s expression, so was he. They’d failed.

“Just… No. We are not making the same mistakes again. I am not. I tried to save Christian and look how well that worked out. Look where it’s gotten Dean.”

“Erin…” Cass pleaded softly.

“You want to die?” Sam said in quiet shock.

Erin swallowed once hard, her eyes glassy with moisture. She moved her head in a small woeful motion. “You always knew it would end this way. You can’t save us both. Let me save Dean.”

They both looked back at her with furrowed brows. Castiel shook his head so gently in sorrow it was almost imperceptible and looked away. Sam’s eyes glazed over with a mist of mournful acknowledgement. They’d crossed the Rubicon and reached the point of no return. All they could hope for now was to save Dean and destroy Ahriman.

###

Dean spit another mouthful of blood out onto the floor and lifted his head to look at Ahriman with contempt. His right eye had swollen shut and was blackened. He had a sneaking suspicion that the formerly cracked ribs he’d had, were now well and truly broken. Every breath felt like someone was stabbing him. His head felt like he’d stuck it in a car crusher. He had lost a few teeth. They littered the floor along with his blood. He was pretty sure his jaw was broken, it hurt enough to be, but that didn’t stop him from speaking. So, maybe not.

“That’s the best you can do? Wail on me like a juiced up punk?”

Ahriman hit him again and Dean’s jaw burst into an inferno of pain. When he got a grip on it, he leveled the same derisive look as before at Ahriman. He had been hurling insults the whole time the demon had been hitting him. Dean didn’t break easy. He knew Sam, Erin and Cass would never leave him to die. That meant they would be planning something. If the demon was off his game when they tried it because Dean had petulantly refused to cave in, all the better.

“You’re nothing but a scared, pathetic excuse for a demon. No wonder you’re an outcast to your own kind. You want to kill me. Oh, I know you do, but you can’t, because you know if you do before you kill Erin, she will never stop hunting you. She’ll track you down and rip your spine out just to watch you bleed.”
“Shut up,” Ahriman seethed.

“Or you’ll what?” Dean mocked.

“I said…shut up,” Ahriman growled and clenched his fist. Dean’s throat closed like a steel hand was around it. He couldn’t breathe and it felt like his esophagus was being crushed. When Ahriman let go, Dean gasped, coughing and spitting blood in a less than cool display.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” Dean rasped. “This is what? The second time you’ve used a human as a bullet shield? Not very demonic of you now is it? It’s almost… human. Or Immortal. Maybe Christian’s had more of an effect on you than you want to admit. Maybe, the longer you’re in him, the more he rattles around in that head with you-- the more you realize how impotent you really are. Gotta be hell stuck inside a meat suit with something that’s even half angel. All that untapped potential and you can’t even touch it.”

Ahriman snarled, teeth bared and punched Dean again. There was a wet snap as his nose broke. Dean barely blinked. Instead he laughed, a throaty, gravelly sound.

“Hit the nail on the head, huh? Speaking of Christian, why hasn’t he come out to play? You put him in a lock box or is he just too much of a coward to step up to the plate?”

“Christian isn’t home right now,” Ahriman spat.

“Oh really?” Dean said. “Cause ya know, I think he is. Come on, Christian. I know you’re in there. Come out, come out, wherever you are, you dickless, backstabbing, little jackass.”

He hated Ahriman. But Christian, there were no words for how Dean felt about him. He’d committed the ultimate betrayal. He had betrayed his family. He had chosen a demon over the person who had spent four life times protecting him. Who had taught him to survive. And Dean wanted a piece of the sniveling little shit.

Ahriman’s face contorted, his neck and shoulders convulsing and then his posture relaxed. The way he stood became a little lazier. Dean recognized it. Christian had come out of his hiding place or Ahriman had let him out. He stepped forward and clenched Dean’s battered jaw in an angry hand, his nails digging into Dean’s skin.

“Watch your tone with me boy. Or I’ll show you ‘dickless’. Then, try banging my sister.”

“What do you care what I did with her? You’re half the asshole who wants her dead,” Dean snipped back. Christian let go of Dean’s jaw and backhanded him. Dean’s head reeled for a moment and then he started to laugh in amusement. He couldn’t help it.

“You’re pissed I slept with your sister?” he snickered. “You want to kill her but you’re mad I slept with her. You are all kinds of screwed up.”

“Shut up, before I gut you like a fish,” Christian growled.

“Oh that’s real easy for you to say with me tied to a chair and beat to hell. You’re a real badass, Christian. Shows real strength of character to threaten somebody who can’t fight back dirt bag. Erin has more strength of character than you’ll ever have.”

“Erin’s nothing but a weak, sniveling could-have-been whore,” Christian snarled, his voice dripping with disdain and resentment.

“You’re the one with a demon riding around inside you. So who’s the whore again?” Dean cut. He
didn’t pause to give Christian a chance to respond. “She’s weak? Erin was willing to die to save you. She still would be if you hadn’t betrayed her. She spent four lifetimes protecting your ass and you paid her back by choosing a demon over her the first time he offers you a deal. Tell me how’s that deal going by the way?” Dean rebuked through clenched teeth.

Christian backhanded him a second time, making yet another split in Dean’s lip. He ignored it and the trickle of blood that made its way down his chin. He glared at the Immortal.

“That well huh?”

“I didn’t need her protecting me. All she ever did was hold me back. I’m a better fighter than her. I’m stronger. Smarter. She’s too busy trying to atone for her guilt. Too spineless to take what was hers by right! Too busy whining about her pathetic life. Boo hoo,” Christian said.

“Yeah, you’re a genius. You stupid son of a bitch. She was trying to keep you from ever having to see what she’s seen, from ever becoming like her. She could have left you floating at sea wondering what the hell you were. Left you easy prey for the first Immortal to come along. She could have even taken your head herself, instead of spending over three hundred years watching your back. How many times did she go to the mat, cut and bleeding, for you? Huh? How many times did she risk her neck so you didn’t have to? She was protecting her family,” Dean said shaking his head.

“I didn’t want her to fight my battles. I can take care of myself!” Christian yelled in ire.

“Yeah, because you’re doing such a bang up job now. Made a deal with a demon instead of going to your sister for help. You child. Maybe you can fight your own battles. That’s not the point. The point is she sacrificed her entire life to keep you safe and you don’t appreciate it. You sold her out the first chance you got. For what? Some misguided delusion that Ahriman is going to hold up his end of the deal and make you a real boy?”

“If she gave a damn about me she would have told me about Trajan. About what she did. Not hide it for three hundred years. She would have given me the same power she had!” Christian railed back, waving his arms in fury.

“Oh man, there is something so broken in you. That is such crap. She loved you, she trusted you and you betrayed her. You don’t betray family.”

Christian snarled and lunged for Dean in a rage, his face morphing between himself and Ahriman. It was hard to tell anymore where one started and the other stopped. Dean had hit the right button. Christian hit him as hard as he could and Dean sputtered, coughing up a clot of blood.

“You don’t even know what family means. Family steps in when you’re taken by a demonic asshole,” he managed to gasp.

Christian pulled out his cell phone and leered at Dean. “So Erin’s in your little family now, huh? Well, let’s see how fast we can reunite you with your family-- in hell.”

###

Sam searched for words, for something that would change Erin’s mind, the cell phone hanging forgotten in his hand. But he knew she was right. They couldn’t save them both and if it were to come to a choice between Erin and Dean, he knew he’d choose his brother. He accepted her
decision, even if he didn’t like it and it pained him. She had the right to choose her own path. But no matter how undeserving Erin felt, he wouldn’t give up on her.

Cass’s head still hung forlornly. But he too, accepted her choice, as hard as it was for him, it had always been her choice to make. He looked like he was about to say something out of pure desperation when the phone in Sam’s hand rang, the Gummy Bear song with its dissonant cheer, startling him. Sam jumped and looked at the phone as if it was a foreign object.

“It’s him,” Sam said with a hard swallow. Erin held her hand out for it without a word. Sam looked to Castiel for guidance. He was unsure if he should relinquish the phone to Erin and let her seal her fate. Cass gave him a brief nod in response and Sam handed over the phone like he was passing her the weapon that would kill her.

Erin looked between them sadly and then pressed the ‘talk’ button and put it on speaker, raising the phone to her ear with a heavy inhalation of air as she stilled herself. This had to be the performance of a lifetime.

“Let him go Ahriman.”

“Surrender and you can have him. What’s left of him anyway. He’s a bit broken I’m afraid,” Ahriman said haughtily. Sam almost panicked at the news of his brother being broken. Cass stilled him with a glance.

“You can have me. Just don’t hurt Dean,” Erin said her voice quavering. To her surprise she didn’t have to act. The undertone of fear for Dean came through like a bell.

“Erin don’t listen to him!” Dean cried out desperately in the background, his voice muffled and strained. In response to Dean’s outburst, the sound of flesh impacting flesh with force could be heard through the phone, followed by Dean’s despondent growl of frustration and pain.

“So selfless. First Christian, now Dean. Sentimentality is going to be the death of you Erin,” Ahriman teased viciously.

“At least I’ll have died for something worth dying for,” Erin said. Then her jaw clenched and she pleaded, “Christian, I know you’re in there. Please don’t do this. If there was ever anything good between us, don’t do this.”

“I’m afraid he’s not speaking to you at the moment. There’s the whole little issue of you smothering him for three hundred years. Think there might be a tad bit of resentment there,” Ahriman said in a blasé voice. Erin winced deeply. She’d had to try one last time.

“When and where?”


“Cass!” Dean pleaded again. Cass’s jaw was tense but he said nothing in return and for once, they didn’t hear the sound of Ahriman pummeling Dean in retribution.
“There’s a good girl. See you then,” Ahriman purred and the line went dead.

###

Dean roared in helpless frustration, pulling at his bonds. Erin was just going to do it. She was going to give herself over to save him. The only thing he could do was hope Sam and Cass would stop her and save his hide.

Ahriman gave a deep staccato laugh. “Oh calm down, Dean. Your precious lil angel isn’t going to just walk up and kneel to beheaded. That was a little too cut and dried. Of course, she wants me to think she will. But I was expecting her to try something, righteous heroine that she thinks she is. But it’s a dangerous thing underestimating me. She will die and so will you.”

“You can’t win you son of a bitch,” Dean growled. His usual brash gruff was there but it was colored by doubt and grief.

“Funny. Looks like I already have,” Ahriman chuckled.
Chapter 20

The group stood there a moment trading silent, melancholy looks of resolve. Erin stashed the phone in her pocket and moved for the duffel bag Dean had put the relics in. Sam and Cass followed closely on her heels.

“We baited him, now what?” Sam asked, watching as Erin dug through the bag in search of the ring, the dagger and the vial. She propped her foot on the table and slid the dagger into her boot, then dropped her foot to the ground.

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Erin said eying the vial and the ring. She licked her lips and picked up the ring, hesitating for a moment. A bit amazing really, that this tiny bit of metal would turn her into a living, breathing Devil’s Trap that would not only trap Ahriman and force him to take possession of her but bind them together irrevocably. The sigils on the band were lovely for something so ominous, the fluting Old Enochian script scrolled around the ring like filigree. Her death warrant.

“Do I just put it on or?” Erin asked Cass, uncertain.

“Maybe you have to hold it up to your power battery and recite your oath?” Sam suggested with weak humor. Erin chortled despite herself. It was funny how humor could still be found even in the worst moments of despair. Cass looked between them in confusion.

“The ring doesn’t require an incantation. You simply wear it.”

Erin, Sam and even Ruby, who had until now remained so inconspicuous that they’d nearly forgotten she was there, snickered. The moment quickly faded and Erin took a deep breath, then before she could think about it, she shoved the ring on the middle finger of her right hand.

The moment the ring was in place the Old Enochian script flared pure white and blazed hot as holy fire, welding itself to its wearer. Erin let out a yell of inarticulate pain as the ring seared the sigils it bore under her skin and onto the bone. The marks burning for an instant through her, the same way a demon did when struck with Ruby’s knife, before fading as if they’d never been there, hidden.

Sam had his jaw dropped open and Ruby was wide eyed. None of them had been expecting that.

“Well that friggin’ hurt!” Erin bit. “I suppose you forgot to mention the ring welds itself to you!”

Castiel was standing there with a rather surprised look on his face. “I wasn’t aware putting it on would have that side effect.”

“Didn’t it come with a user’s manual or something?” Sam asked.

“It’s a relic Sam. They don’t usually come with printed instructions,” Ruby snarked.

“Just asking,” Sam said.

Erin picked up the vial, as elegant and beautiful as the ring was, and handed it to Cass. Shortly it would hold her soul and Ahriman’s, then it would be destroyed under some heavenly host’s boot heel and her along with it. Cass took it, covering Erin’s hand with both of his. His blue eyes looking into hers soulfully for a moment. As soon as the vial was out of her hand, Erin broke the gaze and shouldered on her jacket, and grabbed her sword.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Erin said and turned on her heel. Sam grabbed his duffel bag and
they followed in her wake.

In the garage, Erin stopped short as Sam diverted from the direct path to her Mustang and got something out of the trunk of the Impala. He came back holding a can of white spray paint.

“Pop the trunk,” he said. Erin looked at him oddly, but she fished out her car keys and unlocked the trunk. Sam leaned into the open space, shaking the can. He proceeded to paint a Devil’s Trap on the underside of the trunk hatch. When he was done, Erin was looking at Sam like he’d defiled it.

“Just in case,” Sam shrugged. The ‘in case’ being once Erin had taken Ahriman’s head and he was trapped inside her, they’d have to transport her back here to question Ahriman about the seals. Sam threw his duffel into the trunk and Erin shut it with a weary sigh.

As she went around to the driver’s side and started to get in, she paused and groaned, looking over the top of the car at Ruby. The demon looked back at her expectantly. “Come on. Get in. We’re gonna need all the backup we can get.”

“Oh, I get to ride in the ‘big girl’ car now, huh?”

“Do you really want to test me?” Erin threatened.

Ruby held her hands up in surrender and got in the backseat. She knew now was not the time to argue, it might disturb her plan and it was going so well. Ruby couldn’t have been happier. To be honest, she’d been trampling the desire to jump up and down with glee since the moment Erin had nay said Sam’s and Castiel’s pleas to find another way.

Sam got in the front beside Erin, trying to find enough space to fold his tall frame. Castiel appeared in the backseat across from Ruby.

“Ever heard of a door handle?” Ruby quipped.

“Of course,” Cass said innocently. Ruby just shook her head as Erin backed the Mustang out of the garage and flipped on the headlights. It was still dark out but within an hour, it would be dawn. With her eyes focused hard on the highway before her, Erin turned out onto the road. She didn’t look back.

###

“So what’s the first switch, in ‘bait, switch, switch’,,” Sam asked as they drove. They were going north, back the way they had come. Heading for the bridge that connected Sewall’s Point to the mainland. Nothing but the Mustang’s headlights accompanied them in the dark, past the houses of people who had no idea what really lay outside their doors or the world of the supernatural that lurked where they couldn’t see.

“Well, we already ’took’ the bait he laid out for us. I know he doesn’t buy our unconditional surrender. He’s not that stupid. So, since he’s expecting us to try something, we, or rather I, am going to play right into it with something he won’t see coming,” Erin explained.

Her grip on the steering wheel was so tight her knuckles were white. She was scared. There was no sense in denying it. Only a fool would sign their own death warrant and not be scared out of their wits. But, Erin had faced down a lot of things in her life. Never had more depended on her keeping it
together, than now. Despite her natural fear, there was a kind of relief. When this was over, it would really be over. No soul. No body. No guilt. No anguish.

“And what won’t he see coming?” Ruby asked from the backseat. Again, she was crammed as far over as she could get from Castiel. Even if he wasn’t actively menacing her, being this close to an angel of the Lord wasn’t exactly a day at the park.

“I’m going to do what Christian asked me to. I’m going to go over to the dark side.”

“You expect him to buy that?” Sam asked incredulous. Erin shrugged.

“He expects us to pull some daring rescue attempt. What’s the opposite of that? It’s not surrender. It’s changing teams. It’s what he would do and that’s going to confuse the crap out of him.”

“If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em?” Ruby summarized.

“Not quite. I said I was going to change sides. I didn’t say it was going to be his side.”

“Okay, now even I’m confused,” Sam said. Erin spared him a wicked grin.

“Take what ya can. Give nothing back.”

Sam’s face relaxed in an expression of realization and he gawked at the Immortal. In the rear view, Erin could see Ruby was as astounded as Sam. Castiel, however, looked contemplative.

“Pretend surrender, then trick him by usurping what he would have, for yourself. It’s an interesting plan.”

“Yeah, that’s a word for it,” Ruby scoffed.

“It’s insane. I know. Go ahead, say it,” Erin said. It was insane. Completely. And that meant it was unpredictable and it would scare the crap out of Ahriman.

“Of course. I am happy to say that, if that’s what you want to hear. But that’s not what I think,” Castiel said.

Erin’s eyebrow raised in surprise. She hadn’t expected any of them to think this was a good idea, even if they would go along with it. Ruby just shook her head, she wasn’t even this crazy. Sam looked at Cass, to Ruby and back to Erin and swallowed apprehensively. He’d have to trust her.

“Okay, so once you mind screw Ahriman, then what?” Sam asked.

“While he’s trying to figure the whole thing out, Cass swoops in, grabs Dean, and then it’s back to Plan A. I fight the bastard and relieve him of his head. Then, the rest is up to you.”

Sam shook his head in wonder.

“This is either buckets of crazy… or genius.”

“You’d be surprised how often the two coincide.”

They drove for a few minutes in silence after that. Each of them contemplating their own place in all this. Ruby was, as always, trying to think three steps ahead so she could ensure her plan worked. Castiel was considering their failure and the inevitably bad end this was all going to come to. Sam was lost in his own guilt over letting Erin go to her death, Dean was not going to be happy and yet, Sam couldn’t lose his brother.
“Sam?” Erin asked, her voice quiet.

“Yeah?” he responded, absently.

“You need to know what you’re going to be dealing with once I take his head. I’m not just going to be possessed. It was a Dark Quickening that let a possession happen in the first place. Ahriman seems to have suppressed things so it’s just him and Christian knocking around in there but he won’t have the power he has now once he’s trapped in me. The Dark Quickening may take over.”

“Meaning?”

“Quickenings, souls…once they’re taken they’re…dormant. They have no influence on the personality of the person who took them. We gain power and knowledge but it’s like getting a massive data dump in your head. But, with a Dark Quickening, the evil overpowers you, I won’t be able to fight it. Every head I’ve taken, every quickening from someone who was evil might surface, sometimes to the point that you end up with multiple personality disorder from hell. I don’t know what or even who, I might be. Just…whatever I say and do after I take Christian’s head…it’s not really me. Make sure Dean knows that,” Erin said.

“Sure,” Sam agreed as Erin turned the car left, off the highway and on to a dirt path that was hidden by trees and darkness.

“Make sure Joe Dawson knows what happened. He’ll know what to do with all my loose ends. Normally, my Watcher would do it but since mine’s currently a cadaver, you just became an honorary one. And…,” Erin paused a moment before continuing. “Burn the bodies. On a pyre.”

Sam’s eyebrows crinkled. “Why?” He knew Hunter’s salted and burned the bodies of fallen Hunters to prevent them rising as ghosts or being turned to zombies by someone vile. He’d done it many times for friends and family. But, he hadn’t heard many modern traditions that didn’t involve cremation at a funeral home.

“Tradition,” Erin answered. Sam looked thoughtful a moment.

“Never wondered why there are no Druid burial sites?”

“I will,” Sam promised.

“End of the line,” Erin said, throwing the car in park. Everybody blinked. She’d stopped in a tiny clearing. They couldn’t see a bridge anywhere.

###

“Uh, this doesn’t look like a bridge,” Sam observed perplexed.

“It’s close enough,” Erin said exiting the vehicle. She left the driver’s door open and the car running.

“Everybody out,” she ordered. They obliged, if a bit bewildered.

“The bridge is two hundred, two hundred and fifty feet past the tree line,” Erin said indicating the line of trees directly in front of the Mustang. It was so dark in the small glade, if not for the Mustang’s head lights, they wouldn’t have been able to see at all.
“We’re far enough off Ahriman can’t sense me and he can’t see us. Cass, stay out of sight until you see an opening,” Erin said. Cass nodded, though he knew, she already knew he would. It was a function of her fear. Making sure every piece was in place.

“Once I’m done with my end, well, I’ll let you figure that part out because I doubt I’m going to be feeling very cooperative.”

“So you’re just gonna leave us down here while you go off and fight the big bad?” Ruby asked incredulous.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it,” Erin confirmed. “It’s Cass’s job to get Dean out of there at the first opportunity. From there it’s up to me to kill Ahriman. You, Dean and Sam, your job is to make sure you get the job done after I take his head.”

Ruby threw her hands up in annoyance, stalking off to one side and crossing her arms over her chest. Erin wasn’t fazed a bit.

“This is the part where I say something deep and meaningful but, uh, I can’t think of anything,” Erin admitted. She hated long drawn out goodbyes. All they did was drag out the pain. Besides she couldn’t think of anything that hadn’t already been said.

Castiel stepped forward, hesitant, looking for the words he wanted to say. Emotion didn’t come easily for him, much less expressing it. It was something he was still very new to.

“I know you didn’t want this,” he said solemnly.

“Want it? No. But we, need it,” Erin said.

Sam had said nothing. He entertained a pensive look for a moment then, using Castiel’s conversation with Erin as a smoke screen, walked to the driver’s side, pulled the trunk latch and headed for it. He began rummaging through the contents.

“For what it’s worth, I would give anything not to have you do this,” Cass confessed, his expression full of sorrow. Erin’s throat tightened despite herself and she felt her eyes grow damp.

“Casualties of war, Cass. But…thank you,” she said with a husky voice.

Castiel looked down at his shoes and Erin seemed awkward for a moment as they searched for what to do next. Erin hadn’t expected Castiel to be so…open suddenly. Then her eyes landed on Ruby still standing off to one side petulantly.

“There is something you can do for me,” Erin admitted. Ruby snorted in derision.

“What?”

“Make damn sure they find out what seal Lilith is going to break next.”

Ruby looked surprised. It worked as an excellent concealment for the hilarity Erin’s request caused her.

“Yeah, okay,” she assented.

Sam had found what he wanted and closed the trunk with a quiet hand so as not to disturb the flow of talk going on.

“Thanks,” Erin said uncomfortably. It wasn’t the easiest thing to ask Ruby for her assistance in
“No problem,” Ruby said with an equal measure of discomfort.

“Is the moment over now?” Erin asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Erin said relieved, casting about for Sam. She didn’t see him anywhere. “Where’s Sam?” she asked concerned. Ruby and Cass looked around and didn’t see him either. The passenger side door on the Mustang slammed.

“Right here,” came Sam’s voice.

Confused Erin peered in through the driver’s side. “What do you think you’re doing? Get out of the car.”

“No,” Sam said resolutely.

Immediately, Erin turned to Cass. “Get him out of the car.” Castiel looked torn. He wasn’t exactly sure what was going on here.

“Sam, get out of the car. Don’t be an idiot,” Ruby snapped.

“No,” came his reply.


“Sam and Dean never do what they’re told. It seems every time I ask them to do anything they do right the opposite.”

Erin gave a frustrated huff. “Get out of the car Sam. We don’t have time for this,” she said leaning so she could see him through the open door. He leaned so he could see her.

“No, we don’t. So get in the car.”

Erin turned back to Cass with a plaintive look, exasperated. She even looked to Ruby for assistance. The demon was as at a loss as she was and Cass could only shake his head with the same exasperated expression. Blowing out a breath Erin submitted and got in the car, but she didn’t close the door.

“Get out of the car,” she said again.

“No,” Sam said pulling out his handgun and checking the clip, then flipping it to hand it to her grip first. “You want to make this look good right? Well, it doesn’t get better than having me as a hostage.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Erin said shaking her head vigorously.

“Dean’s my brother. I’m going,” Sam insisted pushing the gun at her. Erin just stared back at him in defiance. Sam sighed.

“Erin, it’s like Dean said… we’re not letting you walk into hell without some backup.”

“No,” Erin bit.
“We’ve been stuck in the same fox hole together for a week. You put people in a situation like that and something happens. Earlier tonight, in the kitchen, you and Dean, Cass. Dean trying to take your place. All of us trying to find a way out of this. That proves it.’

Erin still stared at him, her eyes boring holes in him.

“Family doesn’t end with blood, Erin,” Sam said sagely.

Erin was so touched and choked up she couldn’t find words to express herself. Instead, she took the gun, tucking it in her waistband and said, “I could just knock you out.”

Sam laughed. “I’d like to see you try.”

Erin grinned wanly and shook her head.

“So are we gonna sit here all night, or are we gonna go save Dean?”

Erin said nothing, she just shut the car door and put the car in reverse.

###

Erin stopped the car at the entrance to the bridge, the Mustang’s headlights illuminating the narrow strip of concrete in their glow. She put the car in park and glanced at Sam beside her. He looked ready to face down the devil himself.

“You know this could go very wrong,” she pointed out.

“Me and Dean have pulled off harder than this,” Sam countered undeterred. Erin gave him a skeptical look. Again, she tried to dissuade him. Bad enough that her fate had been sealed the moment she agreed and put on the ring; they didn’t need to lose Sam too. This plan wasn’t exactly flawless. It could go bad in a million different ways.

“We could all die.”

“I’m not leaving you or my brother alone out there. You made your choice. I’ve made mine.”

Erin sighed. He was right. What right did she have to stay him, when she’d fought for the right to give up her own life in this fight?

“You’re out of your mind but…okay.”

Sam grinned at her. “Then I’m in good company.”

Erin gave him a wan smile in return. At once sublimely jealous and touched by the devotion Sam had for his brother and his brother for him. She should be so lucky. Their bond was all she’d hoped hers and Christian’s would be. All she’d thought it was. “Dean’s lucky to have you and you’re lucky to have him. Never forget that.” Before Sam could respond she stepped out of the car and pulled her sword from beside the driver’s seat. Sam followed, shutting the door as quietly as possible. In the distance they could see the headlights of another car stopped on the opposite side of the bridge, obscured by the fog that had rolled in off the ocean so close to dawn. The light made the misty substance almost glow. Two human shaped figures could be seen making their shadowed way toward the center of the bridge.
Erin walked for the bridge, stopping just shy of where the road stopped and the bridge started, worrying the hilt of her sword in her hand. She took a deep breath as Sam stepped up beside her. Somewhere she found her resolve and Sam watched as the vulnerable woman fell away, replaced with the weapon two thousand years of pain had wrought and Castiel had honed. The only thing that betrayed her was a slight shiver and sharpening of her eyes. Sam knew automatically she could feel Ahriman out there and he could feel her. That unknowable link between all Immortals zipping down the line to vibrate in her skull.

“When Dean is in the clear, get as far back as you can and stay there. Quickenings can be rather… explosive. No matter what I do or what I say, until one of our heads rolls, you have to trust me,” she said looking at Sam with eyes that burned like cold flames. It was a little frightening. Sam swallowed and nodded.

“Wait for the opportune moment,” Erin said ominously.

Then, her back straight and her gait sauntering, she strode out onto the bridge with all the arrogance and confidence of someone who knows they’ve already won. It was so convincing even Sam, striding at her side like they were in some whacked out version of a spaghetti western high noon show down, had a hard time reconciling what he knew to be true. That Erin, despite two thousand years of life and fighting, was scared out of her wits. He endeavored to assume as much of the same air as he could. In his opinion, he was much less successful.

They strode, there was no other word for it, down the middle of the bridge. Beyond, at the center, waited Ahriman and Dean. Even if they couldn’t see their faces yet, it was easy to tell which one was which. Ahriman stood straight and tall, a hanger sword gripped firmly in his free hand. The other held up a flagging and battered Dean. He sagged on the bonds that held his wrists behind him, barely able to stand. Around them, the fog swirled with every step, puffing up to surround them like a wraith. If Sam hadn’t been here, if this had been a movie, he’d have been laughing at how over the top it was.

When they were within visual distance of Ahriman and Dean, it became apparent how bad off Dean really was. Had Ahriman not been keeping Dean cruelly on his feet he’d have been on his knees. He was bloodied and broken, though, true to his word Dean wasn’t dying—yet. His jaw was severely swollen and so was one of his eyes. It was patently obvious he was in a great deal of pain. It was hard to tell how much damage Dean had sustained but it was substantial. Sam fought not to look concerned. A brief glance at Erin proved that somehow, she hadn’t batted even an eyelash at the sight of Dean pulverized like a spun glass figurine.

Again, Sam was struck by that little thread of fear. The knowledge that Erin hadn’t lost a fight in two thousand years, that she’d been a brutal killer, a pirate and God only knew what else. That somewhere beneath the tough but still human façade lurked something as cold and calculating as Castiel when he was angry. That she was not completely human, no matter how strongly Immortals clung to their human halves. He tamped down on it and kept his face a mask of confident bravado. Within a few more paces, they were close enough for a voice to be heard if it were thrown.

“Heady tonic, holding life and death in the palm of one’s hand.”

It took a moment for Sam to realize the deepened contralto voice full of dripping grandiosity had come from Erin. They broke through the fog and looked directly at their adversary in that moment, Erin’s voice never losing the completely fearless tone.

“I’ve been there. I know.”

Ahriman sneered at them, wrenching Dean closer to him and bringing his sword up to Dean’s throat.
The sky was moonless but the cars’ headlights glinted off the razor sharp edge of the blade lethally. Sam gulped discretely in trepidation. Erin’s eyes flickered briefly to the blade and then back to Ahriman with not a shade of emotion.

“Erin,” Ahriman scoffed with disdain. “Even for you this is idiotic.”

“Don’t do it Erin,” Dean pleaded in a muffled voice; his jaw so engorged it hindered his ability to speak properly. Erin favored him with a disturbingly snide smile and then forgot him. Sam was beginning to get truly worried. He knew what the plan was, but Erin was flirting with disaster.

“Is it?” Erin mocked and then tilted her head as if considering something. She looked alarmingly like a cat playing with a mouse before it pounces for the final kill. “Who am I talking to anyway? Ahriman? Christian? Or both?”

Ahriman looked at her askance, unable to believe that Erin was stupid enough to believe that she could save Dean in a head on confrontation with the likes of him.

“You don’t believe I’ll kill him?” Ahriman threatened, pulling the sword blade along Dean’s throat so a thin trickle of blood was left in its wake. Dean grunted and gritted his teeth in anger and pain. Erin glanced at the injury and away without a thought. She huffed once and shrugged.

“Kill him.”

Sam’s eyes bugged in shock. Despite knowing the plan, despite knowing about Erin’s subterfuge, the last thing he’d been expecting was for her to outright tell Ahriman to kill his brother flippantly. She’d told him to trust her but this was pushing it. Sam clenched his jaw and held his ground, casting his brother a worried look. Dean’s good eye reflected it and confusion. His brother didn’t know what to think. Frankly, neither did Sam.

Ahriman laughed. “You think I’d fall for that?”

Again, Erin shrugged, casually examining her sword blade and then propping on the pommel with her elbow. “Fall for it. Don’t fall for it. Doesn’t make a difference to me.”

Ahriman’s brow furrowed. He wasn’t sure how to take that but the sword blade at Dean’s throat never wavered. “You’re serious?”

“Deadly,” Erin said deadpan. Ahriman’s eyes widened slightly and for a bare half a second the sword at Dean’s throat tipped as if the demon was no longer so certain Erin wasn’t bluffing him. Sam grabbed the tiny movement as a sign that Erin’s ploy was working, though he was no longer certain on whose side Erin was playing, her performance was so convincing. “You see, I got to thinking about what Christian said. And he’s right. Humans are short lived, weak, mortal. We are better than them. Always were. So go ahead kill him.”

Ahriman’s stance shifted an inch, wary and uncertain. The sword blade quivered again. Dean rolled his good eye at his brother in disbelief.

“In fact,” Erin said standing on both feet again and pulling Sam’s gun from the back of her waist band and cocking it so fast none of them saw it coming. She pointed it directly at Sam’s heart. Sam stumbled back in surprise, his heart beat racing. “You can have this one too. Call it a…display of my intent.”

Pain or no pain, now Dean was pissed, she’d betrayed them as far as he knew and she’d just handed his little brother over to a demon to be gutted. His eyes blazed and his teeth were bared. “You bitch.” He snarled. Erin merely gave him a scornful look. She shifted her gaze back to Sam and looked at
him expectantly. Sam moved with his hands up, he didn’t have much choice even if Erin had switched sides. She could drop him like a stone right now and both he and Dean would be dead.

Slowly he made his way over to Ahriman’s side of the bridge and to his utter disbelief, Ahriman let go of Dean. Sam stepped into the space it left, just behind his brother and moved to help him. Erin clicked her tongue in warning and Sam saw the gun was still leveled at him and his brother menacingly. “Uh uh,” she warned in a sing song tone. Sam ceased his movement and Erin gave him a penetrating look. Sam tried to read it. Did she mean for him to stay where he was? Was there some reason she didn’t want him aiding Dean? Whose side was she on? Had this whole mission been a cleverly constructed scheme? Sam no longer knew. Dean was on his knees, barely able to lift his head or remain upright but his anger at being betrayed fueled him.

“You back stabbing bitch,” Dean growled. His voice made all the more bitter because he’d cared, he’d dared to even think he was in love with her. He’d been willing to die to save Erin and she’d betrayed them as utterly as he’d accused Christian of betraying her. Erin couldn’t be bothered to give him the time of day. She ignored him like he wasn’t even there.

Ahriman’s raucous laughter drowned Dean out, vibrating in the stillness of the dark. “I knew you couldn’t resist the temptation of real power,” he said with a self-assured voice. He stepped a pace in front of Dean and Sam. Erin stepped a pace to the side, her arms wide and sword blade slack in a what-can-I-say motion.

“I remember what wielding power felt like with Trajan. All those years torturing and killing. But you and Christian,” Erin said pausing to suck in a savoring breath as if her thoughts were pure bliss. Erin stepped backward a pace and unconsciously Ahriman stepped forward, keeping the distance between them even. “What you two are planning, now that’s power. I want to taste that, to have that at my finger tips,” she said casting Sam a brief glance.

Sam realized some part of Christian still had some control. He was reacting on instinct, never let your opponent get an advantage on you, never let them decide on the distance between you. He’d accepted that Erin didn’t care if Dean and Sam lived or died. Now they were useless to him. As incapacitated and weaponless as they were, they weren’t a danger in Ahriman’s eyes. That left only her as a potential threat. Sam also realized Erin was manipulating that. She was drawing Ahriman away, one step at a time. She’d also positioned Sam and Dean within a breath of each other. When Cass saw an opening, they’d both be easy to retrieve and pull to safety.

Erin hadn’t switched sides after all, it was all a very carefully executed dance. Dean however, didn’t know it and Sam knew he couldn’t tell him. Not now. It would blow their cover.

“So you think you can just join me. Stand by my side and reign like warlords over the pathetic humans on this sad little planet?” Ahriman hissed with delight. Erin gave him a condescending tilt of her head.

“Oh no. Not at all. We both know the problem with power. Power corrupts. Absolute power
corrupts absolutely. I want it. But I don’t share.”

Ahriman gaped at her. “You really think you can kill me? You?” he derided. Erin gave him a mocking shrug and grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“Christian warned me you were a crafty little bitch. You had this planned all along didn’t you? Foist off the Winchesters on me, have me kill them and then you kill me and take everything for yourself. Everything tied up nice and neat. Impressive. Where’s the angel? Tell me, did you plan this with that slut demon of theirs?” Ahriman said with real admiration.

Erin stepped half sideways and half backward again. Predictably, Ahriman moved with her. Now he was three ample steps from Dean and Sam. She frowned. The last bit of the demon’s monologue she hadn’t been expecting but she went with it.

“He’s…indisposed at the moment. And Ruby?” She snorted in derision. “No. I don’t make deals with demons.

“What have you done to Cass?!” Dean barked with a gasping breath. Still Erin ignored him. It dawned on Sam why she wouldn’t acknowledge Dean. To do so might break her façade, she might show emotion and that would get them all killed. Ignoring him made it seem like she couldn’t care less about him, when really it was everything but.

“So not only did you trick me, you tricked the Winchesters,” Ahriman chuckled. “Oh what a tangled web we weave.”

Erin moved again and Ahriman matched her, drifting further from Dean and Sam. “I was just waiting for the…opportune moment.”

Opportune moment? Sam almost panicked. Erin had told him to wait for the opportune moment but what was he supposed to do? Frantically he tried to figure it out. Sam focused all his concentration on Ahriman willing his abilities to the surface. He was chock full of demon blood courtesy of Ruby. Maybe he could at least distract the demon.

“I apologize. I underestimated you,” Ahriman said. Erin grinned wickedly. Sam reached out with his gift, grabbed the demon’s essence and pulled for all he was worth. Ahriman’s back bowed and he screamed in pain. It wasn’t all Sam had hoped for but it was enough. He let go of the demon.

“Yes . You did,” Erin bit. At that instant, a rush of air and the sound of rapidly beating wings was heard. Cass appeared, grabbed Sam and Dean and was gone.

Ahriman gaped, his head swiveling between where Sam and Dean had been, and Erin, in disbelief.

Erin shrugged dismissively as she dropped into a defensive stance. “I lied.”

“Harridan!” Ahriman roared, enraged that he’d been played like a violin.

Erin gave him an icy glare, her sword swinging up. “You want me? Come and get me,” she dared.

Anger blind, Ahriman eyes flipped to an enraged crimson and he rushed her as the first sounds of crossed blades rang out in the dark.

###
Castiel set Dean down as gently as possible in the sparse grass beside the Mustang. Sam’s attention had been torn instantly between his brother, by whom he knelt as he untied Dean’s bound wrists, and the clang of metal coming from where they’d been only a second before. He caught sight of Ahriman running headlong into Erin. She deflected his crazed lunge and pivoted, causing the demon to overextend and stumble. She brought her own blade up and then down again in an arch for a strike, but Ahriman blocked her blade.

“Cass?” Dean rasped in astonishment. “You’re alive?”

Sam returned his attention to his brother, who was clutching his ribs and panting in pain, too weak to stand. Castiel reached forward and touched him briefly on the forehead. In a blink, Dean’s injuries disappeared, leaving him as hale and hearty as he’d been before Ahriman had laid hands on him.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Castiel asked innocently. Dean got to his feet still gaping at the angel.

“Erin said…I thought she killed you.”

“Obviously you were mistaken,” Castiel pointed out.

“Thank God for that. You got here just in time. The bitch fed us to Ahriman,” Dean spat in fury.

“Dean,” Sam said trying to cut short the impending tirade of Dean Winchester brand rage he knew was coming.

“She’s been screwing us over from the jump. Man, when this is over I’ll kill her myself,” Dean continued. Castiel looked from Dean to Sam and back with mild surprise. Ruby, who hovered in the shadows, said nothing.

“Dean,” Sam tried again. “She saved your ass.” Dean swiveled around and gawked at his little brother.

“You call selling us out saving our asses?” he sputtered.

“She didn’t sell us out, Dean,” Sam tried to explain but his brother cut him off.

“Oh I’m sorry. No, she just tried to kill Cass and have us ganked to clear her path to world domination!”

“It was a con. We were all in on it,” Sam pitched over his brother’s raving. Dean stopped short, his mouth snapping shut for a moment.

“Wait. What?”

“Dude, she saved your ass,” Sam repeated.

“But she said…,” Dean started, confused.

“She said what it took to make Ahriman look left when she went right.”

Dean paused a moment to absorb that, to really think about the circumstances.

“So let me get this straight,” he said, “She Kansas City Shuffled—a demon?”

“Yeah, pretty much. It was the only thing she didn’t think he’d see coming.”
Dean thought about it a moment more as the guttural sounds of battle echoed down the bridge. “I didn’t see it comin’,” he admitted, then added after a beat, “I love that woman.”

Erin’s initial advantage over Ahriman due to his confusion and anger was fading fast and she’d yet to get in more than a handful of blows that would so much as make a fledgling Immortal stagger. She hadn’t been able to get in close enough to use the dagger Cass had given her without giving herself away either and she was getting her ass kicked. Already a gash had healed over in her left upper arm, her sleeve soaked with blood, in her side was another, the flesh barely mended. Something had to give soon or she was done for.

Ahriman came in for another attack, his blade coming down in an overhead cut. Erin brought her blade up in an overhead block and caught the blade. She tried to force it away in a parry but Ahriman was determined the attack should succeed. He braced his sword arm with his free one, trying to use his body strength to shove Erin’s blade down.

“I’m going to enjoy killing you,” Ahriman spat.

Erin grabbed Ahriman’s free arm and attempted to push him back. Ahriman had the choice of letting Erin’s move win or releasing his grip on his sword arm. He let go and Erin immediately enveloped his blade, circling it with her own throwing it away from the line of attack. Ahriman stepped back with his heel to keep his balance and Erin shifted her grip on her sword, bringing the pommel up in a jab under Ahriman’s chin and slamming hard into his jaw. Dazed Ahriman stumbled backward.

Immediately Erin swung for the demon’s midsection but he’d recovered enough to narrowly avoid being gutted. Erin stepped in a cross over, retreating and circling her opponent. “You didn’t really think it would be that easy did you?” she mocked.

“You might be clever Erin Morgan, but you haven’t got the strength to win against me,” Ahriman boasted and lunged.

Erin stepped out of the blades path and spun bringing her blade around in a sweeping motion so she’d already be en guarde when Ahriman regained his footing. But he’d stalled, stopping his momentum at the last second, and when Erin completed the spin he grabbed her wrist, wrenching it. She almost lost her hold on the blade but he pulled with such force he tossed her several feet. Erin rolled with it coming up on her feet and attacked him with a backswing as he advanced.

Ahriman had apparently regained enough composure to fight as a demon and not a human or an Immortal. With a gesture he picked Erin up and flung her back down the length of the bridge in the direction she’d come. She hit the ground like a ton of bricks, a sharp gasp escaping her. She coughed and choked, blood filling her mouth, and spit it out. The landing had broken bones she could tell.

Ahriman came striding down the bridge with a gleeful smirk.
At the end of the bridge, the others stood abreast, watching with rapt horror and fascination. This was how Immortals fought. It was brutal and it was bloody, albeit with less demonically fueled flying sessions.

“This isn’t a fight, it’s a massacre!” Dean exclaimed as Erin went sailing through the air like a thrown doll. Unconsciously he took a step forward, instinct driving him to intervene, to do something instead of just standing there like a bump on a log while Erin was pummeled. It was obvious she wasn’t gaining any ground and she had already taken a beating that would have put down anyone but one of them.

Castiel’s hand griped his shoulder firmly to stop him. “You cannot interfere.”


“You really think you have a better chance against Ahriman than Erin does?” Sam admonished sadly.

Dean’s face contorted in heartache. He knew he didn’t, but it went against every fiber of his being to do nothing. It made his bones itch and set his teeth on edge. The woman he’d gone and stupidly fallen in love with was out there risking her life for innumerable others. How could he let her do it alone?

“It took guts for her and Sam to go out there and twist Ahriman into an emotional wreck to save you and you’re going to throw it all away by barging back in, guns blazing, completely useless? There’s gratitude for ya,” Ruby snipped. Dean glared at her. Ruby gave him a smug grin back.

Dean’s expression fell and he looked at Sam desperately. “How can we just stand here and watch? It goes against everything Dad ever taught us.”

Sam looked as saddened as his brother. “Because we have no choice.”

Not finding the response he was seeking from Sam, Dean looked at Cass in anguish. “She’s going to die.”

Castiel’s gaze dropped to the ground, blue eyes shadowed with sorrow. “I know. We always knew.”

All any of them could do was look on with pained faces as Erin coughed and spit blood. As Ahriman descended on her like a vulture.

###

Erin struggled to get up, trying to ignore the pain of shattered bone knowing it would knit. Blood stained her teeth and lips and her breath came in ragged gasps as Ahriman hovered over her, his sword raised for a killing blow. “Stupid girl. Christian, Dean, Sam. You’re really willing to die to protect them. I told you, your sentimentality would be the death of you.” He swung and Erin rolled to the side at the last second.

Ahriman’s blade hit pavement with a shower of sparks. The demon bellowed in anger at being thwarted and whirled wildly around his sword striking steel with a resounding twang. Erin was already there.
Ahriman’s mouth twisted into a demented sneer. Their blades were locked. Erin knew she didn’t have a chance against Ahriman. Not when he could throw her around like a ragdoll. A direct attack wasn’t working. But Ahriman wasn’t the only one in the body she fought. If she could coax Christian out she had a chance.

“Come on. Don’t you want a piece of me?” she teased.

Ahriman gave her a contorted smile, his eyes still red as blood. “I’ve already got a piece of you.”

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to Christian,” Erin said looking him steadfastly in the eye.

Ahriman pushed with his blade forcing Erin to disengage and circle again, looking for an opening. “Sorry. He’s not home right now.”

“Oh yes he is,” Erin snapped. “Seems I was right after all wasn’t I, Christian. Hiding behind a demon? Are you that scared you’ll lose? Or are you just a coward?” she provoked deliberately, speaking to her brother, whom she knew still lurked inside his body, still watched, hidden somewhere in the recesses of his mind.

For a moment, Ahriman’s eyes flicked back to normal, Christian’s blue ones taking over and then the demon wrenched back control. Clenching his fist, Ahriman struck out, grabbing something inside Erin and twisting. She groaned in pain, her knees starting to buckle as her heart and lungs seized then he flicked his wrist. Erin skittered across the bridge, her back hitting the cement railing and nearly flipping over it to fall in the channel below. Ahriman ‘jumped’ from his place across the bridge’s narrow expanse to right by her side, his blade pressing down on hers across her throat. Erin griped her blade, narrowly keeping the demon from beheading her with her own sword.

“You can’t fight your own battles, Christian. You never could. That’s why I had to do it for you,” Erin grunted still trying to draw Christian out.

Ahriman grimaced and pushed harder on the blade. Erin’s brushed her throat dangerously close, leaving a thin line of blood. “It’s not going to work Erin,” Ahriman told her.

“This isn’t how it’s done. You know the Rules. You think I smothered you, that I should have let you fight your own battles? Then prove it. Fight me, Christian,” Erin kept trying, ignoring the demon’s insistence that it wouldn’t succeed.

###

“She losing,” Sam hissed worriedly. They could all see Erin pinned like a fly to the bridge railing, perilously close to losing her head.

“Have faith, Sam,” Castiel encouraged him.

Dean scoffed, “In what? That she can get her head hacked off?” Castiel turned his head and pinned him with a steely look.

“Erin is a seasoned Immortal. She lives by the sword, you don’t.”

“Yeah and now she’s going to die by it!” Dean exclaimed.
“She’s a weapon, a finely honed one. Immortals don’t fight by force alone. Have faith. She will win,” Castiel reiterated. He refused to consider otherwise. He couldn’t, the alternative was unthinkable. Ahriman free to wreck havoc over the world and no one able to stop him. The idea was chilling.

“Glad you believe. But Erin is getting her ass handed to her,” Ruby put in. Castiel gave her a sidelong glance of wrath and she dropped into silence. Her plan had gone too well up until now for her to risk getting smote because she’d pissed off the nerd angel but, she had a valid point she thought.

“Once Erin has taken Christian’s head she’ll be vulnerable for only a few moments after the quickening. We’ll have to restrain her before she regains control,” Castiel said, refusing to entertain the notion that Erin might still lose. Discussing instead what they had to do once she won.

“If she even gets that far,” Sam said, pointing toward the fight. Erin was still trapped against the railing, trying desperately to keep her own blade from slicing her head off like a Guillotine.

“What do we do if she loses?” Dean asked fearfully.

“Pray it doesn’t come to that,” Castiel advised him.

Dean swallowed apprehensively. He had a feeling that might actually be a good idea. He didn’t want to consider what would happen if Erin lost. Castiel’s avoidance of a direct answer alluded to the horror it would be.

###

Ahriman’s eyes flickered, red, human, red, human. Christian was fighting him for control. His face convulsed with the effort it took to keep his hold on the host he was in, but the sheer strength he was exuding trying to chop Erin’s head off kept his blade down on hers. Then, Christian’s will overpowered Ahriman’s and the weight on his blade let up. Erin pulled herself out from under it and danced away.

When he turned to face her, still poised to fight, it was Christian’s face she looked into, three hundred years of resentment and reined in spite drawn in the lines of his frowning mouth, the cold blue of his eyes.

Erin looked back at him with deep sorrow and regret. “I know you hate me. If I could do it all over, go back and change it, I would. But I can’t.”

“Too little, too late,” Christian growled, closing the distance between them and engaging her blade. Erin parried and struck back. He matched her. His movements were more fluid that Ahriman’s had been, displaying the grace and agility of someone who’d been taught how to handle a sword well. Erin knew she could beat Christian when she couldn’t beat Ahriman. The only question left was did she want to?

“I was so busy trying to protect you, I didn’t see what it was doing to you. For that I’m sorry,” She said her blade bound to his. He cast it off.

“You should have trusted me. You should have had faith in me,” Christian bit, thrusting his blade into the open space his parry had left. Erin slide her sword down the length of his with a shing, and
tossed it out of the attack line then twisted again, slicing across his arm and leaving a deep gash. He yelped with pain but even as he did so, the cut healed.

Erin’s face clenched with heartache. “I know.”

###

The others watched as the tide turned.

“That’s not Ahriman, it’s Christian,” Sam said, noticing the change in how he moved, the anguish Erin displayed visible even at this distance.

They were no longer watching a battle between a demon and a nephilim. They weren’t even watching a battle between two Immortals, not really. They were watching one sibling kill the other.

“The sinner shall rise and slay their brother,” Castiel murmured with reverence and sorrow. Sam and Dean exchanged a pained look, none of Cass’s melancholy awe in their expressions. For them this was a tragedy. One they’d managed to stave off many times before in their own lives, one sibling having to kill the other for the greater good.

Neither had to ask what the other was thinking. In the end, would they end up the same way as Erin and Christian? Was it inevitable?

###

Erin and Christian traded blows, first one driving the other then changing places. Erin had a purpose; she needed her brother to know, even if he’d never understand, that she was sorry. She was also wearing him down but she didn’t know how long he could keep control away from Ahriman. He had to be battering around in Christian’s skull in a rage. This would have to end quickly.

“You aren’t sorry. You just wanted to be the one in control! The one with the power,” Christian spat his voice full of scorn, coming at her with a flurry of blows.

“It was never about power, Christian. It was about family. You protect family,” Erin said ducking him. He advanced again and Erin counter attacked, forcing him to block or be skewered.

“Like you’re protecting your new little family? You’re going to give your life to protect some pathetic humans? In sixty years they won’t even be alive!” he bit disdainfully, looking for a new opening.

Erin was faced with a problem, she could wear him down but she still didn’t have a way to get to him with the dagger before she tried for his head. Their sword blades kept them too far apart and she couldn’t kill him until she’d gotten him with the dagger. She had a thought, then quickly hid it before Christian could read her expression and discover what she intended to do.

“That’s what family does. That’s what you never understood. My life was forfeit the moment I realized you’d chosen a demon over me,” Erin said attacking him again. This time she came in fast
and hard, forcing him to fight without thinking, to rely on everything she’d taught him. *The sword knows what it wants to do, don’t fight it,* she’d once told him.

Christian fought back, blocking and parrying until he saw an opening. One Erin deliberately gave him. He spun out of the line of attack and back in, ducking low and cutting across the back of her knees, hamstringing her as she had done to Trajan two thousand years ago. It was the only effective counter attack he could use and she had known it.

Erin sank to the ground on her knees, her legs cut out from under her, at Christian’s mercy.

###

Dean’s heart stopped and he leapt forward. Erin was on her knees, helpless. She’d lost.

“No!” he cried out.

Only Castiel’s arm across his chest like a steel bar kept Dean from rushing out there onto the bridge to try and stop Christian. Beside him, Sam’s jaw was slack with horror and doom. Even Ruby was in a state of shock, she’d been certain Erin would win. Castiel’s face was unreadable.


###

Christian raised his blade for the deathblow. Erin’s gazed up at him, panting and in pain. Surreptitiously she worked her left hand down her leg toward her ankle.

“It was always about power,” Christian snarled and brought the blade down. Erin’s right arm arced back, catching Christian’s blade behind her head with her own and her other came up and out like a snake striking. She shoved the dagger Cass had given her, kept sheathed in her boot until now, up under Christian’s sternum and into his heart. Where it struck there was a small electrical burst and then nothing. With little more than a spark, Ahriman’s and Christian’s invincibility had been nullified. Erin had been expecting something more…spectacular, to be honest.

Christian’s eyes went wide as saucers in disbelief; he gazed down at his abdomen like he couldn’t understand what he was seeing.

“I learned that from Cass,” Erin said, still on her knees.

Christian raised his head and looked at her, his mouth gaping. “You cheated,” he gasped as the sword fell useless from his hands to the pavement with a clatter. He sank to the ground beside her, his hands clutching feebly at the dagger buried in him, blood seeping from around the blade.

“There’s no such thing as a fair fight, Christian,” Erin said sadly, struggling to her feet. Her legs worked again but she was still wobbly.

“But the Rules…,” Christian rasped. He was fading quickly. His heart was unable to circulate
enough blood to keep him alive and unable to heal itself, all his advantage with a demon inside of him gone.

“The Game has always been about survival. You know that,” Erin said stepping up beside him.

“So this is how it ends? You chose Dean and Sam Winchester over me? So much for family,” Christian bit between pants of pain.

“Family, Christian? You don’t know the meaning of the word. I’m saving you the only way I have left,” Erin breathed, raising her sword with tears in her eyes.

“This is your salvation? You’ve a cruel mind Erin,” Christian hissed. Erin tightened her grip on the pommel.

“Cruel is a matter of perspective. You forgot the most important rule. In the end… there can be only one,” Erin said in a whisper, her voice breaking. Then, she brought the blade down, severing Christian’s head from his neck.

She dropped her sword, her jaw clenched in anguish and grief, waiting for what she knew would come.

###

The others looked on in thrilled shock as Erin pulled another last second save out of her hat. Then Dean and Sam winced, and looked away, unable to watch a sister kill her brother. Castiel’s face was still unreadable, but his eyes told the story well enough. He knew he was watching whatever remnant of Erin there was left, die with Christian.

There was an odd, unnatural silence once Erin’s blade passed through Christian’s neck and his head rolled. None of the normal sounds of insects or night birds, not even the sound of the ocean could be heard.

“I’ll be damned. She did it!” Ruby whooped. The other three threw her a castigating look. Ruby was mystified. “We won!”

“Nobody won,” Dean said tightly. Sam’s brow furrowed and his mouth was taut with sympathy. He made to go out on the bridge, to go to Erin’s aid, but, it was Dean, who had formerly been so desperate to do the same, who grabbed his arm, stalling him.

“You do not want to be out there in the middle of a Quickening. Trust me,” he said. Sam stepped reluctantly back. He didn’t understand why Dean was stopping him now. Dean motioned with his head out to the bridge and Sam turned his gaze back.

A hum started from somewhere, maybe everywhere, building from a sound that was almost imperceptible to human ears until it was like a live power line arcing. The middle of the bridge was slowly becoming covered in a mildly glowing mist that seemed to be emanating from Christian’s headless body. Erin was looking down at it as if it were an encroaching tide of acid, taking one unsteady step back at a time, almost as if she was afraid to let it touch her.

Threads of red-tinged electricity crawled haphazardly over Christian’s inert form, growing larger and slithering across the ground as if they were in search of something. Erin kept backing away. The tendrils swarmed over Christian’s sword, then Erin’s, spiraling hungrily down the blades to the hilts like it was a living thing that had expected something to be there that wasn’t. It hissed and popped
angrily, then shot off in a many-fingered arc finding what it sought.

The bright red coil wrapped itself around one of Erin’s legs and she stiffened as anyone suddenly caught in the grasp of the equivalent of five hundred thousand volts of electricity would. Overhead, thunder clapped with abrupt suddenness, clouds that hadn’t been there before darkening and rolling, casting what wan predawn light there was back into darkness. Bright blue-white lightning chased over the belly of the clouds, crackling wildly. Sam could feel the charge in the air, the hairs on his arms standing on end.

A crimson thread swelled and branched off striking Erin in the torso and she screamed, back arching, arms flung wide, her head tossed back as the Quickening built and ravaged her. There was something disturbingly wrong with the angry glow of the energy. Black smoke rose, hellborn, from Christian’s form and flowed like lava over the ground seeking out a new host.

Lightning struck down from the sky like a great spear thrown from Heaven with a tremendous boom. It entered through Erin’s back and lifted her off the ground. She still screamed. In anguish or in pain, Sam could only guess. Then, the real fireworks started.

None of them could move. They were frozen in place. Even Dean and Cass, who knew what a Quickening was. Dean had at least seen one on TV and Cass must have seen many throughout his unknowably long life. But still they stood wide eyed in awe as red energy mixed with the blue-white from the lightning and arched off Erin, racing down the bridge and jumping along the railing on unseen lines. The black smoke swirled up into the air, questing. It closed around Erin, spiraling in an ominous dark miasma.

The sound alone was deafening. Some of the tendrils split off striking trees near the bridge and setting them alight. One hit a nearby power line exploding the transformer with a sonic bang. They all flinched, ducking to avoid anything that might strike them. Other erratically crackling tongues of energy roved unchecked, setting even the pavement on fire. Sam could only gape.

The black smoke worked its way up to Erin’s head, her mouth open in a scream and forced itself down her throat. Red electricity blazed through the blanket it laid. A huge vine of bluish white-red energy lickerd over the end of the bridge, jumping from railing to tree and then over their heads, striking the Mustang and threading out over it. All the windows and lights burst at once, sending shards of glass everywhere.

The foursome broke apart to avoid being pierced by the flying razors and threw their gazes back to the center of the bridge. Dean’s expression was tortured, his jaw set and his eyes pained. Cass looked utterly torn. Ruby seemed more like she was watching the best movie ever. Had Sam been able to see his own face, he would have seen his forehead wrinkled and his expression empathetic and horrified. Erin was being forcibly possessed by Ahriman while at the same time absorbing the Quickening, the soul, of Christian and every other Immortal he’d ever killed. All of them twisted and warped beyond recognition into a Dark Quickening.

The smoke, Ahriman in his true form, was still snaking his way inside Erin. Then, suddenly, the smoke jerked as if something had a hold on the end already inside her. It flailed wildly, trying to back out. The glyphs the ring had made under Erin’s skin, on her bones, blazed pure white. Brighter than all the electricity running rampant over her body and anything else it could get to. Ahriman gave one last desperate jerk and was sucked in. The glyphs faded. A final branch of red light snapped up from Christian to whip around Erin and across her skull like a fiery hand, fingers gouging into her eyes and invading her mouth. Somehow she still managed a heart rending howl.

With no warning, the lightning from the sky dissipated, leaving Erin suspended only by the blood red tendrils that held her like an angry fist. Then, they too disappeared and she fell, striking the pavement
with a heavy thud and didn’t move. The clouds receded as if they’d been drawn back like curtains by an unseen hand, leaving the sky clear and star-studded again. The first light of Dawn peered over the trees on the other side of the bridge.

The fire still blazed on the bridge. It swarmed too high for Dean or Sam to dare try to pass through it. Cass stepped forward, striding out on the bridge and blinked out in mid-step, reappearing beside Erin. With a downward motion of his hand, the fire on the bridge tamped itself out, though the inferno around them still burned. Dean, Sam and Ruby raced for Erin’s fallen form.
Chapter 21

They pounded to a stop beside Cass, who looked as morose as the boys had ever seen him, and Erin’s unmov ing body. Erin looked like hell. Her clothing was bloodstained and ripped from the fight. She didn’t even look like Erin anymore. She looked like a shade of herself. A pale imitation. Something vital was—gone.

Dean knelt by Erin’s side. His jaw clenched as he gently turned her head off the pavement. A scrape on her cheek, inflicted in her fall, still bled—unhealed. A brief touch on her throat proved that she was only unconscious, not dead. Dean squeezed his eyes shut a moment in anguish and shook his head.

“Damn it, Erin,” he whispered with a hoarse voice. She’d done everything they had been trying to prevent her from doing and she’d done exactly what Dean would have done in her shoes. Of course, to Dean, it was only okay when he was the one doing it.

Dean gave Cass a despondent look. They had to work fast. He didn’t have time to dwell on what had to happen now. The depravation and horror of what he knew he was going to be asked, again, to do. But Cass saw everything he didn’t say, in his glance.

“We need something to tie her up with,” Dean said looking at Sam expectantly.

Sam paused, his frown of pained empathy fading into mild embarrassment.

“You didn’t bring anything?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, I jus-uh-just forgot it in the car,” Sam excused. He’d been so caught up in the ploy to get Dean back safely and everything that came after he’d completely forgotten to get the holy water and salt soaked rope out of the duffel in the trunk.

“Well, go get it,” Dean instructed askance.

“Uh, yeah, right,” Sam mumbled and sprinted off back to the car.

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“Uh, yeah, right,” Sam mumbled and sprinted off back to the car.

“Cass, why isn’t she healing?” Dean asked worriedly.

Ruby, who had stepped up to take Sam’s place while he was gone, shrugged, “What difference does it make? She’s a meat suit now. She’s as good as dead.”

Cass and Dean turned looks on her that could have killed.

“I don’t care. We are not giving up,” Dean spat.

Ruby played it off but she felt her insides tense, she thought they’d given the whole thing up for lost. She couldn’t afford for them to keep digging, there was still a very slim chance they could make the prophecy go the other way. “Okay, sorry!” she said hands up in apology.

Dean shook his head in disgust, “Friggin’ demons.”

Apparently satisfied Dean had said enough about the subject so he didn’t have to or because he felt Ruby wasn’t worth the effort it would take to say anything to her, Cass answered Dean.

“The ring bound her soul to Ahriman. Made her a living Devil’s Trap. They’re both essentially powerless.”
Dean’s eyes widened. He had known what the ring would do. Cass had told them. But, somehow, hearing it wasn’t the same thing as seeing. “You mean she’s completely human?”

“In a manner of speaking. She’s,” Cass paused for a way to explain what the ring had done, “cut off from her angelic nature.”

“So, she’s half a person?” Dean asked appalled. Cass couldn’t think of a way to answer that that would make sense to Dean, but his expression confirmed it in so far as Cass could explain it. Dean rubbed his hand over his face. “Jesus.”

This was bad. Not only was Erin torn in two by the ring, she was fused to Ahriman, under the influence of a Dark Quickening, and she was helpless to heal herself. He couldn’t begin to think what was happening to her mind.

Sam came trotting back up with a substantial length of rope in his hands and looked between Dean and Cass. “What?”

“Nothing,” Dean said gruffly. But Sam could tell it wasn’t ‘nothing’.

“Let’s do this,” Dean said reluctantly as he slipped his arm under Erin’s neck to lift her so her wrists could be bound.

Suddenly she went rigid as steel. Then her eyes snapped open and she looked directly into Dean’s eyes. Her eyes were so wide he could see the whites all the way around the iris; they were wild and utterly petrified. “Dean!!” She cried and clutched at him frantically. It was a desperate plea for help.

Dean wrapped his other arm around her, supporting her. “I’m right here, sweetheart,” he assured her.

Erin started to shake and her gaze shifted up to Cass with the same beseeching look. In an instant, Cass was on her other side, a strong hand bracingly on her shoulder. Erin shook harder.

“I can’t…I can’t,” she tried to get out. The shaking turned into convulsions; Erin’s back arching in Dean’s arms.

“Cass, what’s going on?” Dean asked alarmed. Erin’s eyes rolled back in her head, red peaking from beneath her lids and receding again in haphazard jerks. Sam and Ruby could only stand by and watch.

“She’s fighting him. We’ve got to get her bound before he gets control,” Cass said trying to get control of one of Erin’s arms without hurting her.

Erin spasmed violently, limbs flailing wildly and gave an agonized yell. It was all Dean could do to keep a hold on her but he couldn’t move. He couldn’t react. He was frozen in mortification, his eyes rooted to Erin seizing like an epilepsy patient.

“Dean, help me,” Cass insisted. Dean still couldn’t more.

Erin’s neck twisted in an excruciating way. Cass had managed to get her arm bent behind her back and was trying to get a grip on the other. Sam leapt into action, coming around to try and help Cass get Erin under control. Ruby whipped off her jacket as Sam tossed her a coil of rope and caught it, using the cloth as a barrier between her hands and the rope that was poison to her. Then she tackled Erin’s legs that kicked and scraped helplessly on the pavement.

“Dean! Quick, before she hurts herself,” Sam pushed. Dean snapped out of it and helped them get Erin onto her side. She went suddenly limp and then, just as quickly, wrenched free and rolled into a
sitting position swinging at the same time. Sam didn’t duck fast enough and she caught him full force in the face. Sam fell back on his rear with a yelp, his hand over his busted and bleeding nose.

They all stopped a moment perplexed. Ruby was the only one who kept her grip on Erin. Then Erin laughed a strange deep laugh.

“Erin?” Dean asked.

She grinned perversely and her eyes were different. The look in them wasn’t entirely sane or human but it wasn’t demonic. It was evil, however.

“Éireann is mine now,” she hissed. Dean looked at Cass aghast and a little confused.

Cass didn’t look back, he was looking shrewdly at Erin, or who ever had control at the moment. His gaze so intense it looked more like he was looking through her than at her. With absolute calm that belied the complete fury he felt, Cass knelt on one knee beside her, one arm draped over his lifted knee casually. “Trajan,” he seethed.

Dean’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline and he exchanged a glance with his brother, who looked as dumbstruck as Dean.

“She said this might happen,” Sam said weakly.

“Hail, hail the gang’s all here,” Ruby said, looking up at them with mild surprise.

Cass was still locked in a staring contest with Trajan-cum-Erin.

“That’s Legatus Trajan, if you please. Who, pray tell, are you?” Trajan said. It was Erin’s voice but it was deeper, rough and dripping with malice.

Cass inched forward until he was nose to nose with him. Most were intimidated by the angel’s invasion of their personal space, the way he seemed completely at ease and yet full of holy wrath at the same time. Trajan didn’t even blink.

“I’m the one who should have destroyed you before you ever laid a hand on Erin,” Cass intoned darkly. Trajan laughed that strange laugh again in genuine amusement.

“You? Destroy me? I’m Immortal, a God. You’re nothing but a pathetic mortal human waiting to be conquered.”

Cass shifted his weight back, his gaze never moving. “I’m an angel, you ass and you’re no God,” Cass bit. Then quick as a thought he hit Trajan/Erin hard under the jaw with his fist. Erin’s head snapped back and she slumped over again.

“Cass!” Dean boggled, dashing back in to see if her body at least was all right.


“I know.”

“We should get her bound before she wakes up again,” Ruby pointed out.

“Yeah,” agreed Sam drearily, handing off a coil of rope to Dean and moving to help Ruby with Erin’s ankles. She had managed to get the rope around Erin’s ankles but she couldn’t tie it off securely hampered by the jacket.
Dean took the coil of rope Sam had given him and bound Erin’s hands, wincing when it burned flesh as soon as it touched her wrists. Then, he and Sam hefted her up, Sam holding her legs and Dean hooking his forearms under her armpits. Together, they carried her toward the car. Ruby followed in their wake, shrugging her jacket back on. Cass lagged behind, stooping to pick up Erin’s sword. He turned it over in his hands with a heavy sigh, then retrieved Christian’s as well.

Carefully, they put Erin in the trunk, Dean and Sam both suppressing the revulsion shoving her in a car trunk provoked in them. Then Dean closed the trunk hatch with a click and Cass joined them, a sword hanging limply from either hand.

“What about Christian?” Sam asked. Dean looked back down the bridge at Christian’s body, his head was a few feet away from it staring blankly into nothing.

“Erin wanted the body burned,” Sam explained. Dean didn’t think Christian deserved a decent burial of any kind. He didn’t care if his body laid there for centuries, the flesh falling away and rotting until there were only bleached bones left. But there was the fact that he’d been Erin’s brother and the fact that while an Immortal couldn’t be raised, their body might still be able to be used by a ghoul or some other supernatural monster.

“You have got to be kidding me? He’s dead. Let the son of a bitch rot,” Ruby said in exasperation. She had the passenger side door already open, ready to go. For once, Dean actually agreed with Ruby. Sam saw the hesitancy in Dean’s expression.

“He was still her brother, Dean,” Sam pointed out.

“Yeah, alright,” Dean said reluctantly. Then looked at the window busted Mustang. “But where are we going to put the body?”

Cass passed the swords off to Sam, who took them. The blades were still blood slicked, though it was quickly turning into a congealed, sticky mess. “I’ll attend to it and meet you back at Erin’s.”

Dean and Sam nodded. Ruby plunked herself in the back seat after brushing away bits of glass and Sam tucked the swords on the glass-spattered seat beside her. Silently he and Dean got in the car. The keys were still in the ignition. Dean took the wheel and they pulled out on the highway. Dawn had truly come now, the bright oranges and yellows of the sun blazing over the treetops. The road they traveled on seemed incredibly lonely and empty.

###

Erin’s mind flashed through images of Christian’s life. Visions from before he was Immortal, their time together. Snippets and vignettes of who he was, his thoughts and emotions. All his memories flooded into her like a river.

She knew, implicitly, as no one but another Immortal can know the one who’s Quickening they’ve taken, everything. Every nuance and particle of his being. All the pent up hate and anger he’d felt toward her. She knew why. Erin understood and she didn’t want to.

Then, Ahriman snaked his way in, shoving and pushing, trying to wrench control from her until all she could see was blackness. She felt the ring’s power flare and wrap around him, pulling him in, welding the demon to her soul so he couldn’t escape. She felt tainted and defiled, forced into the
bond. Ahriman raged, furious. Unwilling to accept his fate. He thrashed and fought.

Finally, he seemed overwhelmed and Erin ‘woke’ to a void of midnight and cobalt blue. Blue white energy flashed and blossomed around her like lightning. There was no up or down here, the space just—was. She was inside her own psyche.

Unable to process everything around her, her mind formed ground or visualized it, although she couldn’t see it in the literal sense of the word. She just knew she could stand up if she tried to. Erin struggled to her feet, mystified by the fact that she was standing on nothing. Around her, in the periphery of her vision she could see shapes that were vaguely human, moving in and out of the preternatural fog that shrouded everything.

Some glowed white as stars, brighter than the energy that crackled around and through the fog. They were men and woman, standing like silent watchers, unspeaking. Most were like shadows, darkened wraiths that prowled the edge of her vision like wolves. If she moved to see them, they disappeared into the fog, only for another to appear somewhere in the distance. There were so many she couldn’t count them.

Erin tried to take it all in. She looked down at herself and found she was neither white nor black. She was both. The depths and hollows of her form, she couldn’t call it a body really, like gray evening shadow, the highs and prominences a subtle, glowing white. Beneath that, crimson roiled sluggishly.

Abruptly she realized what she was looking at. She was looking at the personification of her soul and all the soul’s she’d ever absorbed as an Immortal. The soul of every Immortal whose head she’d ever taken, good, bad or in between. The crimson that moved so lazily beneath the light and shadow of her own, was Ahriman bound to her.

Erin became very afraid. She’d killed so many innocents in cold blood. Surely they would want revenge. How many more had she killed who were evil? She’d taken a Dark Quickening. Certainly they were what roved like blackened ghosts on the edges of her vision. Vying for position, waiting for the moment to strike and over take her.

Erin could feel Ahriman, like a worm wriggling inside her, poking and prodding trying to find a way out. A parasite. She felt it when he ripped through her, overwhelming her. She fought back viciously, refusing to give in. He boiled and fumed, slashing at her. She slashed back.

Then something black as night descended on her. One of the shadowy specters that had roamed the boundaries of the fog in her mind gripped her tight and forced its way in. She saw its face and with absolute terror realized who it was. Trajan. She rebelled, striking at him, trying to get away. He engulfed her and Ahriman. Erin no longer knew who was who. She could only claw and crawl her way out, kicking and screaming for anything to hold onto.

Something that felt familiar, that said reality, passed within her grasp and she clung to it. Wrenching for all she was worth, the void disappeared and she found herself looking into Dean’s green eyes. She was herself again but she could feel Ahriman and Trajan ripping and tearing, pulling her back down.

“Dean!?” she cried in petrified desperation clutching at him. She felt him grasp her tighter, saw the anguish and shock on his face.

Erin heard him console her in a voice as desperate as her own. “I’m right here, sweetheart.” Then, Ahriman and Trajan dug their claws in. Beseechingly she looked up at Cass, his blue eyes gazing back at her in great sorrow.
“I can’t…I can’t,” she tried to get out. She was trying so desperately to tell them she couldn’t fight them. Then Ahriman and Trajan tore her apart. She heard herself scream and be ripped from reality. The only thing she knew was the all-consuming horror of Ahriman shredding and gouging at her soul for control while somehow Trajan got the upper hand. Erin descended into black agony.

Dean braced himself on the kitchen table and shut his eyes, willing everything around him to disappear. He wanted to wake up in some seedy motel room with Sam snoring in the next bed over, discarded fast food cartons scattered around and the clock radio blaring Asia tunes to realize this had all been a bad dream.

He could hear the enraged howling of Trajan in Erin’s body below them. He hadn’t shut up raging since halfway back to the beach house. He’d screamed and pounded on the trunk hatch, spouting what Dean was sure were obscenities in Latin the whole way. When he and Sam had pulled him out of the trunk, it had been to find he’d beaten Erin’s hands bloody in his anger.

Now, Cass was downstairs in the basement securing him. Occasionally, a howl of fury was superseded by one of pain as Cass wrapped another length of iron chain around him. The Devil’s Trap was Old Enochian. Ahriman would be bound completely. But, Ahriman had yet to rear his ugly head. They’d had that brief glimpse of Erin in utter terror before Trajan had taken over but the demon had yet to make an appearance. It seemed Ahriman’s ability to repress or control the other souls in Christian had been rendered useless or severely weakened in Erin.

Dean wasn’t actually worried he wouldn’t be able to get Ahriman to surface. He’d been taught too well by Alistair while he was in hell. Dean could make Ahriman do whatever he wanted. That wasn’t what concerned him.

What tore at his heart and soul, was that he knew, any moment Cass was going to walk up those stairs and tell him Erin was bound, and was ready for… him. He knew Cass would ask him again, to torture Ahriman using Erin as a host because he knew what seal Lilith would break next, because they had to know to keep Lucifer from getting out of his cage. Torturing Alistair had come very near breaking him completely. But to do it to Erin? If it had been someone he didn’t know, hadn’t…fallen in love with…that the demon was in, maybe it would be easier to say yes. To just do it.

Dean had no way of knowing if Erin was awake in there. If she would feel everything he did, and hear everything he said. He could only imagine the pain she was already in, fighting Ahriman and whoever else made a play for dominance in her head. She had to be half crazed already. And he was supposed to add to her torment. Then, one of them, probably Cass, because Dean knew he couldn’t do it, would have to kill her. Take her head and cram her soul and Ahriman in a vial to be shipped off to Heaven and obliterated.

All because they’d failed. All of them. He and Sam hadn’t been able to figure out what Cass’s cryptic and obscure hints meant. Cass had not been able to tell them anything more without ruining any chance they had. Ruby hadn’t been any help at all, as far as Dean was concerned. Erin had walked into the fire without even blinking. Because it would save the world. Save Duncan MacLeod. And save Sam and Dean. Knowing what would happen to her. And she hadn’t cared, because they would still be alive and she would be freed from her guilt and her loss, because she’d already given up the moment she’d lost Christian to Ahriman’s temptation.
Dean couldn’t do it. He could not. He couldn’t just give up, even if everyone else had. He wasn’t sure if it was because he really did care about Erin or because he could not face the idea of torturing anyone again. Least of all someone he had feelings for. Or both. Or none of the above. Maybe he was just scared he would like it, like he had in Hell. Or that he would make the first cut and he just wouldn’t care. That he would become a monster himself, all over again.

Dean felt a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes. Sam was there, looking mournful and worried. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine,” Dean lied.

He knew Sam didn’t believe it for a second, but what else could he say? Sam’s forehead wrinkled and he looked like he was about to give Dean one of his spot on, Dr. Phil inspired quit-bullshitting-me speeches, but they heard Cass’s heavy footsteps coming slowly up the basement stairs. Ruby hopped down off the counter where she had been idly eating a piece of the blackberry pie Erin had made the night before and taken perverse pleasure in refusing her. Dean loved pie. Right now, he never wanted to see another piece as long as he lived.

“It’s done,” Cass said in a flat sotto voce. The howls from the basement had stopped. He cast his eyes away as soon as Dean and Sam turned to look at him. The angel looked about as if trying to look at anything but them. “You should begin.”

Dean tightened his jaw and winced deeply to keep tears from springing to his eyes. He had dreaded this moment. “I can’t Cass. We can’t give up.”

Cass still wouldn’t look at him. He wandered the length of the kitchen like he was searching for something or trying to find a way out. Dean knew Cass didn’t like this anymore than he did. “It’s too late. What’s done cannot be undone.”

“She’s giving her life for us. We have got to at least try something! Anything,” Dean pleaded as much for himself as for Erin.

Cass gave a wearied sigh. “What would you suggest? We didn’t come to the right conclusion about the prophecy in time. Erin made her choice. There’s nothing left to try.”

“And what conclusion were we supposed to come to? Huh? What was so friggin’ mysterious that you couldn’t tell us outright without screwing the pooch when it might have stopped this whole thing. Might as well tell us now,” Dean lashed out.

“No. I can’t,” Cass said.

Dean’s ire grew. He knew he was being harsh but he couldn’t help it. He was in too much turmoil to keep his tongue in check. “Can’t or won’t? Was there ever even a reason for us to try to figure out what you hinted at or was it all another angel mind screw to get us do Heaven’s bidding?”

“Of course it wasn’t. I can’t tell you,” Cass said in a strained voice.

“Why? If it’s too late what difference does it make?” Sam asked. Cass didn’t answer, he glanced at Sam and then gave Dean a deep, penetrating look.

Dean looked back, his anger still building and then he saw it. Cass wasn’t telling them because he was still, beyond all reason and logic, holding on to the shred of hope that somehow a miracle would happen. That they would be able to pull Erin out of the fire. Even when they hadn’t a clue how, no time left and her fate sealed. He knew Cass couldn’t say that because it would hurt too much. Dean’s shoulders sagged.
“I can’t do this, Cass,” Dean reiterated desperately. “If it was Alistair or some other random demon in someone I didn’t already know, maybe. But I just can’t. Not to her.”

“Because you’ve fallen in love with her,” Cass said softly. It was a statement. Not a question and it wasn’t accusatory or angry. It was understanding and sorrowful. Dean said nothing. He couldn’t bring himself to agree. It cut to his heart and he couldn’t bear to say ‘yes’. Cass came toward him in sad entreaty. “This is too much to ask again, I know. But I have to ask it.”

Despite Dean’s best efforts, tears filled his eyes turning them glassy and bright. “Please, Cass.”

“I’ll do it,” Sam offered in a voice they could barely hear. He couldn’t stand listening to his brother pleading, brokenhearted, not to have to torture Erin anymore and Cass plead, just as torn in his own way, for him to do it. It was heartbreaking to watch and he knew Dean would never be able to get the information out of Ahriman. He was too emotionally tied up in who the demon was in. Dean looked at him askance.

“What? No!” he said without having to think about it. Sam stepped forward to argue and now Dean was boxed in between him and Castiel.

“Dean, I can do this. It’ll be faster. She won’t suffer as much.”

Dean’s eyes bugged out of his head. There was no way he was letting his little brother come anywhere near doing, even one iota of the crap he’d done in Hell. It wasn’t happening. “No. Absolutely not, Sammy.”

“But Dean, I killed Alistair. I got the information out of him. Ahriman’s nothing compared to him. Right?” Sam insisted reasonably. Dean and Cass ran all over each other with their next words.

“Wait, you want to go down there and use your mojo to do it? Like you’ve already done…twice? Oh yeah, I saw what you did on the bridge, Sam. Are you out of your mind?” Dean spat.

“You’ve been using your power? You have already been warned that it leads down a dangerous road,” Cass said sternly in warning and admonishment. He hadn’t realized Sam had been toying with it again. This did not bode well on top of everything else they had going on.

Sam’s eyes grew wide. “I had to. Ahriman was going to kill all of us and it will work now. Why make her suffer if she doesn’t have to?” he argued dismally.

“Oh yeah, because it did us a lot of good up there in that skyscraper. And on the bridge? I don’t know, did it occur to you to push him maybe? I don’t care if it would work. No. You are not doing it,” Dean bit back. Sam looked from Cass to his brother, at a loss.

“I’m just trying to spare you and Erin. I know you love her, Dean.”

Dean gave him a caustic look. It was getting annoying that everyone kept throwing around the notion that he was in love with Erin like it was casual knowledge. “Yeah, well don’t,” he said in a gruff voice. “Even if it wasn’t about you using your psychic crap, I wouldn’t let you do it.” He pointed in the direction of the basement. “Me and Erin, we’ve been on both sides of that fence and it’s not pretty trust me. You do not want to go there. I don’t want you finding out what that’s like and neither would Erin.”

“Then what? You can’t do it. You don’t want me to do it. So, we just let her stay down there until she gets loose with Ahriman inside her or she goes crazy? We forget about the seals he knows about? Cass already said you can’t undo what’s been done. Erin’s totally screwed,” Sam argued, irritated with his brother.
“I don’t know, Sam. Okay? But you’re not stepping foot down there. You hear me?” Dean growled.

Sam shook his head. “Yeah. I hear you,” he said recalcitrant and perturbed.

Cass spoke up again, “Dean, you know what we’re all fighting for and dying for. What Erin is giving her life for. You know what will happen if we fail.”

Dean licked his lips and shut his eyes again in torment. He knew Cass was right. They had to know about the seals. They couldn’t risk Lucifer getting out of his cage. Erin was bound body and soul to Ahriman. If she wasn’t killed and destroyed, they would have a monster on their hands that was as bad as Lucifer. It had to be done. They couldn’t fail a second time. But Dean just couldn’t.

Ruby, who had been silent up until then, put her two cents worth in. “I have a solution.” They all turned to look at her dubiously. “Why don’t I do it?”

Dean flipped like a switch from open but controlled anger at his brother to cold venom. “You’re not touching her.”

“Why not? Then you don’t have to butcher your girlfriend and Sam doesn’t use his mojo. We get the information we need and Erin gets put out of her misery,” Ruby countered. Dean paced toward her menacingly.

“Why not? Because you’d like it. You’ve had it out for her since the moment you laid eyes on her.”

Ruby scoffed. “I think you’ve got that backwards. I’m the one she’s been giving hell.”

Dean kept advancing on her until he was so close Ruby could feel his breath on her face. “You touch her and I’ll kill you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, here’s a news flash for ya. Erin asked me to make sure you got the job done. It was her dying wish. So how’s that float your boat, hotshot?”

“Oh, you evil bitch,” Dean seethed, his eyes flashing with rage. Before any of them could move, he cocked his arm back and punched her square in the face. Ruby hit the ground spread eagle, blood pouring from her nose. Dean was right on top of her, sending a kitchen chair clattering to the floor, intent on beating her to a pulp.

“Dean!” Sam cried and grabbed him by one arm. Cass grabbed the other and together they managed to haul Dean away from Ruby.

Cass glared at the demon, still on the floor, half up, trying to get away from Dean and nursing her wounded nose. “She’s telling the truth. Erin did ask her to make sure we secured the information about the seals, and destroyed Ahriman.”

Dean snarled in inept fury, but he subsided from his attack on Ruby. Angrily he wrenched from Sam and Cass’s hold and paced the room. He ran his hands through his hair and looked up as if calling on a higher power to help him. They watched him, while Sam helped Ruby up and handed her a paper towel for her nosebleed. Dean gritted his teeth and shook with the revulsion of what he was going to do.

“I’ll do it,” he said pitifully.

“Dean, are you sure?” Sam asked, leaving Ruby to tend herself. Ruby shot him a dark look for abandoning her in favor of the guy who’d punched her.
“Erin asked me to do it. If she can give her life for this, the least I can do is make sure it means something,” Dean admitted. Then he whispered, his eyes wet again and looking at Cass and Sam, “How the hell’d we wind up like this?”

Cass frowned deeply in sadness and Sam looked gut-punched with empathy. Ruby didn’t have to hide her grin for once, since it was hidden behind the paper towel clamped to her still bleeding nose. The words of the prophecy running through her head in triumph. As two shall bend so shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces.

###

Dean descended the stairs like he was walking the Green Mile. Every step echoed in the concrete emptiness of the basement. Erin and Christian hadn’t kept much down here. There was a washer and dryer with a counter for laundry on a far sidewall and on the wall adjacent to the stairs, shelves of neatly stacked and labeled boxes. The rest of the room was empty.

Toward the back wall, was the huge iron Star of David rack with its iron chain pentacle in the center, that Dean had once tortured Alistair on. It sat atop the Old Enochian Devil’s trap Cass had painstakingly drawn in white. Erin was chained to it. Her arms were stretched out over the first horizontal points, wrapped with a continuous length of iron chain. The chain draped from her arms to cross over her abdomen and down to her ankles, which were shackled with iron. Her feet were bare and she wore only her t-shirt and jeans. She panted rapidly, sweat filmed her skin and her head hung.

In front of the trap and the rack sat a rolling cart covered with a heavy cloth. Underneath the cloth lay all the instruments of torture that Dean would need. He knew, intimately, what every piece would be. He had used them on Alastair. Holy water and salt. Scalpels and knives. Particularly Ruby’s demon-slaying knife. The ornately worked crystal vial that would hold Erin’s soul. A hammer and other, less intimidating tools to be used on Ahriman. And Erin. Some of the implements someone who wasn’t acquainted with torture would find hard to imagine could be used to maim and injure. Dean knew how. He wished he didn’t but Dean knew. He hoped there was a large bottle of whiskey on the cart, too.

Dean made his last step deliberately slap on the floor. His face was schooled in a hard, cold visage he didn’t feel, every muscle tight as whipcord. Dean looked every inch a cold-blooded murderer. Erin lifted her head and looked at him through the curtain of her hair. It only took one glance to know it was still Trajan who had control.

Erin’s head lifted arrogantly and tilted, considering Dean. A slow, sadistic smile spread over her face. One that deformed Erin’s mouth in a way Dean had never seen, not even when she’d been coldly sparring with Cass or fighting Ahriman. That smile belonged to Trajan alone.

Dean ignored the smile and pulled the cloth off the cart as he reached it, revealing the multitude of instruments that cluttered its surface. He refused to look at Erin. It was a torture technique to ignore your subject as if they were chattel but at the same time, he couldn’t handle looking at her face while he prepared to rip her to shreds, no matter who was speaking with her voice. He couldn’t let Trajan see him falter.

“And here I thought the angel--if he really is an angel--would be doing the torturing. But no, he sends a mortal to do it. Fool. I was a master of torture before your oldest forbearers huddled around a fire wearing animal skins like savages,” Trajan said in amused voice.
Dean didn’t look at him. He picked up a jug of holy water with a rosary floating in it. “Maybe,”
Dean said with deliberate ease, “but you’ve been a quickening stuffed in a box in Erin’s head for
fifteen hundred years. I’m betting you’re a bit rusty.”

“How old are you, boy? Twenty five? Maybe thirty? I tortured for centuries. There’s nothing you
can do, I haven’t done better,” Trajan said prideful.

Dean filled an iron chalice on the cart to the brim with the holy water from the jug and sat it back
down. “Oh, don’t count on that. I apprenticed under someone who would make you look like a
saint.”

“And who, my dear boy, might that be? There is no one better than I am. None who tortured for
hundreds of years. I can make torture an art form, you pathetic waste of skin,” Trajan taunted.

Dean slid his jacket off and folded it neatly before placing it on a lower rung of the cart. “I
apprenticed under a demon named Alistair. In hell. I promise you, he makes you look like a kid
burning ants with a magnifying glass.”

Trajan laughed. “Angels and demons. How ludicrous. You are all deluded. The only Gods in
existence are Immortals. Caesar should have thrown all of you Christians to the lions long ago.
Éireann was Christian, before I cut it out of her.”

Dean’s shoulders tensed at the mention of Erin’s birth name. He tried to play it off, toying with the
instruments on the table languidly for effect. But Trajan had seen it.

“It took three hundred years for her to stop begging your vile excuse for a God to save her. She
would spend hours on the rack praying until her voice gave out. I assume she kept praying even
then. Your God never answered. Then I was her God,” Trajan said with perverse pleasure.

Dean turned and looked at him, his expression carefully blank. “Not much of a God. She still took
your head.” It was incredibly disturbing when Erin’s head was tossed back in a loud laugh of
genuine humor that didn’t belong to her. The sound was nerve grating and wrong.

“Yes, I suppose she did. She was the best protégé I ever had. Hardest to break, too. Oh, what that
woman could do with a knife,” Trajan said with a pleased and proud shiver.

Dean’s skin crawled. Trajan talked about it as if it were a turn on. For him it probably had been. He
gave Trajan a disgusted look and turned back to the table for the chalice of holy water.

“But before she took my head, I had my way, anyway, anytime, I wanted with her. She was
completely and totally…mine,” Trajan said, the words rolling off his tongue with such profane
avidity it was impossible for Dean to mistake what Trajan meant.

Dean squeezed his eyes shut as his stomach rolled with nausea, his hand tightening on the chalice
until his knuckles turned white. He hadn’t thought about the fact that torture of a woman might have
included rape. He sucked in a breath through his nose trying to calm the conflicted wave of emotion
that washed over him. He wanted to rip Trajan apart with his bare hands then and there, but it was
Erin’s body he was in. With his free hand Dean unscrewed the cap on a bottle of whiskey that had
been placed on the cart. Thank you Cass, he thought with gratitude. Then, he turned the bottle back
on his lips taking a large swallow before setting it back down.

Erin. Oh God, he thought. It struck him then that for fifteen hundred years she’d had Trajan trapped
in her head, dormant. Now he was awake and kicking and in complete control of her body. What
had Trajan done to gain that control? It was vile and sickening. This was as much rape by another
name as any physical rape.

Dean’s grip on the chalice continued to tighten until the vessel shook and holy water splashed over the rim onto the tray.

“She was never yours,” Dean seethed.

He wanted Trajan out of control of Erin. Now. He couldn’t stand the idea of that monster having control of her body for another second, violating her. But, despite his best attempts at control, Dean’s fury showed in the flash of his eyes, the way his head was cocked as he turned back to Trajan, the chalice in hand.

Trajan looked at him through Erin’s eyes and smiled broadly. “Ah, I see. You think she’s yours,” he said with startled realization. “My little bird found another mortal to warm her bed and a torturer too! My influence, I’m sure. Éireann always was fond of you sad little creatures. It made her incredibly easy to capture, wailing and sobbing over her mortal lover.”

Dean closed the distance between them. Trajan kept talking.

“You’ve touched her. You’ve had this body. You’ve been inside it, even as I am now. A consummate little whore isn’t she? Taught her everything she knows.”

Dean looked down his nose at Erin and stopped seeing her face and saw only Trajan. His mind was torn, he didn’t know if she knew what was going on, if she could feel it but, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Trajan had to go. Both because Dean needed information out of Ahriman, not him, and because Trajan was a desecrating presence in control of her body. He didn’t think Erin would fault him for the latter.

“All Erin ever learned from you was how to destroy. You might be inside her now but gimme a minute. You won’t be,” Dean growled. Then, his eyes softening in grief, he said, “Erin, if you can hear me. Forgive me.”

Then he poured the holy water in a sheet over Erin’s face. The skin smoked and sizzled. Trajan screamed. When he’d stopped sputtering and gasping, Dean got in close, almost touching Erin, his head hovering a breath away from her ear. Trajan was panting with pain already though the holy water had left no mark on Erin’s skin.

“Hurts doesn’t it?” Dean whispered. “That weakness you’re feeling? That’s because you’re bound with iron chains. The burning acid sensation from the water? It’s holy water. Want to know why those hurt so friggin’ much?”

Erin’s head turned and Trajan glared at him. Dean bent so he was nose to nose with him. “It’s because there’s a demon locked in there with you. It’s him I want to talk to.”

Trajan gave a weak grin but Dean could already tell Trajan was unsettled by what he’d said.

“You’re a lunatic. That’s why you want to torture me? Pardon me, Erin—that what she’s using now? You think she’s possessed?” Trajan laughed. He choked on the sound.

“Don’t believe me?” Dean asked never moving. “Didn’t it feel different to you in there? Didn’t something feel off when you forced your way into her soul and took control?”

Erin’s throat swallowed and her eyes widened. Trajan’s expression was wary and worried.

“That was a demon. And the guy who punched you out? He really is an angel. See, you got it
wrong. Immortals aren’t Gods. They’re just one more pawn in God’s Nintendo game and the demon knocking around in there with you? He’s fused to Erin’s soul. So, either you can call it quits and run back to the box you’re supposed to be in or I can shove you back in.”

“You wouldn’t dare. You would have to harm this body. Cause Erin pain,” Trajan hissed.

“Erin’s already dead. She knew that from the moment she agreed to do this. So, you know what? You might have bent and twisted her but you never broke her. Because she gave her life so the demon you’re playing house with could be killed. No matter what you did to her, she still killed you and for fifteen hundred years, she’s been trying to redeem herself. She’s one of the good guys. You lost,” Dean said with grim satisfaction as he stepped away from rack and went to refill the chalice. The iron chains rattled faintly as Trajan jerked Erin’s limbs weakly against them in fury.

“That’s the way of it then? A Greek tragedy of star crossed lovers. Boy finds girl, girl finds boy, girl becomes a martyr at hands of boy to save the world. Ah, love. Such a dreadful bond and yet, so easily severed,” Trajan rasped, ever petulant.

Dean clenched his teeth. That had hurt. It cut close to the bone. Gritting his teeth until his jaw hurt Dean poured the chalice full again and marched back to the rack. He flung the chalice of holy water on Erin’s face and watched Trajan scream in pain.

“Severe this you son of a bitch. How does it feel now that you’re the one on the rack?” Dean growled.

###

Sam winced as the first screams echoed up from the basement, reverberating around the kitchen like the wails of a tormented ghost. Dean hadn’t been down there long, maybe fifteen minutes. The pained howls curdled Sam’s blood and made his stomach turn.

Castiel was as still as stone, propped with his back against the kitchen table looking off into the middle distance, his hands in his coat pockets and his face set in an expression of deep disturbance.

Ruby was watching Sam and Cass carefully. Now was the most important and dangerous point in her scheme. The last leg home. If any of them managed to figure out they had even a breath of a chance left, Ruby’s carefully constructed deception would fall apart like ash. The sound of another tortured scream filled the room and Sam shivered.

“Where’s the whiskey?” he asked of no one, crossing the room and rummaging through the cabinets for a bottle. He took down the first one he found, and hastily filled a glass, taking a large swallow.

“No! Stop! Please!” came a gruff plea for mercy from below. The voice was rough and warped. Erin’s but not Erin’s.

Cass didn’t move but his voice filled the space between screams. “It’s not her. Not really,” Cass said sagely again but his voice was hollow and Sam knew Cass didn’t even buy what he was saying.

“I know. It’s just…Erin’s already giving her life for this, to add this on top of it…it just doesn’t seem fair. And Dean, this is going to tear him apart,” Sam said and poured another measure into the glass. He looked at Cass whose eyes were on the floor. Sam pulled down another glass and filled it, holding it out to the bereaved angel.
“It must be done,” Cass excused with an empty tone but he didn’t take the offered glass. Sam sat it down next to him just in case.

Yet another shriek pierced the air and Sam flinched in sympathy for both Erin and Dean down there. Both caught in their own hell.

“Giving your life for something, that’s one thing, but this?” Sam said looking at Cass despondent. Ruby rubbed his arm consolingly but Sam didn’t seem to notice. Cass was staring at the floor again, his brow furrowed in thought. A yell rang out again and Sam had had enough.

“I can’t do this. I just—I need some air. I’m going to take care of Christian. At least I can do that,” Sam said setting his empty glass down and turning on his heel.

“Sam,” Cass called after him but the younger Winchester had traversed the space to the back doors that lead out to the beach beyond, where Christian’s body waited for its final rites, in a handful of strides with his long legs.

“I’ll help,” Ruby said and hurried after him. She wasn’t willing to allow Sam to be alone to think. The boy had an uncanny knack for figuring out things at the most inopportune moment, she wanted to be sure she kept him off the track until this was over.

Castiel lifted his head and watched them go, his eyes bright and fiercely pensive.

###

Erin fought like a wild animal. Trajan had torn through her like she was nothing, overwhelming her and sending her reeling into a black abyss. He was beyond her ability to wound but the other shadowed figures came on his heels trying to force their way in while Ahriman tried to force his way out. The midnight and cobalt blues that had been the walls of her mind were now pitch black, black smoke roiled around her ankles and the white apparitions stood like marble statues. Never speaking, never moving, on the fringes.

It was like Erin was fighting the worst bar brawl of her life, alone. Every time one of the shadowed wraiths came for her she fought it tooth and nail, clawing at it until it receded to lick its wounds. But another always took its place. Inside her, she felt Ahriman scrap and tear, trying to rip his way out and she fought him too, stubbornly refusing to give in.

Erin wasn’t even sure why she kept fighting. It wasn’t something she chose to do consciously, it was instinct, an ingrained part of her psyche. An Immortal did not stop fighting. Something came at you, you fought it until either you won or it took you down. Never lay down your sword.

She felt it when Dean poured holy water over her face but it wasn’t something she could point at and say, “this is what happened”. It was more a sudden wave of pain that burned through her. She faltered each time it happened, giving the dark figures another inch of ground, giving Ahriman one more finger hold in his frenzied and enraged battle inside her. Another spasm of pain hit her, different this time, like sand stuck to skin she didn’t have and burning its way in. Erin staggered and one of the dark forms tried to seize her. Ahriman caught her in a stranglehold and Erin almost crumbled to her knees.

“Dean! Cass! Sam! Somebody help me!” she cried out uselessly. She knew they couldn’t hear her, that even if they could there was nothing they could do. She’d chosen her path and there was no way
Somewhere far away, like a whisper heard from a great distance amid the murmurs of a thousand other voices Erin heard, “Come on, Ahriman. I know you’re in there. Get out here you coward. I want to talk to you.” She faintly recognized it as Dean’s voice.

Pain wracked her again and Erin flailed at the evil that tried to take advantage of it. Ahriman’s hold tightened, and she bucked against it. Then, she stopped. Why was she fighting? It was counterproductive. Dean needed to find out about the seals, Erin was exhausted to the point of collapse and the pain was only getting worse. Fighting to keep Ahriman and the others at bay only prolonged it.

Erin gave in and felt herself sink into a red wave of heat and pain as Ahriman roared triumphant. The shadowed ghosts of the evil Immortals seemed attracted to her surrender like flies to a rotting corpse. They converged on her en mass and Erin lost herself amid the darkness. Letting them consume her. All she saw was blood and shadow. *Let it be over soon,* she thought, as they tore everything she was apart like wolves on fallen prey.

###

“No! Stop! Please!” Trajan begged in Erin’s mutated, hoarse voice. Dean hadn’t gone beyond holy water and salt applied creatively and Trajan had been reduced to a begging and pleading heap strapped to the rack.

“I wonder, how many times did Erin beg for you to stop?” Dean said through clenched teeth. Erin’s form hung limp and exhausted on the rack, but no blood ran. Dean hadn’t even gone as far as he would have with a simple demon possession. No knives, no exorcism chants. That was what being apprenticed, forcefully, under the Master Torturer of Hell did for you. “You want it to stop? Then, go away.”

“I cannot,” Trajan panted.

“You’re lying,” Dean said with a hard-edged voice, approaching with the eyedropper full of holy water again.

“No. I’m not,” Trajan insisted desperately, head held back in fear of Dean and the eyedropper. Dean raised the dropper, ignoring Trajan’s pleas.

“By all the Gods, don’t. I am not lying. I swear!”

“Sorry, your Gods aren’t answering,” Dean hissed viciously, turning Trajan’s own words back on him. It was funny how religious a person got when they were being tortured. Suddenly they wanted a higher power to save them.

Dean had wrapped his anger and hatred around him, using it like a barrier between him and the screaming anguish that begged to be let free inside him. It was Trajan he tortured but it was Erin’s body and for all Trajan’s control of it, there were moments when Dean saw only her and the pain he was causing.

“Please! I will do anything. I can’t go back, there is nothing there. Please, believe me,” Trajan beseeched him with such fervor Dean stopped. He stepped back a pace and took a good hard look at
Trajan, hiding behind Erin’s eyes.

He didn’t think Trajan was lying. Trajan wasn’t a demon, he was loose as the result of a Dark Quickening. He didn’t have the same motivation to lie a demon would. There was no reason for him to hang on to his control of Erin if he’d had enough, nothing to be gained.

“I believe you,” Dean said slowly. “So what? You’re stuck?”

“I have no idea. There is just darkness. I let go and nothing happens,” Trajan said in a beaten tone.

Dean hid it well, but something deep within him twisted. Just darkness? The ring made Erin virtually mortal. What did Trajan’s implication mean?

Dean stepped away and fetched the hypodermic needle, contemplating it. He filled the needle and decided if Trajan couldn’t let go, maybe calling Ahriman out would wrench him loose. “Come on, Ahriman. I know you’re in there. Get out here you coward. I want to talk to you,” Dean demanded, returning to the rack.

Trajan, looked at the needle in abject fear, then Erin’s eyes went wide and he began babbling. “What? No! No!” Then he wailed like a dying thing and Erin’s neck twisted in grotesquely unnatural way. When her head readjusted itself, her eyes were red as fresh blood. Apparently Dean’s prodding had worked.

Erin’s body shook in silent, disquieting laughter. It built until it was an ominous sound and there was no mistaking who it was. Dean’s facial muscles twitched with contempt and anger. At the demon, at fate, at God, at the circumstance, at himself. He hated this. It twisted his very soul. He would have to start the torture anew and pray Erin didn’t know what was going on.

Erin’s eyes flipped to normal and her mouth turned up in the same arrogant smile Dean had seen on Christian’s face. “Oh my, isn’t this an interesting predicament,” he mused in a feigned tone of nonchalance, shifting Erin about in the chains as much as they would allow and taking in his situation.

“I wouldn’t be so smug if I were you,” Dean said. Ahriman lifted Erin’s head and looked back at Dean, none of his conceit ebbing. But, it was obvious he was weakened. Erin’s body still looked exhausted and pulled thin. None of the previously inflicted harm resolved itself and the slow way Ahriman moved her body proved he felt it.

“I see you’ve been working already. I must say, I was expecting more from Alistair’s beloved protégé but there’s not even any blood. What? Afraid to hurt your delicate little flower here? Oh, yes. I forgot. You can’t kill me,” Ahriman taunted.

Dean gave him a smug smile. “Are you sure about that? The only reason we couldn’t gank you before was because you were lucky enough to find an Immortal who had a Dark Quickening. You could never have possessed one any other way. Them being half angel it would kinda kick your ass if you tried. But the dagger you so arrogantly ignored and that ring,” Dean said motioning his head in the direction of Erin’s right hand, “they changed all that. You can’t leave of your own free will. The ring bound you to Erin’s soul and cut her off from her angel juice so you’re no better than a crossroads demon wearing a mortal human.”

Ahriman sidestepped Dean’s statement, trying to appear calm and collected, and sighed in a put upon manner. “What is all this anyway?”

“A little bird tells me you know something about the sixty six seals. That you know which one Lilith
will break next,” Dean said cutting to the chase, rolling the hypodermic needle in his hand and holding it up to the light as if inspecting it. Ahriman followed it trying to hide his wariness.

“Now why would I care what that whore Lilith is doing with the seals?” Ahriman scoffed, but he kept Erin’s eyes on the needle.

“I don’t know and I don’t care but I’ve got it on good authority from angels and demons that you know. So, you’ve got one chance. One. Which seal is Lilith going after next?” Dean said with deliberate cold, calm and disdain.

Ahriman laughed again, a halting, choking sound. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh should I? This is very emotional for you I imagine. What with Erin being my meat suit. But it’s just so ironic. If Erin’s as good as mortal you can’t hurt me, without killing her.”

“Erin’s as good as dead anyway. She signed her own death warrant the moment she put on that ring,” Dean said.

“Oh, the tragic martyr and her lover. You trying to die to save her, her dying to save you. It’s all so poetic. I told her, her sentimentality was going to get her killed,” Ahriman said dreamily. “But really, you’re willing to torture and kill Erin? So much for love. Or was she just a good time Dean? Another notch on your belt? Can’t say as I blame you. This body is exceedingly attractive and it’s so warm and soft in here. But you already know that,” Ahriman dug. Dean gave him a dark look. Ahriman grinned.

“I’d stop gloating you demonic bastard. What the ring did can’t be undone. She dies, you die,” Dean said tightly. He was standing directly in front of the rack now, within easy reach of Erin’s body.

“So, you’re really going to do it? Kill your precious little pet Immortal? Oh Dean, how traitorous of you,” Ahriman mocked. Dean clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. Ahriman tilted Erin’s head, and grinned knowingly.

“Or maybe, you’re hoping somehow that angel on your shoulder will swoop in and save you from having to kill your little darling. Maybe you’re even praying for God to give you a little help? Hm? Maybe you’re scared to make that first cut.”

“I’m here aren’t I?” Dean threw back.

Ahriman clicked Erin’s tongue. “Yes, you are. All the trust and faith Erin put in you and you’re going to rip her apart. Can’t trust anyone these days can you?” Ahriman gouged a little deeper.

Dean glared back at him with hatred. “Erin trusts me to do what needs to be done. She asked me to do it. Now, answer the question. Which seal?”

“You humans and your hero complexes. Always sacrificing yourselves for one cause or another. What, you think I’m going to see all your sharp little toys and your fake bravado and spill my guts?” Ahriman said in scornful exasperation.

“Oh you’ll spill your guts one way or another.” Dean promised, edging the needle under Erin’s nose. Ahriman glanced at it and Dean saw the tiny spark of fear it induced then he shrugged Erin’s shoulders.

“Actually I’ll spill Erin’s guts. Go ahead, work me over. But why should I tell you anything? What’s in it for me? I tell you I die. I don’t tell you I still die.”

“I wouldn’t worry about dying. What you should be worried about is what happens to you before
you die,” Dean growled.

“And to Erin. We musn’t forget that,” Ahriman said. Dean shook with anger and revulsion. He knew the demon was pushing his buttons looking for a response. Dean wouldn’t let him see he’d pushed the right ones.

“Well, come on let’s get started. Throw the first stone Dean. But I’ll go ahead and tell you I have no idea what seal Lilith is going to break next,” Ahriman said.

“Right,” Dean said sarcastically and moved to push the needle into Erin’s arm.

Ahriman laughed raucously just before the needle pierced flesh. “This is going to be so much fun.” Then he began howling in pain as holy water pumped through Erin’s veins. Dean swallowed and looked away.

###

There was nothing but a haze of darkness. The blue-white lightning blazed blood red, threading through the thick shadow like angry questing fingers. There was nothing but pain left in the abyss of Erin’s mind. Bodies writhed, twisting and turning like a bed of vipers as they tore and ripped, clawed and rent, what little was left of Erin’s soul. The shadows were so pervasive that the unmoving, unspeaking pure white figures were cast into blackness.

Erin no longer cared. She wanted it to be over. She had ceased to hold onto even the shred of survival instinct left to her. Erin had given in and given up. She had given all there was left to give and now, there was nothing left. She was nothing. She lay like a wounded animal waiting for death. Screaming as the darkened souls feasted on her and tried to invade her. It was pointless for them, she knew. There wasn’t enough left to invade or to control. She didn’t fight them. She gave no protest. Ahriman had control now. They could not win.

Convulsing in excruciating pain, she burned from the inside out, consumed by invisible flames. She felt every slice and cut as Dean quested for the answer he and the others needed. Blind with the agony, she no longer had even the strength to wish for oblivion. Erin had succumbed completely.

###

Castiel stood, his arms braced on the kitchen table, with his head down. The screams from the basement were never ending now, blending into one continuous cacophony of misery and torment. The angel’s face was drawn in anguish. This was painful for him and to his surprise, he felt dampness on his lashes. He had vowed he wouldn’t let Erin stand alone again. That this time, he would be there. But what was he doing? What were they all doing but letting her languish in torment and agony? Letting her stand alone? Castiel had grown surprisingly close to Erin. She was kin… family. And he’d failed her.

He looked out through the kitchen, past the entrance to the salle, to the back glass doors. Sam and Ruby worked in the fading sunlight, piling wood together for a pyre. Neither looked enthusiastic about their task. Sam had thrown himself into it, hacking through tree thick branches and thin tree
trunks with an axe, like a man possessed. Ruby looked tense and apprehensive as she pulled what Sam chopped into a workable pile. Christian’s body, his head aligned with his neck so it appeared he was whole, lay wrapped tightly in a white sheet, awaiting his last rites.

His mind drifted to Anna’s warnings. She must say yes. I mean she has to really say yes to being God’s weapon, not just consent to go along with the plan. Castiel sighed in remorseful resignation. He had been thinking, deeply about what Sam had said. What he had said. What Dean had said. What Erin had said. What Ruby had said. All of them at one point or another in the last few hours had voiced it. Erin is giving her life for this.

It was such a peculiar phrase when he thought about it. Wasn’t she giving her death? Shouldn’t they have been saying, Erin is dying for this? Again all their words, all his thoughts echoed in his mind. She must say yes. I mean she has to really say yes to being God’s weapon, not just consent to go along with the plan. Erin is giving her life for this. Erin is dying for this.

Castiel gripped the table’s edge in powerful hands, the wood squealing and cracking beneath them. The words ran faster, cycling like a never-ending litany, his mind looking for something he couldn’t quite find in them. The words stopped and Castiel felt a shaft of knowing so profound strike him, his vessel’s knees almost buckled from it.

The angel cast his gaze down the stairs toward the basement. His eyes burned bright and fierce. Castiel whipped out one of the chairs, pointed it toward the stairway, and then sat down in it. It was a peculiarly human gesture. It wasn’t as if his vessel wouldn’t stay immobile and standing if he chose for it to. The angel focused, his pupils contracting, making the irises stand out. Castiel had absolute conviction now. He left the room behind and saw only his goal.

Erin isn’t the only one who has to have faith Cass. So do you, all of you.

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Erin’s body thrashed on the rack. The chains rattled like discordant bells. Her skin was pallid and sweat drenched. Her eyes were deeply shadowed and sunken. Where perspiration hadn’t sluiced it away, blood clung, sticky, to her clothes and her flesh. Dean was not being gentle or roundabout with this. He wanted the information he sought and he wanted it now. The faster this was done with the faster Erin would cease to suffer. An end to her misery brought Dean no comfort. He had been down here, cutting and slicing for hours and still Ahriman would not break. He laughed in Dean’s face and taunted him always insisting he didn’t know what Dean wanted to know.

Ahriman howled again. Dean, pulled the holy water treated demon killing knife from between Erin’s ribs and tried not to look as blood poured from the wound. Another of many he’d already inflicted. Ahriman turned Erin’s head and spit a mouth full of blood.

“This is rich. You just won’t believe will you? How many times do I have to tell you I don’t know before you get it through that thick skull of yours?” Ahriman said in amusement.

“Oh, you know. So why don’t you just make this easy for both of us and tell me what seal Lilith is going to break next? Because I’ve got plenty more where this came from,” Dean growled holding up the knife as he poured holy water over the blade with a ladle.

“How do you know? Because the halo upstairs told you? Or that backstabbing demon bitch? How are they so sure I know which seal Lilith will break next? How do you know they aren’t lying?”
Ahriman poked at Dean.

Dean poured salt over the holy water moistened blade and shook his head with a snort. “Nice try. Ruby, I believe she’d do anything. She’s a demon. But Cass. Cass doesn’t lie. You on the other hand,” he said pacing back with deliberate slowness.

“Are you certain? Sure, demons lie. But they also tell the truth when it serves them. You know that Dean. What if you’re wrong and the heavenly host in a trench coat isn’t lying. Maybe he’s just got bad intel. Ever think about that? Maybe somebody, demons, angels, religious fanatics—God knows everybody wants me dead—wanted you to think that?” Ahriman pushed.

Dean ignored him and drove the knife blade into the other side of Erin’s abdomen. Ahriman shrieked in pain.

“No!”

“Which seal Ahriman?” Dean asked again.

“I don’t know, you blind sheep!” Ahriman wailed.

Dean twisted the knife. “Tell me.”

“Stupid, blind pawns all of you. You. That damnable angel. Erin. All good little soldiers. Never questioning your sanctimonious drabble. And oh, the things you’re willing to do, to sacrifice to prove you’re righteousness. Oblivious to what’s right in front of you. Hell doesn’t need to manipulate you to get what they want. You do it to yourselves. You’ll even tear those closest to you apart. How many Dean? How many have you fed to the wolves to win? No price too high?” Ahriman snarled.

“You can’t stall forever. Which seal?” Dean bit, ignoring that stab at his convictions, at all of them. Dean wrenched the dagger out and plunged it back in. Ahriman yelled. The inarticulate cry ripped from Erin’s throat as her body writhed in the chains in agony. Her head hung and Ahriman gasped in quick ragged breaths. Dean lifted her head and Ahriman started laughing manically, blood staining Erin’s teeth.

“This is really sad. Sad. Sad. Sad. Is nothing sacred to you anymore? Hm, Dean? Just rip the woman who loves you into pieces without even blinking. All for something you have no proof of. You’re going to kill me. What reason do I have left to lie? I really don’t know about the seals,” Ahriman said in great bemusement.

Dean flinched and withdrew the blade, trembling with torn emotions. Ahriman didn’t miss the torment that glanced over Dean’s face. He seized it like a starving dog upon rotten meat.

“Oh, yes, Dean. She really does love you. Rare commodity that. Erin doesn’t love just anyone, but you, you she fell for,” Ahriman taunted going for Dean’s throat, as it were.

Dean turned his back and squeezed his eyes shut, covering the mist of grief stricken tears by returning to the table to prep another torture instrument. Eyes hazy with wetness he picked up the leather funnel and a flask full of salt.

“You don’t know how bad it really is. The torture, that’s bad enough. But mental anguish on top of it all? Oh, that is cruel Dean. You know she’s awake in here. She can feel every single slice, every drop of holy water, every grain of salt. Like the song says, ‘Love hurts’,” Ahriman kept stabbing, unwilling to let go of the bone once he had it. If he was going to die he was going to take as much of Erin Morgan and Dean Winchester with him as he could.
Dean snarled, his voice dangerously low with anger at everything and made rough by his own grief. It was one thing to know Erin had fallen in love with him, it was something else to have someone, a demon no less, confirm it for him and then throw it in his face. “Shut up,” he growled filling the funnel.

Ahriman kept going, refusing to stop now that he had a claw in Dean. “What makes this all so much fun...is you’re doing all of this to the woman who loves you....for nothing.”

“Okay, then I’ll just make you shut up,” Dean said his voice dripping with hate. He wrenched back Erin’s head and forced the funnel into her mouth, the salt pouring in like sand from a broken hourglass. Ahriman howled ten times worse than he had before, choking and gagging. Dean let go viciously. Ahriman coughed and wretched, vomiting salt, blood, and tissue but somehow he managed to laugh again like a rusty weathervane.

“Erin’s a broken and bleeding mess in here. The minute you sliced into this weeping bitch’s meat suit she crumbled like a stack of off balance Jenga blocks. She wanted this to stop hours ago. And you’ve done all of it for nothing, because I don’t know about your precious seals. I never did.”

“You’re lying!” Dean snarled.

“Oh, trust me I wouldn’t lie about this. This is my bread and butter Dean. What I live for. Nothing better than some hurt to feed my proclivities and it’s just so much better when it’s all real. Don’t believe me? Allow me to give you a demonstration,” Ahriman insisted. Erin’s form relaxed and Dean backed up warily. Terrified of what he suspected Ahriman had done.

Erin started crying, gut wrenching sounds of anguish and pain so deep Dean didn’t think he could ever hear them. He’d hear them in his nightmares forever. She lifted her head and looked at him brokenly, tears rolling down her cheeks like rivers.

“Please, Dean. Stop. I don’t care if Ahriman knows about the seals anymore. Please. I can’t take it anymore. It hurts so much. Please,” Erin’s voice pleaded. Dean felt his heart clench so tightly it hurt.

“Erin?” he breathed full of guilt and grief.

“Please, Dean. Let me go. I can’t do this anymore. Please, no more. I’m begging you. Please stop!” Erin’s voice begged him piteously. Dean wavered. It could be a trick but that was Erin’s voice, her eyes.

“Dean please!” Erin’s voice beseeched him again. Dean broke. He couldn’t take the chance it wasn’t really Erin. Not with her eyes looking back at him full of such pain. He bolted to the rack and started trying to undo the tedious work Castiel had wrought in stringing Erin up.

“I am so sorry Erin,” Dean apologized fervently. Erin laid her head on his chest, limp as a rung rag and sobbed. Dean wanted to die.

“Just hold on. It’s over. I swear,” Dean promised.

He had almost figured out the configuration Cass had used, when Erin’s soul tearing sobs broke back into Ahriman’s laughter and her head raised, face still wet with tears to give him the most sadistic smirk Dean had ever seen on anyone save Alistair. Her eyes snicked to Ahriman’s crimson red and he chuckled.

“Just kidding,” Ahriman cackled. Dean stumbled back in confused anguish for a split second. Then rage took over completely.
“You son of a bitch!” Dean railed.

“Sorry, couldn’t give you a presentation of your dolly bell because it’s so much worse than ‘broken and bleeding’ in here. Even if you could figure out a way to save her, it’s too late. She gave up. There’s nothing to save. All thanks to you. I have to hand it to you Dean. I understand what Alistair saw in you. You managed to do what Trajan couldn't in three hundred years. You broke her utterly and completely. There’s nothing left. Erin is gone. And you did it all for nothing,” Ahriman shoved the bullet home, laughing wildly in pleasure.

Dean reeled, tears of abject horror and profound grief in his eyes. He knew in his gut, down to his soul, that the demon was telling the absolute truth. He had been the entire time. Dean couldn’t take it, not any more, this had to end. He spun on his heel and snatched a machete off the cart along with the crystal vial. Flipping the hinged top open and spinning back almost in one fluid movement. He couldn’t do this anymore.

“This ends now,” Dean said with broken conviction. It was the only thing left he could do. The only mercy he could show Erin. He could end her life and give her the only peace she was ever going to know. Destruction. Dean lifted the machete and prepared to swing. In the distance, faint as a whisper, so soft it didn’t pierce the veil of absolute torment Dean had fallen into, Sam’s voice called out fervently. “Dean!”

###

Sam heaved the last log into place on the pyre by the glow of the floodlights attached to the back doors. The sun had fallen below the horizon only moments before, sending them into twilight. The Florida humidity combined with the heavy labor he was doing had made his sweaty clothing stick to him, even in April. So, he had stripped to the waist in an attempt to keep cool, his hunting toned muscles straining with his work, a light sheen of sweat on his skin. The anti-possession tattoo beneath his left collarbone stood out in stark black contrast to his tanned body.

Sam paused a moment and looked at the pyre ready to receive Christian’s body. Despite his manual labor, Sam’s mind and his ears hadn’t turned off. All he could think about was, soon he and Dean would be building another pyre just like this one for Erin. It was underscored by the muffled but still very audible sounds of Erin’s twisted screams. The prophecy ran through his head like a chant, looking for where they had gone wrong in an attempt to ease the guilt he felt over all this. None of it seemed fair.

“It’s not fair. None of it is,” Sam said picking up the flannel shirt he’d hung over the stair railing that led to the roof. He wiped his dirt-smudged hands off and then used it as a towel to remove what sweat he could. It didn’t seem right to finish this half clothed.

“Life’s not fair, Sam. I know you feel bad about this but there’s nothing we can do about it now,” Ruby consoled him, stepping to his side and rubbing his bare arm affectionately. She smiled at him, her fingers massaging the hardened muscles. “I think I like it when you work half naked,” she teased, biting her lip. And she did. She’d have very much liked to drag Sam back upstairs that moment and have her way with him, feed him demon blood again and watch as he downed the poison like a heroin addict. But the real reason she was being so alluring was to keep Sam from thinking too much. Sam thinking was a dangerous thing until the moment Erin’s head came off.

Sam cut his eyes at her in such a way Ruby’s eyebrows went up and he stepped away from her touch. He hastily picked up his t-shirt and drew it over his head. “Now’s not a real good time, Ruby,” he said moving to heft Christian’s body into his arms.
Ruby relented and reined in her seduction act. Watching as Sam carried the sheet wrapped body to the pyre and placed it on the platform neatly and with care. Once Christian was settled, he returned to scoop up an old turpentine can of salt and a bottle of lighter fluid.

“I know life’s not fair. I just...I get it. All of it. I know how Christian felt. Erin and Dean, they’re like mirrors of each other. This whole thing, it’s like looking at me and my brother from the outside in. Erin wouldn’t let any of us save her, Dean won’t let me spare him torturing Erin. This whole thing is just one huge mess,” Sam said sadly, as he twisted the top off the turpentine can and pushed back the spout on the lighter fluid.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I hope one day Dean gets it. Maybe if Erin had we wouldn’t be here,” Ruby comforted as Sam doused the pyre liberally with the salt and lighter fluid. He came back and stood at her side in front of the pyre.

“Yeah, maybe. But she was just doing what she thought was right. Trying to protect her family. Isn’t that really all that matters?” Sam said as he pulled a lighter out of his pocket. He looked at it a moment. “Think we should say a prayer or something?”

“Oh, demon remember? Not really into commending souls to Heaven. Besides Christian’s soul is stuck in Erin’s head, not like he’s going to a better place,” Ruby pointed out.

“Right.” Sam said. “Still I ought to say something,” he mused, thinking. The prophecy running through his head, tamping down on whatever eloquent words he might have been able to come up with.

“What ever gets you through the night,” Ruby shrugged. Sam flicked the lighter and an orange flame licked to life from the wick.

“Here’s to hoping they can both rest when this is all through,” Sam said and tossed the lighter onto the pyre. It went up in a roaring blaze instantly. Sam stuffed his hands in his pockets and watched the flames burn, his brow furrowed. “I just don’t see why it had to be this way. Why we couldn’t see the signs before it was too late. Me and Dean, we’ve faced down some pretty big fish but this kicked our asses.”

Ruby stood and watched the flames with him, withholding the snide smirk that she wanted to show. *Because I’ve made sure you never had the chance,* she thought. But what she said was, “You can’t buck prophecy, Sam. There’s a natural order to them. Erin chose her path.”

Sam grew very still. “What did you say?” he asked. Ruby repeated her last remark, perplexed by what Sam’s sudden problem was. Sam’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline and his eyes went wide.

“Order! Natural order! That’s what Cass was getting at. Why didn’t I see it before?” Sam said, burying his hands in his hair, sprigs of it sticking out like weeds between his fingers, and pacing in a circle. Ruby felt herself blanch; this was bad for her plans. Really bad.

“What are you talking about? It’s done. It’s over. The prophecy is not negotiable,” Ruby insisted.

Sam grabbed her by both arms in his fervor. “No. No. It is. That’s it. What Cass meant by the order. It wasn’t just what the events meant, it’s the order they happen in. The last line, ‘So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true’. Erin can’t follow any path if she’s dead!”

“Sam, calm down. You’re getting your hopes up over nothing. It also said, ‘As two shall bend so
“shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces’. That’s not something you can survive,” Ruby tried desperately to dissuade him. Sam released his grip on her and shook his head hard.

“I’m not saying I get the whole thing but I’m right. I know I am,” he insisted. Then his head whipped to look in through the doors at the kitchen and beyond it the stairs to the basement. “I’ve gotta tell Dean,” Sam breathed and bolted. Ruby ran hot on his heels still trying to convince him that he was wrong.

Sam barreled through the glass backdoors like a stampeding moose, skidding despite his heavy boots on the kitchen tiling, and came to a flailing halt in front of Castiel. Who was staring vacantly into space.

“Cass!” Sam said to get his attention. The angel didn’t respond. Sam waved his hand in front of Cass’s eyes. The angel didn’t even blink. It was like he wasn’t there.

“Cass!” Sam said and shook him by the arms. He still got no response.

“What’s wrong with him?” Sam asked Ruby worriedly. Ruby threw her hands in the air. She didn’t care what was wrong with Castiel. She was more concerned that Sam had just figured out the one thing she had been trying to keep him from working out.

“I dunno. Looks like he’s in a trance or something. He’s still in there. Lights are on, but nobody’s home,” Ruby excused, then launched back into her attempt to get Sam to stop pursuing the right course of action. “Sam, listen you’re wrong. I know you don’t want to be. I know you really wish you could save Erin. If not for her own sake, for Dean’s, but you can’t.”

Sam gave the angel one last look, convincing himself that Cass was all right, whatever he was doing, and then raced for the stairs, ignoring Ruby’s argument against his sudden enlightenment. Ruby ran after him.

“Dean!” Sam called as loud as he could, pelting down the stairs.
Chapter 22

Sam ran so quickly down the stairs his feet barely touched them. His fingers skimmed the walls enclosing the staircase in an attempt to keep his flying feet from unbalancing him and sending him plummeting down the stairs head first. He was oblivious to a blathering Ruby, right behind him.

“Dean!” Sam yelled again. He got no answer. Sam skipped the last two steps and hit the basement floor in a dead run. What he saw made him falter for an instant. The gore and horror. Blood everywhere. Erin hanging like a scarecrow on the rack, mangled and broken. That made Sam’s stomach knot so tightly he thought he might vomit and he knew he could never unsee it but what made his heart stop was Dean.

His brother had a machete raised above his head, both hands wrapped around the handle and shaking, about to take Erin’s head. Dean swung and Sam moved, slipping on the blood slickened floor in his desperate dash to stop his brother.

“Dean! No!” he yelled. He didn’t think he was going to make it in time. Flinging himself forward, Sam caught Dean’s wrist a hair’s breadth from Erin’s neck. It was all Sam could do to keep Dean’s blow from following through, despite his brother’s smaller size. Dean gaped at his brother in stark surprise.

“Well this is unexpected. A Winchester saving me. Looks like I have something to write home to mom about after all,” Ahriman quipped sarcastically. No one paid him any attention except Ruby who was looking between him and the Winchesters, terrified the demon would compound her problems by revealing they had been cohorts. She cast him a wary glance.

“Sam, this has to be done,” Dean insisted morose.

“No it doesn’t,” Sam said with conviction. Dean tried to pull his arm from Sam’s grip but Sam wouldn’t let go. He glanced at his wrist and then back at his brother, anger rising in him because Sam had stopped him.

“Yes. It does, Sammy. Erin’s gone. There is nothing left of her. Ahriman doesn’t know about the seals, he never did. There’s nothing left to do but end it for her. Now let go of me,” Dean growled brokenly.

“He’s right Sam,” Ruby tried switching tactics and siding with Dean. Maybe Sam would listen to his older brother.

Ahriman put in his two cents worth, backing up what Dean and Ruby were saying. “Hm, they are right. Nothing up here anymore but a quivering mass of jelly. Erin has left the building. Dean did an expert job of tearing her apart.”

“Shut up!” both brothers yelled sharply at him at the same time.

“What happened to manners? Have it your way. All ends the same anyway,” Ahriman said and shrugged Erin’s shoulders as if he didn’t care. Then he tilted her head a bit so he could see Ruby. Ruby stepped further into the screening barricade of the boys. “Hello again Ruby. Things not going as well as you’d hoped?” he taunted. Ruby quelled. One word and her entire scheme with Erin and with the Winchesters might be ruined. Sam would never trust her if he found out she had deliberately been trying to get Erin killed. Thankfully the boys’ attention wasn’t on them, it was on each other.

“I figured it out, Dean. What Cass said about the order being important. The last line of the
prophecy, ‘So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true’. It’s not just the meaning that’s important it’s the order it happens in. She can’t ‘follow the path’ if she’s dead,” Sam explained in a rush. Dean’s eyes went wide with confusion and a sudden swelling of faint hope.

“What? But how? There’s nothing left Sam,” Dean said his arm relaxing. Sam let go of him and they stood face to face in front of the rack. Sam’s face desperately hopeful and Dean’s afraid to believe.

“Prophecy. I’m sorry, what prophecy?” Ahriman asked forgetting about Ruby, diverted by the topic at hand.

“You went to Hell, Dean and you’re still in one piece. There’s gotta be something left in there of Erin. Way, way off maybe, but it’s gotta be there. Remember you can’t buck prophecy. We didn’t really buck it with Lilith not even Chuck knew how it ended until it happened.” Sam insisted.

That was all Dean needed. He dropped the machete and turned to Erin’s mutilated form. Ahriman looked back in confusion. Dean’s face wasn’t angry, it was open in an expression of desperate hope.

“Excuse me. What prophecy?” Ahriman demanded. Dean ignored him and took Erin’s face in his hands, holding it gentle as a blown glass figurine. He looked into her eyes, trying to see through them to what lay beyond.

“Erin, if you can hear me I am so sorry. Come back. Don’t you give up on me now!” Dean pleaded.

Ahriman rolled Erin’s eyes. “Really? I thought we were beyond all this? She’s gone.”

“I’m not talking to you, you slimy bastard. Erin, come on, fight him,” Dean called again to Erin, wherever she’d drifted off to, if there even was an Erin to call out to anymore.

###

Castiel was a bit startled when he finally broke through the turmoil and chaos that was Erin’s mind. It had been a great deal harder to get through the door, as it were, than he had expected. He was being as quiet about this as possible. He didn’t want Ahriman to know he was here. Castiel stood panting in the bare fringe of the mental realm Erin’s soul had created in conjunction with the myriad of others housed and now loose within her. He was doing something similar to dreamwalking as he had with Dean in the past. But this was no simple nightmare or a message delivery interrupting normal sleep. This was the death throes of an Immortal soul.

Catching his breath, Castiel took a moment to take in what he was facing and cringed. This was not going to be easy. A maelstrom of pitch-black clouds swirled around him in fury, blood red lightning streaked the sky in angry slashes and still their warped light illuminated little. Beneath his feet what little of the ground he could see through the blackened fog was dried and cracked earth. An arid plain devoid of life. He couldn’t see more than a foot in front of him. Erin’s tortured and tormented mind had created the closest approximation of Hell it could. Excepting the fire, Castiel thought it came perilously close to the real thing.

The angel took a deep breath and stilled himself. Though his visage looked like Jimmy Novak and he still wore the same clothing he’d had on since the day the man had allowed him to take him as his vessel, the ‘Cass’ the Winchesters knew disappeared. He was once again, ‘Castiel, an Angel of the Lord’. The same angel who had walked into a glyph and symbol ridden barn, and proclaimed to
Dean, “I’m the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition.”

Castiel “reached out” before him and searched the shadows for Erin, letting thin threads of his essence seek his desired destination. He felt her somewhere ahead of him, drowned and bereft, consumed by the darkness. The angel moved a foot and set it down again. Where it had been, pure whiteness bloomed. Behind him, where he had passed through the barrier into Erin’s mind stood the same blank purity, bleeding through the darkness and quenching it. This was Castiel at his absolute pinnacle of holiness without discarding his visage for his natural form altogether. He fairly shone with it, surrounded by an aura of holy grace, power and wrath.

With slow but confident and determined steps Castiel set out in the direction he felt the presence that marked itself as Erin. Each step left behind more of the white pureness. In the edges of the roiling miasma of shadow he could faintly see the burning white souls of those Immortals Erin had killed who had been, if not good, at least benign. They drifted like careless whispers in his wake, curiously haunting the footsteps of something they could not phantom but were drawn to. Castiel let them.

Finally, after much walking Castiel stopped. He willed the choking, poisonous fog before him to disperse. It dissipated like heat-touched mist. A writhing, twisting and twining mass of charred souls manifested in something that was an amalgamated semblance of soul-as-human-form. Some had already scattered, roving like scorned jackals in the distance, afraid of the angel. Castiel thought them wise to fear him.

Others looked up, growling and spitting like rabid dogs from their depraved work. Castiel tilted his head in curiosity that they did not flee like their brethren. Seeing the angel’s eyes, they started back in dread. Castiel took a step forward, the whiteness on his heels and they fled to their own like terrified animals.

The remainder, a decidedly large number of them, more than Castiel had thought to find, seemed oblivious. They tore and ripped at what lay beneath them. A brief glimpse between their ravenous limbs gave evidence to what Castiel already knew. Erin’s soul lay like a dying candle flame, mostly shadow and the virulent dulled crimson of Ahriman’s taint, all the light that should have been there faded to almost nothing. She was nearly gone, so closely that even Castiel worried he was too late.

Without hesitation, Castiel plunged his arm into the fray. Everywhere it touched, white light blazed and the evil souls fell back with shrieks of pain and horror, skittering away in wounded dismay. His hand closed on Erin’s shoulder, he gripped it tightly and pulled with great force. Any souls that still dared to try and tear their way into Erin ran wailing.

With gentle arms, Castiel lifted Erin to him, holding her as he once had when she was a newborn child. Her eyes were closed and her body was slack. As in reality her body was rent and mauled. Blood everywhere, wounds gaping like open mouths. Her hair hung in sodden tendrils over his forearm. But all of it was transparent, as ephemeral as if he were holding a ghost. She weighed nothing, had this been reality and he human, she would have been but a feather’s weight to carry.

Castiel looked down at her face with an angel’s sorrow. So much pain and misery lay within the shred of Erin that remained. As Dean had been when the angel had pulled him from hell. With a thought, Castiel banished the other souls, light and dark alike, flooding the boundaries of Erin’s mind with his grace and blockading everything behind it. It did not rid her of them and it would not last but, for a brief moment, they were unable to harm her. Now it was only him and Erin in what, if it had had walls and corners, would have been a white room.

Exerting more of his power Castiel rendered Erin’s manifestation in the colors of life. The gold of her hair returned, tanned pinkness tinted her skin but he could not heal her. Still the wounds bled, still she hung lifeless in his arms. Erin’s eyes fluttered, opening weakly part way. He gazed down at her
soulfully.

“Cass?” she said so softly it would have been impossible to hear her in the real world.

“Yes,” he answered, his own voice gentle.

In an awed voice she replied, “Are you God?” Despite the tragedy of the moment, Castiel smiled lightly.

“No, but it’s a nice compliment,” he said and stepped back a couple of paces, kneeling carefully on the ‘floor’ of the space he had created. With incredible gentleness he laid Erin down but she still flinched and moaned in pain. Sliding from his grasp like liquid. Castiel remained beside her. Erin didn’t move, she looked at him in misery, prostrate and weak as a newborn kitten.

“Let me die, please,” she begged piteously, too spent even for tears.

“No,” Castiel said sternly.


“No, Erin,” Castiel reiterated, gently. Erin’s eyes squeezed shut, her teeth gritted in impotent anger and pain.

“What more do you want from me? I’ve given you my life. I’ve given you everything, there’s nothing left. Have mercy, please?”

Castiel held her gaze, his head canting like a cat. “Have you? Given your life?” he asked her. She sagged more if that were possible.

“What? Please end it. Kill me. I know it’s in your power to. Please,” she begged. If she had been able to move, Castiel was sure she would be clutching at him in a groveling plea for release.

“Humans, even angels, have such strange ways of phrasing things. Giving your life. I would think what you are giving is your death. You cannot give a life if you do not have one to give,” Castiel mused.

“Cass I am begging you to kill me. Destroy whatever there is left to destroy. I can’t bear it anymore. I have nothing left, there is nothing left. I’ve given everything,” Erin implored him. Castiel did not bend. He was as much comforting grace as he was holy warrior.

“You consented to your own death in order to try and save your brother and rid the Earth of a monster that would gain enough power to be as dangerous as Lucifer should he ever walk free. That is not the same thing as everything.” Castiel explained. He could simply have told her what he wished her to know, to understand, but cruel as it was, as much as it pained him to put her through this, in the condition she was in. He knew this was the way, this was how and that, as before, the final decision would be hers. Must be hers.

Erin gave him a look of deep hurt and betrayal. “What more can I possibly give. I just want to die. Have even you forsaken me now?”

“Forsaken you? No. I have not forsaken you. It’s you who has forsaken us,” Castiel told her. As expected Erin’s reaction was violent anger, though she was too weak to express it in more than an angry whisper.
“Don’t you dare say that to me. Kill me! If you have any mercy in you, kill me!”

Castiel stood up, one hand clenched by his side, holy light filtering from between his fingers. He could do what she asked. An angel was not bound by petty rules or shallow boundaries of nature. He could kill her if he chose. He let the light build, ensuring she would see it and Castiel was no longer the comforting angel in a trench coat. He was wrath and holy fire. “This is what you want? Oblivion? The cessation of all that you are?” he demanded of her in a angry voice.

“Yes!” Erin answered.

“You would rather lie down and die, cease to be, to rid yourself of pain and torment and guilt you don’t think you can bear. Is this your idea of the redemption you spent fifteen hundred years seeking? Annihilation?” Castiel raged.

“Do it!” Erin encouraged. Castiel’s fist tightened, sorely tempted to. was she as strong as he believed? Was his faith misplaced?

“No,” Castiel thought. Lack of faith is what got them into this. Faith was what would get them out. He would believe, he did believe. Erin was strong enough, if only she could find that faith within herself and he would give it to her, anyway he had to.

“You have forsaken us. You gave everything? I gave everything for you. I disobeyed Heaven. I have flouted orders because of you. Dean was willing to die for you. You asked of him the one thing he could never give. To torture again and he gave it. Sam was willing to use powers that have been forbidden to him, when heaven itself forbade them to make your suffering as short as possible. They gave everything. And this is what you give to us? Your surrender?” Castiel went on, the light blazing in both clenched fists now, an imposing and terrifying presence.

“Cass,” Erin pleaded, frightened of him more than she had ever been. The angel kept up his tirade, unwilling to stop until he had said his peace.

“What happened to your proclamation that you would stop the Gathering no matter what it took? You know what will happen if it continues on its course. What will become of Duncan MacLeod then? Yes, he is the One. But for which side? What is to keep him from being tempted by Hell’s demons?”

“Duncan would never! That’s Methos’s job. He took it up like a mantle from the moment he met Duncan,” Erin argued hoarsely, every word weakened her further. Every breath drawing away a little more of what was left of her soul.

“Perhaps it is Methos’s place to watch after Duncan’s soul, to guide him down the right path but who will ensure that the path is clear of demons and angels? Who will stand between Heaven and Hell and give your kind, the Immortals, the nephilim, a choice? None of them know what they are, you are the only one to have ever known. You are the only one who knows what their fate really is. And yet, you are willing to give up and let it happen.”

“What can I do? This is the end of it. It’s over Cass. Just get it over with. I can’t take it anymore. The prophecy can’t be avoided!” Erin wailed.

“When did you start to believe in holy prophecy? The word of God? You don’t believe he cares for any of us. Human, angel or Immortal. Why should you believe in his word?” Castiel provoked. “Or perhaps you think Dean and Sam can stop the Gathering. They are already trying to prevent the
Apocalypse. The Gathering is another battle on the same side in the same war. Do you think it fair to ask that of them? Or have they not given you enough?"

“I can’t!” Erin insisted.

“Can’t or won’t? This is your problem, Erin. You have no faith. Dean, Sam and I had the faith in you to trust you to make your own choice. They still do. I still do. I asked you if you had faith in nothing else to have faith in us. What do you believe in Erin? Where is your faith in us?”

“Cass, what can I do? There’s nothing!” Erin cried again, tears in her eyes. “It hurts too much!”

“You consented to go along with this plan. You were willing to give them your death. Are you willing to give your life? Because giving your life is entirely different than your death. Dean cares deeply for you; will you let your death break him? I believe Sam is very fond of you. I walked with you for decades before I was forced away, will you let it have been for nothing?” Castiel asked forcefully.


Castiel let the light in his hands fade and once again became the comforting and gentle presence he had been.

“Listen. Can you hear them?” Castiel asked. “Can you hear Dean and Sam calling you back? Pleading with you? Can you refuse?”

Erin listened and in the distance Castiel could hear it echo, faint but clear. He knew Erin heard. Dean’s voice called desperately into the void in search of her. “Damn it Erin, you’re a part of this family now, like it or not, and Winchesters don’t give up! You get up and you fight, you hear me!”

Amazingly, Erin got up. She didn’t stand, she didn’t struggle to rise. She was on the ground one second and the next she was standing face to face with Castiel. He didn’t even think she realized what she’d done. He was startled and heartened by it but he kept it carefully hidden. His job wasn’t finished yet. She shouldn’t have been capable of it, not as she was, not with what she was.

“I’m sorry Cass. I can’t. I don’t know how,” Erin said sadly. She still had not realized she was no longer immobile, that she was nearly eye to eye with him.

“You consented to give your death. Consent to give your life. I warn you, if you think the last two thousand years of your life have been painful, the remainder, however many, will be just as bad, perhaps worse. It will not be easy,” Castiel told her with a quiet voice.

“I don’t understand,” Erin said plaintively.

“Have faith. Say yes,” the angel advised her. She still looked back, unable to comprehend what he was asking.

“To what Cass?”

“Say yes to God’s will. Give yourself over wholly,” Castiel said sagely. Profound understanding dawned in her eyes and Castiel felt a chill wash over him. It was rare and beautiful to see a moment of epiphany. Something he tragically believed was dying in his brothers and sisters and here it was in his niece, baring only half the angelic nature they did.

Dean’s voice echoed again around them, a phantom. “Erin, don’t you do this to me. I know you’re in
there! We need you damn it!”

Erin’s eyes were as bright green in that moment as Castiel’s were blue and her head canted in eerie imitation of him.

“Yes,” she said. Castiel had only time enough to give Erin a relieved and acknowledging nod. Then, Castiel was hurtled out of her mind violently.

###

The instant Castiel’s presence was forcibly evicted from Erin’s head, all he had constructed began to crumble like the stone of an ancient ruin. The roiling, angry darkness bled through the whiteness, snaking tongues of red lightning searing across the vista.

Erin turned to look at the destruction. She was terrified of the walls falling. The angel had been all that stood between her and the souls that wanted to eat her alive. She still bled. The wounds so deep and open she should have already been dead, body and soul. The blackened forms came crawling through the cracks and holes, angrier than ever. Ravenously bent on reclaiming their prey and Erin was clueless how to stop them. Inside her soul, Ahriman still burned with repulsive taint, pulsing and vile.

Erin felt the ground quake and a roar that was so loud it deafened her. Pure unadulterated power swelled within her, unchecked and completely out of her control. She looked at her hands, unable to breathe, watching as they flared and burned white, but instead of burning outward, it burned inward.

The starlit souls no longer drifted on the fringes. They paced steadily toward her, shining brighter than before. Those that were black as pitch kept coming. Racing on unnaturally fast limbs to overtake her. The walls around her continued to crumble, falling into dust.

Erin felt like whatever was building inside of her would surely render her to pieces. Her knees buckled and she huddled there, her hands clutching her head in a kind of pain she had never had before and would never be able to find words to explain. It was intoxicating and abhorrent all at the same time. Only none of it was hers to wield. She was a helpless vessel for whatever it was. All of her freewill stripped away the moment she said ‘yes’. There was nothing as horrifying as that.

“Erin!” she heard Dean’s voice call again. With it came that sense of reality again and Erin grabbed it. It jerked her with it, like a cut line breaking free of a suspension bridge. Erin hung on. The power building to fever pitch. Words she hadn’t spoken in over a millennium coming to her lips unbidden.

###

“It’s not working Sam,” Dean said desperately. Erin’s head was still in his hands and Ahriman’s control had not faded. If Erin was in there at all, you couldn’t tell.

“I told you, she’s gone. Nothing left. Finished. What about this prophecy?” Ahriman demanded.

Sam snarled at the demon over Dean’s shoulder.

“In the Gathas. Don’t you even read your own religious text?” he bit snidely. “‘From the annals of time a sinner will come to do battle with him. Aided by three wise men, the sinner will rise and slay
their brother in the name of all that is holy. These three shall be the trinity of god, angel, and demon. As two shall bend so shall the sinner break, sundered into a million pieces. With these pieces and faith alone shall the sinner consume him and he be destroyed by the power of God. So shall the sinner go forth and follow the path before them if their faith is true.’ This whole charade of yours was pointless. Erin’s the sinner, she always was. Just like Duncan MacLeod is the champion. You were dead before you even started.”

Ahriman forced Erin’s eyes wide in the first real fear any of them had seen him exhibit. “You’re lying!”

Dean, unable to resist, turned the demon’s own words back on him. “Oh, trust me. Sam wouldn’t lie about this. This is just how we roll. Nothing better than some fear in one of you hell-born bastards and it’s just so much better when it’s all real.”

“You can’t kill me. You’ll kill Erin,” Ahriman blathered.

“Thought you said she was gone?” Sam snapped.

“She is!” Ahriman insisted.

“Man, you are bad at lying under stress,” Ruby quipped. Ahriman glared and Ruby shut up again, fearful he’d break his silence about her half of their bargain.

Dean kept trying to reach Erin, ignoring the demon in favor of some hint that Erin was still in there and not the broken creature Ahriman claimed her to be. “Damn it Erin, you're a part of this family now, like it or not, and Winchesters don’t give up! You get up and you fight, you hear me!”

He got no response from her, only Ahriman’s petrified expression, lay within the eyes that had once held everything that was Erin. It felt like whatever had made this body Erin was withering away, making it only a husk.

“Sam?” Dean said, his brother’s name a plea for help.

“Have faith, Dean. She’s still in there somewhere, she has to be,” Sam encouraged.

Dean gritted his teeth and tried again, both hands holding Erin’s head so Ahriman couldn’t move it. “Erin, don’t you do this to me. I know you’re in there! We need you damn it!”

Above them they heard a startled and deeply pained shout come from what sounded like Cass. Sam looked up at the ceiling wary and Ruby followed his example.

“How about a deal? I live, Erin dies in here and is freed from her misery and you get something in return. Anything. Name it, it’s yours,” Ahriman tried in a last ditch desperate attempt to stave off his fate.

“You can’t offer us anything we couldn’t get a better way. You can’t buck prophecy Ahriman,” Sam said with a great deal of satisfaction.

Dean was bordering on furious, outraged panic. Erin’s body seemed to grow lighter still and Dean gripped her head in his hands and shook it. “Erin!?”

Her eyes flipped to red, back again then, to red and Ahriman screamed. Really screamed. A ear piercing wail like none of them had ever heard. It wrenched Erin’s head back, her body straining impossibly against the chains that bound it like she was in death throes. Dean hung on. Her body relaxed marginally and her head bent down.
None of them knew what they were looking at. It was Erin’s eyes. Everything that set off alarm bells that it was the genuine article was there. The depthless green, flecked with a gamut of shades. The essence that made her, her. But her irises danced with white lightning. It sparked across them and she hummed like a tuning fork. Erin looked Dean straight in the eye and spoke.

It was Erin’s voice, amplified with a thousand others behind it. A chorus of them. She spoke a single word. “Run.”

Dean boggled, the ground shifted beneath his feet and suddenly they were no longer in the basement. They were teetered dangerously on the precipice of a stretch of cliffs butted on the sea and it was deep night. The only thing that remained from their last location was the cement floor, ripped up like a piece of sod, and the rack Erin was still chained to.

“Uh, Dean? I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Sam said fearfully. Dean stepped back, releasing his hold on Erin. She was still looking at them, or through them, Dean couldn’t tell anymore. A breeze blew around them, chill, and when Dean looked at his feet beyond the jagged edges of the cement slab, he saw verdant green grass.

“What the hell?” Dean breathed, giving his brother a befuddled look. “Where’s Ruby?” he added, looking around him. The demon was nowhere to be found and Cass, grass stained and dirt smudged, was running toward them from the approximate distance he would have been in the kitchen from the basement of Erin’s house. He had a hand unconsciously to his temple as if he were in pain.

“Here in this fateful hour,” Erin chanted from the rack. Dean looked from the racing angel to her and back again, unsure what to do. The hair on his arms had started to rise, he could feel pressure building around him from nowhere.

“Run!” Cass yelled to them. Dean didn’t need any more prompting, Dean sprinted for the angel, Sam right behind him.

Dean skidded to a stop in front of Cass, who was panting with exertion. Sam pelted up beside him, casting a glance behind them at Erin. “What the hell is going on?” Dean asked.

“I place all Heaven with its power,” Erin’s voice rang out.

Cass didn’t answer him. “Run. Run now,” he commanded short of breath instead, grabbing the boys by their shirts, turning on his heel and pulling them.

“Run where?” Sam asked exasperated. Back the way Cass had come, lay nothing but green plain, spotted with knee high tufts of grass and sedge. This was nowhere near West Palm Beach, Florida. It had to be at least midnight here and there was no stars or moon. The sky above them was inky black.

“Can’t you zap us out of here?” Dean asked. The sense of something building kept growing, he could feel it tingling on his skin like static electricity in the air.

“No,” Cass answered, his expression uneasy. Whatever was going on it wasn’t because Cass wouldn’t zap them away, it was because he couldn’t.

“What?” Sam blurted incredulous.

“This can’t be good,” Dean said, concerned.

Erin cried out again like she were casting a spell, “And the sun with its brightness.”

“We should run,” Cass advised with anxious fear. As if to illustrate his point, the black of night
seared with orange light as the sun flared to life behind the previously invisible moon, in full eclipse. Dean gaped.

“Running now,” he agreed and bolted back the way the angel had come, Sam and Cass running alongside as fast as their legs would carry them.

“And the snow with its whiteness,” Erin called out. No sooner had she said it than white flakes descended from the sky, floating languidly down to settle on their shoulders and heads as they raced away.

“And the fire with all the strength it hath,” Erin shouted.

Dean was afraid to look behind him to see what that caused. He didn’t have to. There was a fiery roar and a wall of flame sprang up, cutting them off from their path. Instinctively they turned from it only to find it had blazed in all directions over the ground and they were trapped within three criss-crossing lines. Dean and Sam panicked turning in circles to find a way through it, Cass stopped dead. Within the circle of fire they were trapped in, something flashed like faint white light over a glass dome and dissipated. Sam was about to try jumping the fire line when Cass grabbed him, jerking him sharply back.

“Don’t!” Cass warned. Sam gawked at him. Castiel explained by putting the flat of his palm out and touching what he had kept Sam from trying to pass through. His palm pressed against an invisible dome around them, glowing holy white under and around his hand like a touched plasma ball. The dome hummed like resonating crystal.

“We’re safe. It’s a shield but try to pass through it and it will kill a human,” the angel said.


They could still hear through the dome as Erin called, “And the lightning with its rapid wrath.” As though on command, streaks of thick and wild lightning struck around them, one hitting the dome and spidering over it to crawl across the ground and dispel. Others danced across where Erin was but never touched her.

“I don’t know for certain. But I think it’s…,” Cass said trailing off and looking at the boys. They looked back expectantly, but Cass knew they would likely not believe him.

“You think it’s what Cass?” Dean pushed.

“God. I entered Erin’s consciousness to try to help. I was expelled with great power. No angel, not even an archangel, has that kind of power,” Cass answered. Dean looked both incredulous, and awe struck.

“And the wind with its swiftness along its path,” Erin’s voice proclaimed, punctuating the angel’s explanation. Illogically a great wind whipped across the top of the cliff, Erin’s hair tossing in it. It buffeted against the dome harmlessly but outside it raged strong enough to uproot trees.

“What is Erin doing? Casting a spell? Sounds like a spell,” Dean asked, swallowing the option that God was doing this.

“It’s a prayer. A very old and very powerful one,” Cass said.

“And the sea with its deepness,” Erin shouted fervently. In response the sea beyond the cliffs roiled and swelled, dashing huge waves against the rocks, casting them up over the edge of the cliff. Dean and Sam looked torn between the instinctual desire to run away from something they couldn’t fight
and the thunderstruck draw the display provoked.

“So what’s going on?” Sam asked. Cass looked him steadfastly in the eye.

“Erin said yes. She has become a Weapon of God.”

Sam blanched and Dean looked like he’d been hit in the head with a shovel.

“I thought only the One who won the Gathering could be a Weapon of God?” Sam babbled. Cass shrugged helplessly.

“It’s God. His will is absolute.”

“And he stuck us in a fish bowl why?” Dean asked gruffly. His disdain rising. Dean did not like being manipulated by anyone, even if it was God.

“I believe we are to stand Witness,” Cass said.

“To what?” Dean spat.

“The power of a Weapon of God,” Cass said simply and with firm certainty.

“And the rocks with their steepness,” came Erin’s booming voice. Beneath their feet the ground shook, tremor racking.

“That why you’re impotent?” Sam asked watching what was unfolding before them.

“Yes. I believe there was too much power in one place. My abilities have been rendered inert as a result,” Cass said, his tone a bit affected with hurt at being referred to as ‘impotent’.

“In other words Dad put you in time out,” Dean summed up. “You’re sure this shield thing is gonna hold? That God did it?”

“No. I can’t know for certain but it will hold. It was meant to protect us,” Cass assured him.

“Why doesn’t that make me feel better?” Dean mused turning his gaze back to the cliff’s edge and watching. There was nothing else any of them could do.

“And the Earth with its starkness,” Erin yelled. As the words fell from her lips, the ground shook harder and cracked, causing fissures around them. They all struggled to remain standing as the earth shattered around them but they remained unharmed.

The sensation of power had grown to such heights that their body hair was standing on end. Sam’s hair seemed to be drifting up from his scalp, even Cass’s was standing up haphazardly.

“All these I place.”

The power or whatever it was began to feel like a physical pressure on them, the tuning fork hum had risen until it felt like it might pierce their ear drums.

“By God’s almighty help and grace.”

The three men stood abreast and just stared.

“Between myself and the powers of darkness!”
With the last word, still chained like a martyred victim to the Star of David rack, Erin flared brilliant white, the force of it pulling her body away from the rack. A stream of it burst from the center of her body to branch off in two limbs and then again into thousands of tendrils that reached for the ground. It was so bright all of them shielded their eyes.

As it faded, Erin’s body hung completely limp on the rack. That wasn’t what stopped their hearts. Where each tendril had touched down, the forces of nature still raging around them, stood a countless numbers of…people. Or the manifestation of them. They were sharply divided, like two armies facing off on the battlefield.

To the shield-trapped group’s left, lay a rank and file of brightly glowing white figures, their clothes and hair moving as if they were in water, swords as ephemeral as they were in hand. At their head, leading the charge...was Erin. To the group’s right stood another brigade, as dark as the others were light. Though every detail of them was easily recognizable. At the forefront stood Ahriman, set apart from the rest, burning blood red, a twisted visage that had no definite features only the vague form of a man. On one side of him was Christian and on the other stood the man Castiel knew to be Tiberius Trajan.

The numbers of the dark army outnumbered the light by more than triple. But the numbers present were countless, the entire area was crowded with them. There had to be thousands upon thousands. The souls of every Immortal Erin ever killed, and every Immortal they ever killed and so on.

“Holy crap,” Dean gasped.

“Oh my God,” Sam exclaimed. But it was Castiel who took the cake.

“Well. This gives new meaning to ‘My name is Legion: for we are many.’”

The comment was so out of place, said with such deadpan honesty the boys turned to look at the angel in disbelief. Castiel being sarcastic. Who knew he had it in him? The angel looked back without a bit of apology. Setting their sights back on the legions in front of them, Dean’s jaw flexed and he shook his head.

“Erin’s outnumbered. There’s no way she can win.”

“This may look like a physical battle, Dean. It’s not. This is a war of wills. It’s metaphysical. The manifestation is only the souls’ rationalization of it,” Castiel explained.

The two armies were staring each other down, neither speaking, neither moving. Waiting to see what the other would do. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

“So they decided to reenact the battle from 300?” Dean said incredulous.

“‘Reenact’? No. Immortals live very long lives. They live by the sword and they die by it. This is what warfare used to be,” Cass said sagely. Dean’s eyebrows twitched.

“I think I prefer a shot gun,” he said. “I’m guessing this is what ‘sundered into a million pieces’ meant.”

“It would seem so,” Cass observed.

There was faint movement in the ranks on both sides as they assembled themselves in neat lines without any evidence they had been commanded to. Each side carefully watching the other for any sign of engagement.
“Uh, Cass. Fascinating as that is…can you tell us where we are? Because this isn’t Florida,” Sam asked.

“Ireland on The Cliffs of Moher. This place holds special significance for Erin.”

“So Erin brought us here?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know,” Cass admitted. The fact that he didn’t know and the location’s relevance to Erin made the angel wonder. Had it been Erin? Or God? But he didn’t have time to wonder on it. Dean’s short temper had come back into full swing.

“You don’t know much do you? What are you doing? Guessing or making it up as you go along?”

“I’m sorry Dean. There isn’t an ancient tome of knowledge this is written down in,” Cass snapped back. It might have turned into an all out argument but Sam drew their attention back to the scene in front of them.

“Uh, guys,” he said pointing. They looked and saw Erin and Ahriman had stepped a pace in front of their soldiers. Erin, or the manifestation of her soul since her body was still strung up on the rack at the edge of the cliff, spared a glance for them. Looking long and deeply at them, her expression unreadable. Then she turned back to face Ahriman and raised her sword high. Ahriman did the same. Through the flames, snow, lightning, wind and raging sea they could see the Immortals tense and ready themselves, made all the more eerie by the dead silence.

“They’re going to charge each other,” Sam realized.

“That’s buckets of crazy!” Dean gasped.

“Or brilliant. Erin’s good at that,” Sam said with a half shrug uncertain that his brother wasn’t right this time.

As they watched Erin lowered her sword sharply at the same instant Ahriman did in a command to charge. Ahriman’s forces swarmed forward like angry ants, arrowing for the center of Erin’s men. Erin charged straight at them, the middle of her line bowing backward into an arc with the fighters on the outer edge advancing more quickly. Steel met steel and the sound rang across the plain like sepulcher bells.

“It’s like watching the charge of the Rohirrim at Helm’s Deep in person,” Sam breathed.

“Yeah well,” Dean said, “Erin’s minus Gandalf on her side.”

“She has us,” Cass pointed out despite not getting the reference entirely.

Dean in a fit of his normal pique pointed at his brother. “This makes you Legolas.” Then he pointed at the angel. “And that makes you Gandalf.” Cass blinked in confusion, then dismissed it watching the battle.

“Guess that makes you Gimli, Dean,” Sam quipped back.

Dean scoffed. “I’m Aragorn.”

Erin’s forces gave way before Ahriman’s. The shadowed forms slipped into the middle of the lighted ranks, who in turn flowed along the outer edge, as when darkened waves battered against the shore in white froth. Where light met dark and engaged, Erin’s front line held while those behind moved to either side.
The fighting was brutal. The sides of the battle, like a football game, were easily determined. The ebb and flow of the battle, thus easily traced. Erin met Ahriman with her charge and engaged him. Trajan and Christian closed their own circle around her. She spun, her blade whirled in a flashing arc of lightning, and cut through her three tormentors. They fell back. Erin took advantage of that and dashed between, keeping them from boxing her in again.

The lighted forms fought and fell, like lambs to the slaughter. Without falter, without fear, when one fell, another stepped into the void, holding the black tide in check. Erin’s army of souls was thinning and the Winchesters were certain they would fall. To them it was like watching two packs of rabid, wild dogs tear at each other in frenzy. Sam and Dean had never been witness to this sort of battle. They were more accustomed to smaller numbers, the advantage of bullets and one on one combat. This was mass melee at its worst. It was horrifying.

“They’re toast,” Dean said fearfully.

“There’s too many on Ahriman’s side. They’re going to break through the line. This isn’t a fight, it’s wholesale slaughter,” Sam muttered as afraid as his brother that the battle was already lost.

“This is war,” Cass said. “Wait.” He was scrutinizing the battle with a shrewd eye, watching the patterns of light and dark with a tactical bent.

The semicircle of white had deepened, thinned until it was almost one soul beside another keeping Ahriman’s forces from breaking the line. Erin’s ranks were closing around Ahriman’s in a tenuous ring.

“An infantry based caracole,” Cass observed with stern approval.

“A cara what?” Dean spat.

“Erin is trapping Ahriman’s army. When the ring closes they’ll turn and press the enemy toward the center, crowding them so they don’t have room to fight,” Cass explained.

The thin ring of light encircled Ahriman’s darkened soldiers, and closed. Just as Cass had said, they were forced to fall back as the ring tightened. They were pressed and herded closer together like cattle. When the circle had narrowed until the dark could no longer go any further, the Winchesters and the angel inside the dome of God’s upturned fish bowl received another shock. The souls' manifestation as human forms faded into the circle they had become. No longer holding any individual shape. Within the ring of light, the dark souls dissolved into a giant cloud of shadow shot through with Ahriman’s angry red. The ring revolved around the darkened mass, drawing it into itself, until all was but a single, spinning vortex.

Dean and Sam gaped, awestruck, as the vortex lifted from the ground and swelled into a huge orb, the dark, red veined shadows encompassing the light almost completely. Struggling like a bed of vipers to overcome the much smaller threads of white light.

“Whoa,” Dean said, wide eyed.

“Wow,” Sam echoed him but Cass’s expression was sober and set. The boys were too struck with amazement to notice it.

The sphere continued to grow and darken, the ropes of red thickening and glowing a dismal crimson. The light struggled to fight back to no avail and was engulfed completely. The Winchesters faces were a distraught mix of confused emotion as they watched helpless. The ball pulsed and moved from within like a living beast. Then, beams of light slashed through the dark, slicing into the
shadows and through the red haze of Ahriman’s essence. The light grew until it had overtaken all of
the darkness. It looked like a miniature sun or a small star, shining with such brilliance Cass and the
Winchesters had to shield their eyes daring to peer under their arms to see what was going on.

“With these pieces and faith alone shall the sinner consume him and he be destroyed by the power of
God,” Cass said with the dismal tone of a eulogy.

The light built until they could actually hear it, a shrill sonic whine as loud and painful as when Cass
had attempted to speak with Dean in his real voice. The boundaries of the orb strained with
overwhelming power. Then with a sound like a broken steel cable, the orb exploded like a
supernova, consuming and destroying the shadowed souls and Ahriman. It sent out a shockwave of
light with a tremendous roar that rocked the ground and sent all three men down in a tumble within
their protective dome. All of them threw their arms over their heads instinctually protecting
themselves.

When the ground ceased to shake, Dean was the first one to peer from under the shelter of his arms.
He slide into a sitting position and just stared at the destruction before him as Cass and Sam got
themselves righted. Where there had been grass and flame and snow, where the sea had raged
against the cliffs and the ground had been spidered with cracks, there was now nothing but a burnt
wasteland. Behind them the destruction stretched as far as they could see. The only spot of green was
the circle of grass within their small little shelter.

“Oh Jesus,” Sam breathed. Dean couldn’t even speak. Castiel was getting to his feet, a thin line
between his brows. The earth was charred and burned, all the grass and trees replaced with
crumbling earth and rock. The cement slab was burned to a crisp and the rack was shattered into
pieces. Erin wasn’t visible anywhere.

The utter destruction that had been caused sent home the reason Cass had been so adamant that
Ahriman never gain control of the Immortals. Why the demons could never lay hands on something
that powerful. If it caused this kind of destruction turned on itself, the Winchesters couldn’t imagine
what it would cause turned on an enemy. What it would have done to them if not for God’s fish
bowl. They understood why they had been made to bear Witness. So they would know the
incredible power a Weapon of God ,once activated, yielded. It destroyed anything and everything in
it’s path.

Sam helped Dean to his feet as Cass tentatively put his hand out to touch the dome and see if it was
still there. His hand passed through thin air and they knew the dome was gone. Dean bolted for the
demolished rack in search of Erin. Sam pelted after him and Cass, still low on power but his abilities
returned to him, raced after them.

Dean leapt upon the slab and skidded to a stop amid the wreckage. One pale arm was visible
beneath the ruin of the rack. Dean’s heart seized in panic. He grabbed a shard of the rack and cast it
away. Cass and Sam arrived nearly on Dean's heels. The angel lifted the larger pieces and tossed
them away like they weighed nothing. Erin was on her stomach, arms akimbo, with her head turned
away from them. She was covered with blood, soot and dirt.

Dean fell to his knees and turned her over. She was as limp as a rag doll. Her hair was streaked
with blood. Her eyes were closed. The wounds that had been inflicted by Dean in an effort to
torture information from Ahriman were vivid and gaping. "Erin?" Dean called hopefully, pulling her
into his lap.

"Is she okay?" Sam asked. He came behind Dean's shoulder, panting from the short run and the
exertion of moving debris.
"Erin?" Dean called again, quieter as he brushed her tangled hair from her face. There was no response. Dean pressed his fingers to her neck, feeling for a pulse, and found none. Her skin was cold to his touch. He bit down on the panic he felt. "Erin?" he called again, taking her head in his hands. Silence was his only answer.


“She became a Weapon of God,” Cass reminded him and gently reached out his hand laying it flat on Erin’s chest as if he were checking for something. Dean watched every move he made.

“Her head’s still on. She can’t be dead. Right? Right?” Dean said frantic as slow seconds ticked by. The angel winced and drew his hand back, looking up at Sam whose eyes filled with tears. Castiel’s expression told Sam everything he needed to know and Dean shook his head fervently.


"I'm sorry, Dean. Erin is gone. Her soul was destroyed. There's nothing to bring back," the angel said helplessly. His own eyes were bright with unshed tears. He found himself grief-stricken and he looked to the sky mournfully. He turned away from the wreckage, unable to bear the scene any longer.

Sam looked on. He gritted his teeth and cried for Erin and his brother. He considered her a friend, family even, and now she was dead, despite everything they had done. Sam could tell that Dean was an emotional wreck.

Dean pulled Erin's limp form up into his arms, trying to deny his grief and her death. Her head hung lifelessly at his shoulder as he rocked back and forth. "Erin!" he cried, questioningly, in a strained and tearful voice, looking for an answer that her broken body couldn't give. Sam clenched his eyes tight against tears and the sorrow of watching his brother's heart break. The angel looked back at his charges with a pained expression, unable to express his own grief. He watched Dean stroke the back of Erin's head. He watched the elder Winchester hug her tightly.

“No. No,no,no,no,” Dean murmured as he leaned forward with her and cried into her hair. "I'm so sorry, Erin" he sobbed.

Sam placed him hand on his brother's heaving shoulder, offering his moral support, and letting Dean know he was still with him. Sam cried, watching his brother hold on to the Immortal's body. Cass, too, was nearly crying. He also grieved for the fallen warrior. All they had done, everything they had gone through, and still, their victory was Pyrrhic. Erin's faith had not been strong enough, and now she was gone. Castiel looked away again. He was afraid that his emotional armor would break, and that he would cry for her loss, as well. She had been family. Cass had no doubt of that now and he felt her loss.

Dean held onto Erin like he would never let her go. He could feel Sam's firm hand on his shoulder. He knew his brother was crying, too. Dean hurt. He felt like his heart had been ripped to shreds and crushed. He would never be able to make amends to her. There was never going to be a snowball's chance for them. He shut his eyes against the continuing flow of tears. He buried his face in her hair. "Erin, you stupid idiot. You weren't supposed to die," he whispered, his voice strained with raw emotion.

In his arms, Erin's body suddenly heaved and made a sound like someone was taking in a ragged gulp of air. Dean pulled back, holding her by her shoulders, and watched the wounds he had inflicted close. They left neither mark nor scar. The ring upon her right hand crumbled into dust and
passed with a gentle breeze. Her eyes opened.

Dean gasped out, "Erin?!” in shocked disbelief. Sam jolted, startled, with his mouth agape in amazement. Castiel turned and stared in as much shock as the Winchesters were showing. Erin's soul had been destroyed. There was no way she could be alive. Unless...

"That was," Erin rasped weakly, "uncomfortable."

Dean just stared at her for a heartbeat, looking into her eyes. He smiled so hard it was painful and then he grabbed her in a tight hug. Erin feebly returned it. Sam knelt beside them, grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re alive!” he said.

“Yeah. I guess I am. I’m surprised,” Erin muttered as Dean released her from the hug and took another moment to take in the fact that she wasn’t dead.

“We all are,” Cass admitted joining them, though he did not kneel.

“What brought me back? What the hell happened?” Erin asked seeing the destruction around her for the first time in a haze.

“You became a Weapon of God. I would suggest it was God who brought you back,” Cass answered certain. Erin’s eyebrows wobbled as if she were drunk.

“Yeah. Okay,” she said with a less than enthusiastic voice.

“Who cares? Hey, no sense looking a gift horse in the mouth, right?” Dean said jubilant.

“Uh, sure. Can we get out of here now?” Erin mumbled still disoriented.

“Yeah, of course,” Dean said shifting so Erin could get her legs under her. “Can you walk?” he asked as he and Sam helped Erin up. She looked at both of them in turn.

“Of course,” she said and tried to take a few steps. Her legs went out from under her. “Maybe not,” she breathed and then her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed. Dean panicked again, catching her. This swinging from one emotional extreme to another was taking its toll on them all.

“Cass?” Sam asked worried. The angel touched Erin’s forehead briefly and nodded.

“She fainted. She’ll be fine. You would say her batteries are drained. She needs rest,” Cass assured them. Dean slid an arm under Erin’s knees, the other behind her back and picked her up.

“Take us home then, Cass,” Dean said.
“Home” ended up being a seedy motel called the Noble Palms. The Palms was about five miles outside of Sewall’s Point in Stuart, Florida. Erin’s apartment back in West Palm Beach and the beach house in Sewall’s Point were both out of the question. The apartment was as good as untenanted with Erin being considered publically dead and the beach house was in shambles. A good deal of the structure had collapsed when God, or Erin, or whatever had done it, had zapped the lot of them to Ireland, taking part of the lower supporting structure with it.

The rickety motel, with its dry pool, tried to make up for its lackluster exterior by overcompensating with art deco, bright blue, orange, and white palm tree motif décor. Garish didn’t even begin to describe it. But the room was cheap, something that the Winchesters had to account for with their lack of monetary resources, and it had enough space. More or less.

The room had two double beds, along with a desk and a TV. Dean and Sam had taken to sharing one, while Erin was ensconced in the other. Cass didn’t require rest and so contented himself with standing, or sitting, in one of the two chairs the room sported.

The cuisine was strictly heart-attack inducing and their mood was rather somber, despite having succeeded in their efforts. Their unoccupied time, which was the extent of their days, allowed for too much reflection on the repercussions their victory would have.

Ruby hadn’t been seen nor heard from since they had been zapped, part and parcel, from Erin’s basement. Either she had ditched and run, fearing holy wrath just for being present, or she had left on another excursion to who knew where. Sooner or later, she would turn up. She always did, much to Dean’s displeasure.

Erin slept in a near coma-like state for three days. She awoke for neither food nor drink. During that time Cass refused to leave the room for any reason. When the boys had asked him why he was standing such an intense vigil over Erin, when the danger was past, he had declined to elaborate further. This left the Winchesters to wonder if there was more to it, or if Cass had somehow found a human streak in him after all, but they let him keep his secrets. If it were of import, he would say something.

Castiel knew the boys were not wrong about either notion. It was shades of both, but mostly it was the knowledge that with one half of the whole prophecy fulfilled, the half none but he and Anna knew about, would come to pass. Both Heaven and Hell would be after Erin, intent on killing her before she could fulfill it. Hunters, Immortals, and Watcher-Hunters would be after her head, as well, once they caught wind of what she was doing.

Her respite would be short lived. Cass would offer her what concealment he could until she was back on her feet. It was all he could do. After that, she would be on her own. He could not invest his protection in her when his primary charges needed it far more. He knew she wouldn’t want him to and would refuse it, even if it were offered, but the angel did not envy her.

Cass also spent the time considering what had transpired. The teleportation still nagged at him. It made sense that if God had done it, it would have been some random location of no relevance to anything other than the safety of the masses when Erin was set off. But they had gone to the one place Erin saw as “safe”: The Cliffs of Moher. Where, as a child, she had danced along their edge and an angel, though she never knew it, had kept her from falling. It made him wonder if, somehow, it had been Erin who had done it, unconsciously. And if she had, what that meant. But as with many things, it was something he didn’t have an answer for. It was something that would bear watching in
the future, if he could manage it.

Once Dean had been certain Erin was comfortable, up to and including demanding Cass “clean her up and fix her clothes with his mojo”, he had become distant. From time to time he checked on Erin. There were times both the angel and Sam caught him watching over her, when he thought no one was looking. Dean refused to speak of anything that had happened and if pressed, even a little, he retreated with some excuse to avoid the conversation. The fact he had taken it upon himself to repair Erin’s Mustang served as the perfect excuse and he took advantage of it liberally.

It was left to Sam to care for the little details. He did without any complaints. He showed his frustration with heavy sighs when his brother grabbed any opportunity to beg off conversation.

Dean’s reticence only grew worse once Erin woke. He was plagued by guilt. Guilt for his hand in her torment. Guilt that it had all been for nothing. Ahriman hadn’t known anything about the seals.

He was also haunted by the fact that he had fallen in love with Erin. Haunted with the truth that he couldn’t stay. He was a Hunter. Stopping the Apocalypse, as impossible as that seemed, was his task. His cross to bear.

Even if Erin was willing, if there was some possible way for him to make amends to her for what he had done, it could never be. That tore at him until even being in the same room with her, seemed to be the hardest thing he had ever had to do.

Erin was no better. She was as withdrawn and as tight-lipped as Dean. With her, it wasn’t the torture that kept her tongue still. Though the mark it had left would be long in healing. It was the loss of Christian. He was gone as utterly and completely as if he had never existed. Not even his soul remained. Neither locked in her head, nor transitioned to Heaven, or Hell. He just wasn’t, anymore. Like all the souls of the evil Immortals, like Ahriman, Christian had been totally obliterated. It had been the destruction of those souls that saved Erin from the Dark Quickening and the demonic possession of Ahriman, but she wondered if the price had been worth it.

Erin had killed her own brother. Christian’s fall from grace had been a direct result of her influence. It was her failure as his teacher, and as his sister. And now he was simply gone. No amount of warm shoulder pats or consoling looks from anyone was ever going to change that. Though Sam didn’t hesitate to pass them out like they were going out of style. Erin had not had a revelation and found her purpose in life. She had not found her Faith. In fact, she was more broken now than she had ever been. She didn’t think those wounds could, or would, ever heal.

Then, there was the fact that she had fallen in love with Dean. That was something that she hadn’t intended on. She knew his fate did not lie down the same path she had to travel. She was the only Immortal that knew what the Immortals truly were, and why they existed. She was the only one that knew the Immortals were being honed, whittled down for a purpose that none of them had any choice in. Erin had meant it when she said that she would find a way to stop the Gathering. To find some way to give her brethren the choice they didn’t know that they should have. And that meant that she and Dean could never take their relationship any further than this. It made watching him struggling with his own torment, in knowing all that could be, and yet, not be able to act on it, more torturous than any of the cuts he inflicted on her while torturing Ahriman.

Erin and Dean's refusal to do more than speak cordially to each other confused Castiel to no end. He could see into their souls. He knew they loved each other, and he could not understand why that wasn't enough. If you loved, you loved. But humans insisted on making it so complicated. Again he was struck by how utterly confusing his Father's favorite creations were. Even Erin. For surely, she was one of them. Despite her angelic nature, she was as human as the Winchesters, and she seemed to prefer it that way.
It drove Sam crazy. After twenty-four hours of watching Dean and Erin politely avoid each other, Sam couldn't take it anymore. Erin was flipping through a large black address book, making arrangements to start a new life. A life that would be as transient as the brothers'. Sam sat down on the bed beside her.

It took her a moment, but she looked sideways at him through the fall of her hair, questioningly. "What?"

"Are you and Dean ever going to talk? Or are you just going to keep giving each other lingering glances when the other isn't looking?" Sam asked.

Erin closed the address book with a sigh. "It's not that easy, Sam. I wish it was, but it isn't," she said remorsefully. She didn't give Sam a chance to respond. She got up and headed for the door to avoid the conversation. Just like Dean.

Castiel was right on her heels when she got to the door. She barely seemed to notice him following, and did not acknowledge his presence, though Cass knew that she took comfort in his close proximity for some reason. Erin had found something with the angel and the Winchesters that she never thought to find in anyone. Whether God, Immortal, or mortal. It was that that kept her hanging on.

"So you're just going to leave it like this? Both of you?" Sam called after her incredulous. Erin paused with her hand on the doorknob.

"One of a thousand regrets," Erin said so softly Sam couldn't hear her as she slipped out.

Dean and Erin’s silence was still in full effect the following day. Though Erin had broken it briefly, to ask that Dean and Sam attend Beth’s funeral in her stead, since for all public intents and purposes, ‘Erin Morgan’ had died falling from a skyscraper a week earlier and her body was still missing. That one brief break in their mutual avoidance of conversation had been the only one however.

Erin’s Mustang sat on the shoulder of a highway, off I-95, close to West Palm Beach. Cass and Erin waited for the boys to meet up with them. The Mustang was back in pristine condition thanks to Dean. Who had put more work in, in five days, than was really required in his effort to avoid having to face reality.

Resting on the backseat of the car was a long box. The mailing label read “To Adam Pierson” in London, England. Within the box, carefully packed, was Methos’s Ivanhoe broadsword. Erin’s sword was stashed in the gap beside the driver’s seat and the door, within easy range should she need it.

In the trunk of the car was Erin’s past. All of that mattered anyway. The small cache of weapons she had kept through the years, and Christian’s sword. One of the only tangible reminders she had to tell her he’d existed at all. The other reminder, her photo album, was stuffed at the bottom of her duffel bag, under clothes and personal effects. That rode in the back seat next to Methos’s sword.

The vial meant to contain Erin’s soul was hanging from the rearview mirror, glinting in the afternoon sun. She’d asked Cass if she could keep it. The angel hadn’t asked why, but she knew that Cass already knew the reason. It was an indelible reminder of everything she meant to stop and everything
that had brought her to this time and place. For all its beauty it was not meant as a pleasant reminder.

In spite of what the vial represented, despite all that weighed on her, Erin had shoved it down and was attempting to be her usual sarcastic and witty self. If anything about her could be called “usual” anymore.

Erin perched on the hood of the car, while Cass leaned back on the bumper. Between them was a second duffel. On either side of the bag sat open bottles of RC cola. Erin took a bite from the chocolate Moon Pie in her hand and looked at the angel expectantly.

“Are you going to eat it or stare at it?”

“I do not require sustenance,” Cass pointed out, looking at the round confection in his hand with consternation.

“It’s junk food, Cass. No one ‘requires’ it,” Erin pointed out.

“Then why are you consuming it?” Cass asked, turning the Moon Pie over in his hands and inspecting it further.

“Because it’s two layers of candy-coated-graham-cracker-cookie-marshmallowy goodness. You don’t need a reason,” Erin said as if that explained everything. The angel gave her a skeptical look.

“And these?” he asked, picking up the RC bottle she had given him and turning it so the dark liquid sloshed.

“Tradition,” Erin said. That confused the angel further.

“Why is it ‘tradition’?”

“I don’t know. It just is. Who cares why? It tastes good,” Erin said.

“That hardly seems a justifiable reason to eat it,” Cass observed. Erin snorted and grinned, shaking her head.

“Suit yourself,” she said and took a bite of hers.

Cass stood there contemplating the Moon Pie and the RC cola for a few moments more before either of them spoke again. The road was empty and the only noise was the occasional call of a songbird.

“You said ‘yes’. You found your Faith in God,” he said, finally turning the conversation to what he really wanted to talk about.

Erin stopped eating and set the Moon Pie aside. She gave the angel a deeply considering look before she responded. She shook her head, “No. I didn’t find faith in God. In fact, if I ever meet the man I’m going to kick his ass,” she said. “I found faith in you, Cass. And in Sam and Dean.”

The angel was startled by the revelation. He had thought, surely, that to say “Yes” and have it work, meant that she had found her faith in his Father. At the same time he was deeply moved. The amount of faith it must have taken would have been tremendous. It was daunting to have someone place that kind of faith in you, angel or not.


“I don’t know. I don’t care either. God can still kiss my ass. I never want to do that again. I had no
control over anything. I was under this compulsion that I couldn’t resist. I didn’t have any free will. I
don’t even know how to describe it. There aren’t words. But it was the most horrible thing I’ve ever
felt. It was like…trying to hold onto the sun,” Erin confessed.

“Is that all you felt? There was nothing else? You don’t feel different since you were brought back?”
Cass prodded.

“That was enough, believe me. But, no. There’s nothing else. I still feel like me. Or as much ‘me’ as
I’m ever going to, if that’s what you mean,” Erin said pausing, “Though… I can feel you. Sort of the
same way I can feel other Immortals, but different. I don’t know how to explain it. Maybe it was
always there and I was just too caught up in my mission to save Christian to notice. I don’t know.”

“Perhaps,” Cass agreed but he filed the information away for consideration. That revelation along
with the questions he had about where they had been taken to, made him wonder if there wasn’t
something more afoot.

“I see the pain, the guilt, the anger, and the confusion inside you. You are still,” Cass paused looking
for the right word, “broken.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to not be broken, Cass. Life just doesn’t work that way. There are no
happy endings, because nothing ends.”

“You miss your brother,” Cass observed.

“Yeah. I do. I always will. And I’m always going to regret that I failed him. I’m always going to
regret that…,” Erin trailed off, her voice strained. She had been about to say she would regret leaving
Dean behind. “I’m always going to regret a lot of things.”

The angel looked at her knowingly. Ever since he’d walked in her unconscious, ever since she had
been brought back, by God, of that Castiel had no doubt, there was a kind of bond between them
that hadn’t been there before. It wasn’t something Cass could name, and it wasn’t as profound as the
one he had with Dean, but it was definitely something.

They could sit for hours, not moving or saying anything, and still it was there. Erin took a comfort in
his presence that the angel didn’t understand, but he was grateful he could give her that much, at
least. He understood her more than he thought she knew.

“But you have hope,” Cass pointed out. Erin snorted softly and a smile quirked her lips.

“Yeah, I suppose I do.”

There was another long pause while Erin absently played with her RC bottle and Cass watched a
Marsh hawk soar overhead in search of prey.

“I am sorry, Erin. For all of it,” he said as the hawk folded its wings and dove like a missile for a
bank of grass.

“I know. But I would rather have the truth than a million lies. No matter how bad it is. For that, I
thank you. You and Sam and Dean, had faith in me when no one else did. I can never repay you for
that,” Erin said softly.

Castiel nodded in understanding.

“I meant what I said, Cass. I will try to find a way to stop the Gathering,” Erin warned. Castiel let a
hint of a smile flit across his features.
“If there is anyone who can do it, it’s you,” he said with confidence.

Erin smiled softly. “Well, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“‘In the shadows she will stand between Heaven and Earth as God wills. Righting what the hosts of heaven would take. Bringing light from dark, choice from its absence, purging evil from the ranks. That the weapon of God will be righteous and good, free to choose, as it was intended,’” Cass said. Erin’s brow quirked.

“You’re writing poetry now?”

“No. It’s the second half of the prophecy.”

Erin gave him a confused look. “Second half? That wasn’t in the Gathas.”

“No. The prophet Cassandra wrote it,” Cass said.

“Wait, the prophet—you mean the Immortal Cassandra? The witch of Donan Wood?”

“I don’t know that she is a witch. But yes, the Immortal Cassandra is a prophet. I was not aware of it before,” Cass said.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the second half before now?” Erin asked.

“Had I revealed the true nature or the entirety of the prophecy, any chance you had of survival would have been destroyed. The choice had to be yours,” Cass said.

“Free will,” Erin observed.

“Yes,” Cass said. “You do not seem angered I kept it from you.”

Erin scoffed and shook her head. She took a drink from her RC bottle. “Yeah, well. I’m getting kinda numb to the mind blowing revelations at this point. And like you said, if you had told me, I’d be dead. So you had your reasons. I understand that. But, I don’t know that I can stop the Gathering. I said I would try.”

“I know the Immortals’ fate rests with you. I know that you are the only one who can stop the Gathering and prevent Heaven or Hell from taking control of the Immortals,” Cass said. Erin’s eyes misted over and she shook her head.

“You don’t ask for much, do you?”

“No one is ever asked for more than they can give,” the angel answered.

“That’s crap and you know it. We’re asked for more than we can give all the time. But, you were right Cass. If I don’t do it, who will? But I’m not doing this because I want God’s Weapon to be pure and good. I don’t want God to have a Weapon, period. Not when it takes all your free will, when it destroys you. I’m doing this because it needs to be done. Because Immortals deserve the chance to make their own choice,” Erin said with conviction.

“You will be hunted. By Heaven and Hell,” Cass said in warning.

“And by Hunters, and Watcher-Hunters and other Immortals. I know it won’t be easy. But, Duncan’s the One. I’m dead sooner or later anyway. If I’m going, I’m going out fighting,” Erin said. She paused for a long moment and then asked, “Have you told Dean and Sam the second half of the prophecy?”
“No.”

Erin nodded jerkily. “Good. Don’t.”

Cass looked at her contemplatively for a moment. “Why?”

“You don’t think saddling Dean with keeping the apocalypse from happening is enough?”

The angel nodded in understanding. Dean and Erin were much alike in that respect. Both were willing to fight for what destiny proclaimed they should. But neither of them was doing it for the reasons fate had chosen for them. Their reasons were their own. Neither really believed in destiny. They believed in free will.

“What will you do?” Cass asked. Erin shrugged and looked completely lost.

“I have no idea.”

Before their conversation could go any further, Dean and Sam came gliding down the highway in the Impala, slowing to a respectable speed in just enough time to park it on the opposite shoulder of the road without sending a spray of dirt and grass into the air. Both got out, clad in suits and ties, looking quite dashing.

The atmosphere changed like someone had flipped a switch. The slightly sad contemplative air became instantly thick and heavy, the tension between Dean and Erin, and Sam’s subsequent unease and frustration became almost tangible. Erin forced on a wide toothed smile for them as they crossed the road to meet them.

“You both clean up nicely,” she said. Sam fingered his lapel and looked down at himself briefly before grinning with as much forced casualty as Erin. Castiel stood by, a silent watcher. This was between the three of them.

“Thanks.”

Dean smiled but it never reached his eyes. They remained maudlin and reserved. He said nothing and Erin avoided meeting his gaze.

“Was it nice?” Erin asked in a strained voice, of the funeral. Dean was looking at his shoes. Sam was the one who had to answer after shooting an annoyed look at his brother.

“Yeah, it was really pretty. Beth’s mom said Beth would have loved all the pink carnations. Her and Beth’s father were really surprised to find out you had willed that much cash to Beth. They said the ten grand plus the cost of the funeral would help them out a lot. And they expressed their condolences over your ‘death’ too.”

Erin swallowed hard, her eyes misting over a little and nodded tightly. Dean gave her a pained glance when her eyes lowered so she wouldn’t see. This was killing both of them.

“I wish I could have done more,” Erin muttered. Sam nodded his understanding and there came that awkward silence again. Pregnant with everything left unsaid.

“So I guess this is it, huh?” Sam said. He knew this is where their shared paths came to an end but for Dean’s sake he wished it didn’t. He didn’t see why it had to.

“Yeah. Guess so,” Erin said with an emotion-roughened voice. “Here,” she added and tossed Sam the duffel that had been between her and Cass. Sam caught it with a huff of expelled air. The bag
was heavier that he’d though it would be. He unzipped it to find out why and did a double take. Inside there were bundles of twenty dollar bills. A lot of them.

“Off shore bank account. There’s ten grand there. It would be more but it’s kind of hard to get a check cashed when you’re supposed to be dead,” Erin offered in sardonic explanation. Even Dean snapped to attention then, peering into the bag in surprise. It finally made him speak up.

“Oh no, Erin,” he said with a shake of his head. “We didn’t do this for money. We can’t accept this.”

“Dean…,” Sam said in protest. It wasn’t the money, it was the gesture itself he was protesting Dean’s refusal of.

“Shut up, Sam,” Dean shot back. Erin cut them both off.

“Yes you can. You can’t tell me you don’t need it and just ‘thank you’ seems a little inadequate.”

It didn’t pass Dean’s notice that the one time he didn’t want even a ‘thank you’ in return for what they’d done was the one time someone had given him and Sam more than that. And he would have given it all back, he wouldn’t have cared about the money or anything else, if he knew things could be different. It didn’t pass his notice that, that way of thinking was completely unlike him either. He gave a deep sigh and threw up his hands. He knew it would be pointless to argue with her and with everything that had passed between them the last thing he wanted was for them to part ways after an argument.

“Thanks,” Sam said with a melancholy grin. That much money would hold him and his brother for a long time on the road. For once they wouldn’t have to run credit card scams and risk getting caught by the authorities while they were trying to save the world. But, just like Dean, if things could have been different, he’d have given it all back without a thought.

“What about you? What are you going to do now?” Sam asked Erin. Dean had resumed staring at the ground in fascination to avoid having to meet Erin’s gaze and she seemed disinclined to stop him. This caused them both anguish. Both hated long goodbyes.

“Kick ass, take names. Do a little head hunting. Figure out how to stop the Gathering. You know, the usual,” she answered him with a grin that had just a hint of real sarcastic humor in it. Sam smiled back and snickered despite the mood. The comment was so like something Dean would say. Then he grew somber again, thinking. Wanting to find a way to fix all of it.

“Come with us,” Sam pleaded. Dean looked up then, his forced stony expression barely covering the vain hope and pained truth that lay there. Erin gave Sam a sad glance.

“You know I can’t.”

“No. I don’t,” Sam argued. “You’re as good a fighter as either of us. You’re better with a sword than anyone but Cass. You could get good with a gun. We could teach you everything we know. We could hunt together.”

Erin shook her head. “No, Sam. We can’t,” she said. Sam ran over her counter argument before she could finish it.

“Damn it, why not? There’s safety in numbers. We’d be stronger as a group than apart. You’re going to be alone out there.”

“I’m Immortal, Sam. That’s how we do it. We go it alone. There can be only one,” Erin said, pushing home the fact that despite the overwhelming similarities between humans and Immortals.
They were still different and they always would be.

“Well, it’s stupid,” Sam bit sullenly. He was getting desperate to convince Erin, if he couldn’t convince Dean, that this was the right thing to do. He couldn’t stand watching either of them being torn apart like this. Most of all Dean. He’d rarely seen his brother like this and it unsettled him more than he liked to admit. Dean was the big brother, he wasn’t supposed to be the one getting his heart ripped out. Erin was like family now; he didn’t like seeing either of them at such odds. “You can’t leave it like this. You care about Dean and I know he cares about you. We could do this together.”

Dean and Erin both flinched when he said it. He was perilously close to voicing what neither of them would. Erin shook her head again sorrowfully. “Sam, it doesn’t matter. I wish it did, but it doesn’t. I’m about to try to stop the Gathering. You guys are trying to stop the apocalypse from happening. We’re fighting two different battles on the same side of a war. Dean is the angels’ golden boy right now and they are going to be hunting me to stop me. It would be like painting a target on my back. Demons are going to be after all of us and I’m going to be running from Watcher-Hunters, other Immortals and probably Hunters too, eventually. That would paint targets on your backs. You think they won’t try to hurt you two to get to me? Or vice versa? We’d just endanger each other. We’re all a liability to the other.”

“Erin…,” Sam protested in exasperation. Dean cut him off, though his voice was thick with anguish.

“She’s right, Sammy. She’s got a job to do and so do we. And neither one of those fights can be fought together. It just doesn’t end that way,” Dean said not voicing what he left unsaid, what they all knew. No matter how this ended. Erin was dead. It was the same as when Dean had sold his soul to save Sam. Sooner or later, she’d either lose her head to another Immortal, since Duncan MacLeod was fated to be the One, or she’d fail to outmaneuver Heaven or Hell and they would kill her. It could even be another Hunter or a rogue Watcher that did it. But it would happen and she knew it. Their fight might, by some slim chance, end one day. Hers never would.

“Dean…,” Sam countered about to launch into a counter argument against his brother but Dean wouldn’t hear it.

“We should go,” he said gruffly, everything he wanted to say and couldn’t on the tip of his tongue. Erin looked him in the eye then, her expression a match for his own. He looked away before he broke down and just blurted it all out in a moment of weakness.

“Yeah, I guess we should,” she agreed in a soft voice. Sam looked between them in stark disbelief. He’d never seen two people so hard headed in his life. Dean had already turned to leave, unable to remain standing there without giving in to what his heart wanted him to do, despite his head telling him not to.

“Hey,” Erin said suddenly. Dean turned back. “Give me a minute with Sam?” Dean felt like she’d kicked him but he understood she was doing the same thing he was. Avoiding what she felt because it would hurt too much. But it pained him that it was Sam she wanted to pull aside and say good bye to and not him.

“How ya holdin’ up?” he asked weakly now that Dean was out of hearing range. She at least, was a shade more open than his brother. Erin snorted softly and looked at him. Sam understood it as if she’d spoken. She wasn’t ‘holding up’, she was torn into pieces none of them could put back
“Yeah.”

“Sam, listen. I can’t thank you and Dean enough for all you’ve done. But I have to say this. I don’t know what your relationship is with Ruby and I don’t want to. But something was going on in that salle and I know it. I don’t know what. And I probably don’t want to know that either. I do know she’s a demon. I’ve been around a long time, Sam. You learn to recognize deception when you see it. I can’t help but feel that she’s up to something and I don’t like it,” Erin said. It had been itching at her since she’d seen them in the salle together. It scraped at the inside of her skull now like a beetle trying to burrow its way out. Something else that seemed different since she’d come back, a stronger gut instinct. She hadn’t felt it was different enough to mention it to Cass.

“She’s different. She saved my life, Erin,” Sam insisted a bit of ire creeping into his voice. He’d had this conversation so many times with Dean and now Erin was saying the same thing. They just didn’t get it. He was relieved he knew now, that she didn’t know exactly what was going on in the salle that day with Ruby but it still irked him that no one got it.

“Just…watch your back. Okay?” Erin said in all seriousness. She sniffled a bit and Sam could tell she was trying not to get teary eyed over goodbyes. “I’m gonna be really pissed if I have to come hunt the bitch down because she hurt either of you,” she added jokingly to soften the rebuke. Sam managed a real smile of his own despite his irritation and he felt a little teary himself.

“You take care of yourself,” he said.

“You bet,” she said, lying as much as he had only a moment before. Then, she walked back to the car and reached in the Mustang’s open window, pulling something off the dash and holding it up. It was a small digital camera.

“I know it’s silly, but can I get a picture?”

“Sure,” Sam agreed. Erin propped the camera up and set it on a time delay, hurrying back to Sam’s side. Dean looked hesitant and Sam shot him a sharp look. Reluctantly, Dean joined them dragging Cass along with him. The angel looked rather confused and didn’t see what the point was but he complied. It was just another of those odd human customs the Winchesters insisted on dragging him into.

Dean tried to place himself on the outside of the line up but Sam wouldn’t let him. As soon as he got on Sam’s far side, Sam ducked out of line and got on the end. There wasn’t time to change places again. Hesitantly, Dean posed for the picture and allowed himself the one luxury of wrapping an arm around Erin’s waist. It felt good to have her under his arm just like it had the first time. Erin’s lips turned up in a bittersweet smile and Dean returned it. Cass was on Erin’s other side standing head held high, stern and stiff as a stick. She slipped her arm behind his back, which garnered an odd sidelong look from the angel but he said nothing. Sam draped his arm over his brother’s shoulders and they all deign to look presentable for the camera. A second later, it went off with a flash and they were all immortalized in a digital snapshot. Cass and Sam stepped away but for a moment, against his will, Dean lingered. He didn’t want to let go and it hurt to be this close and do…nothing. Reluctantly he pulled away. She was looking back at him with as much anguish as he felt and the words came out of his mouth unbidden.

“Erin, if I could take it all back…,” he began, again searching for a way to mend the rift he saw
between them.

“All of it?” she asked. Dean couldn’t answer, his throat tightened and closed. No he wouldn’t take all of it back, no matter how much it hurt.

“You did what you had to. I told you, you reach two thousand years old and you’ll think differently. The torture, it had to be done. No one knew Ahriman didn’t know about the seals. If he’d gotten loose on the world, if Christian had… if I had, with him inside me. It doesn’t bear thinking about. I forgive you, I always did,” she said softly with a sad smile. Dean nodded awkwardly and they stood there for a moment not able to find words to say to each other. Sam and Cass had moved a bit away, giving them some shade of privacy.

Dean started to leave again and Erin stopped him, grabbing his hand and pulling him back. Dean startled in surprise but she didn’t give him time to do anything else. “The hell with it,” she whispered as she stepped to him, pulling his head down to hers, her fingers twining in his hair. She kissed him fiercely and deeply, stunning him with the intensity of it. She poured everything she was into it, pressing her body against him. His hands went into her hair, pulling her tighter still and they were back on the roof of Erin’s beach house again. Every pent up and withheld emotion, everything they wouldn’t say aloud, flooded into that kiss. It was the height of bliss and the epitome of pain. All that was and could never be. When she broke the kiss it was slowly, reluctant to let it go. Her hand remained on his face, her thumb caressing his cheek. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and so did Dean’s. She tilted her head a little and looked at him with absolute heartbreak. He returned it.

“I could love you, Dean Winchester,” she said and stepped back, reaching behind her and opening the Mustang’s driver side door at the same time. Dean felt like someone had ripped his heart out all over again. He knew now Ahriman hadn’t been lying. It wasn’t that Erin ‘could’ love him. She did and he loved her and both of them knew they couldn’t be together. It was too dangerous, for all of them. Randomly a line from Shakespeare floated through his head. ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. “No. It isn’t,” his subconscious said back.

Erin slipped inside the car and shut the door, turning over the engine with a flick of the keys. Cass and Sam joined Dean beside it.

“I’ll see you around…Uncle Cass,” Erin said with a sudden bright smile. The angel’s eyes widened and he looked shocked but it faded into a real, if brief, smile. Then she looked at Sam and finally her eyes fell back on Dean. “I’ll keep in touch,” she said still smiling. Dean knew it was for them that she smiled. She reached down twisting the radio knob. Kansas’s Fight Fire With Fire came belting out of the speakers and Erin slipped on a pair of sunglasses that had been hung on the sun visor. She hit the gas and peeled out heading north toward I-95.

Dean watched her go mournfully. “No. You won’t,” he said as the Mustang’s blue paint job faded out of sight. He knew she wouldn’t, just like he knew he wouldn’t keep in touch with her. It would only hurt them both.

Castiel strolled up behind him at his shoulder, silent as a ghost. “She’s only said that to one other person in two thousand years,” he observed. There was a long moment of silence, like Cass was leaving something unsaid, as that sunk in painfully. Dean turned to say something back. But, the angel was gone in a rush of wing beats, disappearing like he always did, with no warning. Leaving the brothers alone on the lonely stretch of Florida highway.

“Dean...you should mar--,” Sam began to say, laying a consoling hand on his shoulder but he stopped, thinking better of what he’d been about to say. But Dean already knew what the words would have been.
“You were going to tell me I should marry her,” he finished for him. Sam immediately tried to back pedal for fear of causing Dean more pain.

“No I wasn’t.”

Dean gave a weak chuckle. “You so were.”

Sam smiled wanly. “Yeah, maybe.”

Dean really smiled then and shook his head. “Woman knows how to make an exit.”

“Yeah, Erin has definitely got style,” Sam agreed smiling back and laughing.

“Don’t we have something to go hunt?” Dean asked, striding for the car.

“No, but I’m sure we can find something,” Sam said going along with his brother’s need to play what had happened off as he got into the passenger side of the Impala. He knew it was what his brother needed right now. Dean got in and started the car, turning out and heading the opposite way Erin had.

“Good,” he said. Sam paused a moment.

“You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be fine,” Dean insisted. Sam knew he was lying but he left it alone. Silently he folded up his jacket and stuffed it under his head as a pillow, leaning on the door and tried to nap.

Dean didn’t say anything else, but when he thought Sam was asleep, Sam saw him driving down the highway, a single tear sliding unchecked down his face.

If they had been able to look across time and space, they would have seen Erin, driving alone in the opposite direction, her cheeks wet with tears.
Epilogue

Castiel stood on the edge of a park somewhere in the Midwest. The first hints of spring were declaring themselves timidly here. The grass pushed through the soil in pale green spears, spotted with clumps of darker leaves clumped together with heavy heads on them. One day soon, they would bloom into daffodils and blue bonnets, scattering dashes of blue and yellow across the quiet park lawn, adding more color around the brightly painted playground equipment atop their bed of wood chips. The slides and monkey bars already bore the weight and attention of children clattering up and down ladders and slides with the enthusiasm of the young when the cold of winter gave way to the promise of spring..

On simple wood benches, tolerant parents sat reading or chatting with each other as they watched their offspring go laughing and shouting past to the next amusement. It was a muted but constant chorus of comforting noise. Somewhere a toddler wailed unhappily, the angel’s eyes tracked across the area and found him. A little boy, no more than three years old was sitting on the padding of wood chips around the playground structures, nursing his wounded ego from a fall but, Castiel could see the child was no worse for wear. No sooner had the child cried out than a young mother swooped in to rescue him, cooing and stroking the child’s hair. The boy smiled and laughed at his mother who kissed him on top of the head, then smiled and laughed back. Just as quickly as he’d begun to cry, the child was off again, sprinting across the park’s expanse to a merry go round, whatever had caused his upset instantly forgotten. The mother watched him go, pushing her light brown hair behind her ear as the breeze teased at it, beaming at her son.

Castiel watched and wondered at how oblivious they all were to what transpired in the dark corners of the world and what hid in the shadows just outside their perception, waiting for a chance to steal away their naïve peace. And yet, it heartened him a bit to watch his Father’s beloved creations like this. Some of them tried, they really did, to be good people, to be what his Father had wanted them to be, even if they didn’t believe in him. Unlike so many of his brothers and sisters, the angel couldn’t see them as hairless apes, mud monkeys with no conscience that had usurped the angels’ place as his Father’s favorites. He loved them for all their flaws and faults…for their humanity. Just as his Father had wanted him to do.

If Erin Morgan had a penchant for high places when she wanted to think, Castiel was right the opposite. He preferred places like this, places where he could watch the innocent and unknowing creatures leading their normal lives and reflect. Erin wanted to remove herself from the rest of the world at times like this. He wanted to immerse himself in it, even if those he watched had no idea he was there.

The last time he’d checked in on the boys they had been heading toward Windom, Minnesota. They hadn’t known he was there, he hadn’t wanted them to. Dean was weighted down with the weight of the world, as he always was but it was worse now. Erin, the apocalypse, his destiny, all ate at him and only grew heavier with each passing day. The angel could see it in his every breath. The Winchesters were off on another of their jobs, one of those that they insisted on attending to despite the need to find Lilith or stop seals from breaking, to keep Lucifer from rising. They still found those jobs important in the scheme of things.

Castiel found himself admiring that about them. Before he hadn’t, he’d only been able to see the immediate threat of the apocalypse. But now, he was starting to think differently. Anna had been right; feeling had only been the beginning and the angel was deeply troubled and confused. Watching his Father’s favorites going about their lives gave him perspective but he no longer believed it was the perspective he once sought. Now he no longer saw a herd of instinct and emotion
driven underlings that required the constant shepherding of Heaven to keep from destroying themselves. Now he was divided. He saw the innocence and joy but he also saw the destruction, the pain, the hopelessness. How many children that darted among the bars of the jungle gym wouldn’t see their eighteenth birthdays? Of those that did how many would suffer so much in their lives they would wish they’d never been born? How many, that looked so innocent now, would become monsters one day or perpetrate crimes on their own kind? How many had had those same crimes already inflicted on them? How many of those smiling faces, parent and child, hid pain and grief so deep nothing could ever mend it? How many hid behind a façade of jovial congeniality while the world they knew crumbled around them and they could do nothing to stop it?

The pain so far outweighed the rest Castiel thought it might swallow him alive. Was this the world as the Winchesters and Erin saw it? Hopeless? Beyond saving? Once again, Castiel doubted. He doubted everything. Where was his Father in all this? Dean’s words and Erin’s ringing in his head. Shouldn’t he be here saving his children? Shouldn’t he be guiding the angels? Was Heaven’s plan really for the greater good? Was there anything worth saving left of humanity except a sad few who themselves were so broken only the peace and forgiveness of paradise could begin to offer a relief from the dismal existence life offered them? Like Dean? Like Sam? Like Erin?

Then again, was that the wrong way to look at it? Was it the slim light that still shone so faintly among mankind what made all the pain, sacrifice and suffering worth it? This entire sequence of events with the Winchesters, with Erin Morgan had made the angel reassess everything he’d ever thought he believed in. They affected him in ways he found terrifying and yet, he had no regrets about it. He found himself, feeling—really feeling, for the first time in his very long life. He had grown attached to them despite his best attempts not to. He found himself questioning Heaven’s plan for the boys, for Erin. So many questions—about everything, and not an answer anywhere.

All his questions had kept him from reporting in the weeks since he and the Winchesters had watched Erin drive away on that Florida highway. He’d checked in on Erin twice during that time. The last time, she’d been in the Seacouver International Airport, about to catch a flight out of the country for parts unknown in pursuit of Cassandra, the Immortal and prophet who had put into words, what her destiny was foretold to be. Erin had driven straight from Florida to Seacouver in five days, stopping only to sleep enough that she wouldn’t fall asleep behind the wheel and then pressing on. She’d spent the time prior to her decision to go out of the country on her hunt trying to weasel, beg, and buy any information she could about Cassandra from Joe Dawson, the retired Watcher she had turned to about Christian, before he and the Winchesters had become entangled in the affair. Cass had taken the opportunity then to wipe Joe Dawson’s memory like he had intended to do before, leaving him with only the most pertinent information. Dawson would never remember that Duncan and Methos had gone to Florida after Erin. He would remember Erin seeking his help but everything that happened between those phone calls and her coming to him for his aid in finding Cassandra would be a blank.

Erin hadn’t looked good. Oh the smile was there, the laid back, devil may care attitude, was cranked up to eleven but the depths of her eyes were more shadowed than they’d ever been.

Castiel would like to have known more, he wished he dared to read her thoughts, though he suspected they still lay with Dean and the Gathering, but he didn’t dare. Whenever he’d come within enough distance that she could have sensed another Immortal, she would stop whatever she was doing and look around with a confused expression, as if she knew something was there and couldn’t quite place it. So the angel had kept his distance. It would seem Erin’s speculation that she could sense angels in much the same way she did other Immortals was proving to be true but it was rudimentary at best.

If time allowed he would continue his occasional check ins in the future. But, he knew it was
unlikely time would be on his side. As it was, the two he’d already indulged in, and it was indulgence on his part and he knew it, had cost him valuable time he should have been using to report what had happened to his superiors but he couldn’t do it. Not in as much turmoil as he was in. Yet it ate at him that he still didn’t understand the real purpose to what had transpired. He needed to know, he wanted to. He needed to understand why Zachariah had lied to him.

Castiel stood, his back to the thin stand of evergreens behind him that served as a taste of ‘wilderness’ in this manicured and sculpted park. He let out a long sigh and shoved his hands into his trench coat pockets, his fingers playing over the hilt of the dagger he’d given Erin use of. The metal was cool against his skin.

“It figures I’d find you somewhere like this,” said a chipper voice behind him. Castiel’s spine stiffened and he turned, keeping his expression blank and emotionless.

“Hello Castiel, been busy I take it?” Zachariah asked, his mostly bald pate reflecting the sunlight like a dull glass dome. His perfectly pressed suit, creased and fitted neatly to his vessel’s frame. Castiel started to open his mouth in a humble reply only to realize the question had been rhetorical.

“Too busy to make a report certainly. Because you wouldn’t just forget about reporting on something you’d been assigned to would you?” the elder angel went on, his voice deceptively happy and cordial. Cass eyed him warily.

“Of course not.”

“Hm, I didn’t think so. After all, you’re dependable, you follow orders, you get the job done. Isn’t that right Castiel?”

Cass backed up a pace, putting distance between him and his superior. Zachariah moved forward to prevent him and Castiel knew without a doubt that this wasn’t a social call. He’d been half expecting this to be honest. Dreading it in fact. You did not disobey an order without dire consequences. Heaven didn’t look kindly on it.

“And yet, that vile little half breed is still alive. Now correct me if I’m wrong but I thought I instructed you to make sure she died.”

Castiel’s eyes turned hard and angry but he kept the flare of fury in check, barely.

“You did. And for a time she was dead but it would seem that our Father had other plans,” he said choosing his words carefully. One wrong word could and would put him at Heaven’s mercy. All Hell’s torture, twice the righteousness.

“Really? And what proof do you have of that?” Zachariah questioned his expression still casual and deceivingly open, then it turned to stone and wrath. “You were supposed to kill her! Prophecy, destiny, fate. That’s what we do Cass.”

Castiel’s head tilted in contemplation. He’d chosen his words because he’d thought God interceding to change the outcome in Erin’s favor would be unquestionable proof that they had taken the wrong course of action. He knew Zachariah had lied to him, he knew the elder angel was up to something but to openly show anger that their Father had chosen another path for Erin came dangerously close to disobedience.

“You weren’t entirely honest with me though. Were you? You neglected to mention there was a second half to the prophecy, you deliberately kept the knowledge that the Immortals have their own prophet, Cassandra, from me. If this was about fate and destiny then why didn’t you tell me? But it
wasn’t was it?” Cass said, stepping forward, his frame rigid in anger.

Zachariah paused with an expression of arrogant superiority. “Are you accusing me of something? I’m your boss. You follow orders, you don’t question why you were given them.”

“And who’s giving those orders Zachariah? God…or you? You can’t buck prophecy remember? As it is written so shall it come to pass. You purposely tried to subvert prophecy. The Immortals aren’t Weapons of Heaven, they’re Weapons of God. Erin is fated to keep her kind from falling to the demons…from falling into Heaven’s control. They belong to God, our Father, not you,” Cass told him, openly accusing the other angel.

“Do they? I’m not the only one who tried to buck prophecy am I? So did you,” Zachariah pointed out. Cass’s mouth tightened and he studied the blades of grass at his feet briefly. That was true, all of them had tried to thwart prophecy in one way or another for different reasons.

“If they belong to God then why hasn’t he stopped me? The nephilim, filthy half-breed abominations that they are, are only good for one thing. They’re our secret weapon if we lose the big prize fight. They belong to Heaven and I will have control of them.”

“You’re dangerously close to blasphemy Zachariah,” Cass said, his heartbeat thudding suddenly and forebodingly in his chest.

“Blasphemy Castiel? There is no blasphemy. Our Father has left us high and dry. We’re running the show now,” Zachariah said with a smirk. Cass felt his racing heart drop to his feet in horror.

“You don’t get it do you? You’re just a grunt on the ground. Did you really think you knew what was going on? You have no idea, it’s way above your pay grade. You were sent to eliminate a problem and to learn a lesson, to teach the Winchesters a lesson and that’s it.”

Castiel’s eyes were cold and hard with fury but beneath the anger was a violent undercurrent of fear. Horrible mind numbing fear and disbelief as his brain put two and two together and came up with the Atom bomb.

“You can’t be—no,” he breathed, shaking his head slowly.

“Give the boy a cookie! By George I think he’s got it! The seals, Ahriman never knew about them. He was a means to an end, a way to teach Dean Winchester that he’s under our control and if he won’t do what we want willingly we’ll make him do it. A way to rid us of the threat your pet nephilim poses to Heaven’s control of her kind, among other things. Why do you think her and her brother’s situation so closely mirrored Sam and Dean? It’s synergy, the same inevitable end they are going to face. You think Ahriman would have gotten out of the Devil’s Gate if we hadn’t wanted him out, that any of them would have gotten out? We don’t want to save the seals Castiel. We never did. This has all been a very carefully plotted plan of action,” Zachariah explained with vicious glee.

Cass gaped, wide-eyed, completely dumb founded.

“You might not have gotten the job done but we will find Erin and we will kill her. We will have the nephilim under our control. And the Winchesters? They’re the key to the whole thing. Dean’s our golden boy. He’s the Michael Sword, Michael’s vessel. Sam, he’s Lucifer’s vessel. The apocalypse will happen, it’s destiny my friend.”

One line of the prophecy took on a whole new meaning with those words. These three shall be the trinity of god, angel, and demon.

“You can’t do this Zachariah. You’ll destroy half the planet!” Cass exclaimed in horror and betrayal.
“Humans are our Father’s creations you can’t just wipe them out. We can stop this.”

“You still haven’t learned your lesson have you?” Zachariah asked looking down his nose at Castiel. “Your sentimentality, your attachment, to those mud monkeys God calls his favorites, the nephilim abominations. None of them matter. We want paradise; we want it to be over and we will win at all costs. You serve Heaven not man, not nephilim. Heaven.”

Cass’s breath came in quick gasps of terror and revulsion. This couldn’t be happening. This was wrong. It was Lucifer’s fall all over again.

“Oh, I learned a lesson. It just wasn’t the one you wanted to teach,” he managed to growl. He had to tell Dean, he had to warn him.

“You listen to me,” Zachariah threatened but Castiel disappeared into thin air as he spoke. Zachariah tensed and clenched his jaw in rage.

“Castiel!” he roared at the empty air.

And so began the beginning of the end…

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