When Castiel mysteriously disappears the same night that Sam inexplicably returns from Hell, Dean decides to abandon the ‘apple pie life’ in favor of the road, desperate for answers. Hoping not only to find Cas, but to save their younger brother Adam from Hell, the Winchesters hit a snag when they realize they’re on the hit list of almost every demon, angel and resentful hunter out there. In an effort to buy themselves time, they enter a kind of supernatural witness protection with the help of a Phrygian goddess, but it comes with its own complications. All the while, Dean finds himself coming to terms with what the nerdy angel really means to him, while Sam is given a chance for forgiveness – if he could just forgive himself. Alternate Season Six, plot-driven Temporary-Longterm-Genderswap. THIS STORY HAS BEEN REFORMATTED! SEE EXPLANATION IN RE-POSTED CHP. 19 (6x10 INTRO). NO CONTENT HAS BEEN DELETED!
Beta Reader: Lonely Elf

Rating: R for violence, graphic scenes, coarse language, suggestive adult themes, multiple religious blasphemies and calling the Judeo-Christian deity all manner of bad names (Note: No spirits, shape shifters, werewolves, demons or angels were armed in the making of this fic.)

Warnings:

Spoilers – Extensive spoilers from Seasons 1 – 5; some spoilers for certain events in Season 6 & 7

Alternate Reality / Canon-Deviation – Takes place post 5x22 and completely reimagines what happens after. Because Season 6 and Season 7 displeased me greatly.

Genderswap – It’s (long-term) temporary. With a twist. That is twisty. I don’t generally like genderswap fics, but I read this one called Walk A Mile by cloudyjenn and a plot-bunny attacked me. So here is the result.

Temporary Use of Gender Neutral Pronouns – After careful consideration, I have decided to keep my gender-neutral pronouns in the fic (ze/zir/zirself/etc.) because they really show the difference between Castiel the angel and Cas the Winchester’s friend. For those of you who don’t like these, don’t worry, you don’t see them very often. Just two and a half chapters worth.

Resurrection of Canonically Dead Characters – Enough said.

Word Count: WIP

Blanket Disclaimer: This story utilizes characters, situations and premises that are copyright Eric Kripke and The CW. No infringement on their respective copyrights is intended by the author in any way, shape or form. This fan oriented story is written solely for the author's own amusement and the entertainment of the readers. It is not for profit. Any resemblance to real organizations, institutions, products or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. All fiction, plot and Original Characters with the exception of those introduced in the books and graphic novels, are the sole creation of erthechilde and using them without permission is considered rude, in bad-taste and will reflect seriously on your credibility as a writer. There may or may not be a curse in your future as well, so be warned. Remember, all things come in threes, good and bad. Plagiarizing is considered bad.

See the end of the work for more notes
The angel Castiel folded away wings formed by smoky tendrils of grace and stepped out of the aether, alighting soundlessly upon the rooftop of a Detroit skyscraper. It was nearing dark, the air cool and damp from the rain that had been falling for hours now; the sky was clear enough that Castiel imagined Heaven to be visible from the vantage point.

It was likely the closest ze would ever get to seeing it again.

Resigning zirself to that knowledge was surprisingly easy, even as the immense power of zir enhanced grace thrummed in response to the hymns of the Host in the eternal distance. It was the first time in a mortal year that they were audible, and though Castiel longed to join the chorus and add zir news that the Apocalypse had been averted, now was not the time.

Because Sam Winchester was in Hell and his brother Dean was bound to drive himself to insanity.
and agony with that knowledge.

After everything that Castiel had sacrificed for Dean, from the moment ze laid hands on him in the Pit and hauled him up from perdition, Castiel was still unable to abide Dean's misery. In practice, the suffering of any soul was troubling to an angel, but Dean was different.

It was true that his soul shone brighter than any other Castiel had ever seen, but it was also more than that. There was a bond between them – forged in the moment when Castiel used threads of zir own grace to stitch Dean's body and soul back together – which made the angel particularly sensitive to the emotional state of the human.

It made interactions with Dean easier to forge, and yet at the same time, more painful.

'God gives you a brand new, shiny set of wings and suddenly you're his bitch again.'

Dean's words had hurt more than they should have. Even now the memory was abrasive. Despite knowing that it was anger and grief at the loss of Sam which had fueled his verbal attack, Castiel imagined Dean blamed zir for everything that had happened. And so while Castiel had known that by default of zir second resurrection ze was meant to return to Heaven and oversee its reorganization, the very human emotion of guilt had prompted a change of course, bringing zir to this empty rooftop.

Although angelic presence interfered with the various electronic security measures that mortals used to guard their possessions, Castiel doubted ze would present a very worrisome threat in zir current guise if seen. James Novak, the man whose body Castiel wore and whose soul had been cleaved by an archangel's sword, had not been an imposing figure. The body was incrementally taller than was average for a human male, with delicate bone structure and below average strength. Its dark hair and particular skin pigmentation were unassuming, and had it not been for the peculiar blue eyes that all of Castiel's human vessels were born with, the face would have been considered plain by mortal standards.

In spite of the brisk night air, Castiel could still smell the particular aroma of Dean's automobile on the vessel's clothing. The blend of leather, human sweat and gun oil was not the most enticing scent ze had ever encountered, but it was far from the worst. In fact, Castiel was irrationally comforted by it.

'An illogical sentiment,' the angel chided zirself. Obviously the time spent in a human vessel had altered more than just zir allegiances. Nostalgia was a concept that had been foreign up until now.

Shaking zir head to clear it, a gesture left over from Jimmy, Castiel's attention returned to the problem at hand. Midnight was still a few hours off, and if this undertaking was to succeed, ze had to act quickly.

Digging into the pockets of the trench coat, ze brought out the coin that had been hidden within the Impala. Dean had explained how such a listening device had been used by Crowley for months before he offered them his aid. While the King of the Crossroads demons had removed that particular token, Castiel had not put it past the demon to place another. It had taken little effort on Castiel's part to locate it without Dean noticing.

"I wish to speak," Castiel said clearly, considering the coin in hand, "and I would rather avoid the trouble on both our ends if I were to summon you."

There was silence on the rooftop for an eighth of a second, before the wind suddenly carried upon it the distinct smell of sulfur. Castiel turned quickly but forced back the usual reaction to a demon's presence by calmly taking in the swarthy body of the demon; killing the one creature that could offer
assistance was not the best strategy at the moment.

To angelic eyes, the heavy-lidded face of his vessel appeared morbidly stretched over the ruination that was the demon's true form. The well-tailored clothing seemed inadequate to contain the perverted essence. Still, even Castiel would concede that Crowley's form was better kept than other demons tended to do. Likely it was left over fastidiousness from his time as a mortal.

"Ah, Castiel, Angel of Thursday," the demon pronounced as Castiel finished assessing him. His tone oozed self-satisfaction, yet there was a steely glint in his eyes, which flickered critically over Castiel's borrowed form. He whistled. "Or is it Archangel of Thursday now? I guess it's true what they said about size."

Castiel's augmented grace bristled with a combination of modesty and impatience. "Crowley."

"I assume from the fact you're all in one piece and from the amount of jabbering down on my end that our boys' Hail Mary worked then?"

"It worked, but do not act as though your minor involvement allows you any claim over them." Castiel did not like the notion that Crowley had any kind of connection to Dean or his brother.

Crowley smirked. "Is that so? Because my sources say it's not just Lucifer sitting pretty in the boom right now; seems he's got a cellmate, and they're both wearing Winchester this season."

Castiel felt the vessel's jaw clench at the not so subtle reminder that at the moment, a majority of the Winchester line was ensconced in Hell. Crowley's eyes gleamed at the acknowledgement, and he waved an impatient hand.

"Well? What was so important that it required a tête-à-tête?"

Castiel paused, conscious that now was the point where ze could still walk away and return to zir responsibilities in Heaven without upsetting the status quo too badly.

Instead ze fixed Crowley with an intense stare and declared, "I want to make a deal."

There was a beat during which the only sound was an airplane rumbling far overhead.

"You want to make a deal," Crowley repeated, slowly, as though he wasn't sure he had heard properly. When Castiel nodded, the demon's sly smile tightened. "I know you've been slumming with the hairless apes for a while now, luv, but you're an angel. You don't have a soul to sell."

"No. But I do have grace."

Crowley barked out a laugh, but when Castiel merely tilted the vessel's head to one side expectantly, the demon sobered. "Oh, you're serious."

"Yes."

Only the nearly imperceptible widening of the demon's eyes showed that he understood the gravity of the offer.

Crowley recovered the loss of composure that a mortal wouldn't have noticed, and cleared his throat. "Right, well, that's very Neo-Faustian and all, but what the hell am I going to do with something that can burn me up on contact?"

"As with a human soul, if you were to take possession of it, you would be immune to its effects,"
Castiel responded. "Given your situation, I'm sure you would be able to find a use for it."

Crowley's eyes narrowed. "And what 'situation' is it that you think I'm in?"

"Your hand in stopping Lucifer may have created a power vacuum in Hell, but it will not take long for other interested parties to step in," Castiel maintained neutrally. "As many supporters as you have, I am sure there are ten times that number who lost everything the minute the Devil failed. Ancient demons, almost as old as the Fall, who are more powerful than you and who will not be impressed by your gilded tongue."

"Let's keep my tongue out of this for the moment," Crowley suggested silkily. "What exactly is it that you want, sweetheart?"

"I want Sam Winchester and Adam Milligan out of the Cage."

"So go get them out yourself. You're not exactly the littlest angel anymore."

"I am attempting to do so; unfortunately, it requires your aid. Believe me when I say I would not be considering this otherwise."

Castiel could almost hear the demon's ears perking up at that stipulation, as ze had known would occur.

"Say for an infinitesimally short amount of time I pretend you're not off your rocker," Crowley finally suggested, back to his would-be calm drawl. "It took generations of planning on your side to open the Cage the first time – not to mention nearly having the world implode on itself to do it again. You want me to just waltz down there, pick up Moose and Dean-Two-Point-Oh and waltz out, easy as you please? All while the two most powerful angels in existence are riding their bones?" His expression turned unimpressed. "Do I look like God to you?"

Castiel ignored the blasphemy. "No, you look like a demon. Which is why I came to you. Otherwise this could not work."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but juiced up on archangel's grace or not, it's not going to work," Crowley snapped. "Even for me, it's suicide going down there – and not the nice kind that you come back from with a slight Hell-tan, either. Now, you might not have a problem offing yourself in some kind of grand gesture, but I have no intention to try to break into the bucket just to make a former fallen angel feel better."

"My feelings have no bearing on this matter, as in the event that you agree I will cease to exist."

Angels who were careless with the gift of immortality, whether by accident or by design, were punished with oblivion; there was no Heaven or Hell waiting, not even for those who gave up their grace to experience one short, final lifetime as a human. Having died twice, Castiel had a better inkling than most what oblivion meant.

Rather than cede that point, Crowley continued on as though he hadn't heard. "Do you even know how bloody hard it is to pull a soul out of Hell on a good day? And that's just a soul, not the body it's attached to."

"I do have some idea, yes," Castiel replied without a hint of mortal irony.

"But you want me to go down there and haul up two humans, body and soul." The demon crossed his arms. "Even if I could, I wouldn't, just on principle."
"And yet judging by your continued presence here, you are obviously willing to listen to my proposal."

"Well, I am a businessman – ludicrous or not, it's usually in my best interest to know the long and short of something before I completely write it off."

"I do not think you will write this off."

"I will if you don't start talking. You angelic types love to have your bit of suspense, don't you?"

Castiel paused thoughtfully, not completely sure how to begin this discussion. Given the demon's impatience, it seemed prudent to get directly to the point. "Lucifer's prison was not created for the sole purpose of imprisoning the Morningstar."

"I suppose you're going to tell me it doubles as a soup-kitchen, then?"

Castiel ignored the jibe. "God constructed the Cage as a lesson, one that was not just for Lucifer. The Six-Hundred Seals and the Sixty-Six that had to break in order to open it were only ever a failsafe. Michael and the other archangels were unwilling to make known what the true key to the Cage was."

"And you neglected to mention this when we were scrambling around trying to stop the bloody sky from falling, why?"

"Because I did not know it then," Castiel hedged. "My...promotion has accorded me an increase in knowledge, it seems. Even had I known then, I still would not have said anything, because it was an impossible option at the time."

"Collecting the rings and tricking the Devil were also impossible, but your flannel-clad crush and his brother seem to have pulled it off fine."

"That was not impossible, simply improbable. What I am proposing was truly unfeasible at the time."

"But it's not now?"

"Essentially."

"Alright, my interest is slightly peaked," Crowley granted, making a gesture with his hand that invited Castiel to continue his story.

"From the moment of Lucifer's betrayal, God entertained the hope that reconciliation would be possible. Not only between those that we lost in the Fall, but between angels and demons as well."

"I don't see that happening any time soon," Crowley scoffed.

Castiel inclined zir head in agreement. "Neither do I. However, God decreed that should this resolution ever take place, and either Lucifer served his punishment and repented or Michael and the Host clamored to welcome him back to Heaven, then a key would be created."

"Don't hurry to get to the point on my account, or anything."

"The key to the Cage is in the grace of an archangel," Castiel revealed, increasingly conscious that every word out of zir mouth was a betrayal of Heaven. "If the archangel were to bequeath their grace to a demon, that demon would have the power to open the Cage."

"Which would be equivalent to suicide, considering the archangel would be dead."
Castiel nodded.

"So basically, you're proposing to hand me over the keys."

"I cannot think of any better suited," Castiel allowed. "Other than the Winchesters, you have the most to lose if Lucifer were to break free. It stands to reason you would be a better jailer than some of the higher powers in Heaven."

"And all you ask in return is for me to do a little sweep of the Cage for you before I take possession of it?" Crowley smirked.

"Yes."

The silence that followed was heavy with implication.

"So... a deal, then."

"Exactly." Castiel nodded. "You can see why such an act would have been impossible. Even if Michael ever chose to take advantage of that option, no archangel would ever voluntarily give up their grace. Even for their brother."

Crowley's eyes squinted in understanding. "But you would."

It wasn't a question.

"I would."

A silent conversation passed between them.

For a long moment, Crowley stared at zir, the façade of arrogance slipping briefly as he processed the implications. Castiel prepared zirself for a disparaging remark about how ze must be desperate to consider this course of action; after all, never had an angel – and an archangel at that – so blatantly corrupted themselves for the possibility of saving a human from pain.

Then again, no angel had ever forged such a particular bond with a human before.

Crowley groaned. "Bollocks, I thought I'd seen it all, but an angel in love is something I could have done without. It's absolutely sickening."

Castiel felt the vessel's eyebrows draw together at what seemed like a non sequitur. "I love all of God's creatures."

"Yes, because obviously you would pervert your grace if anyone off the street asked you to do it," Crowley retorted dryly.

"It is true, I have some attachment to the Winchesters," Castiel granted. "We have fought together as brothers in arms, and I would consider Dean in particular to be a friend."

"I can guarantee that that attachment you feel is anything but friendly or brotherly," Crowley leered, but when Castiel did not rise to his bait, the demon sighed and continued, "Does said kept-human know what you're planning?"

Castiel ignored the implication. "No."

"Let me rephrase — is he going to be summoning me up here in righteous fury over your dead carcass?"
"Even if he does, there's nothing he could do about it. Once you use my grace to open the Cage, I will cease to be."

"I take it you've made peace with that fact, then."

Castiel smiled. "I have died twice for the Winchesters; extinction does not worry me."

Crowley harrumphed thoughtfully, scrutinizing Castiel for several seconds before rolling his eyes in acceptance.

"Alright, you've made a compelling argument – and considering the benefits I'd be reaping from this little arrangement, I'm liable to take it," Crowley decided. "But not without an adjustment."

Castiel frowned. "Which is?"

"Snagging both boys out of the Cage is asking too much. Deal or not, it could still get cocked up – I could get killed. Besides, I'll need some kind of insurance if they ever decide to come after me. So it'll be just the one damsel I'll be saving from distress."

"The Winchesters will not leave family behind," Castiel warned, the vessel's fists clenching. "Once they realize he remains down there, they will find a way to save Adam. Given their usual unorthodox methods, it would be in your interest to save him now."

"I'll take my chances," Crowley groused. "It's enough that I'm considering returning Lucifer's meat topside, but Michael's spare as well? If that's not a shot in the foot to begin with, I don't know what is. Besides, what does it matter to you? Your precious Dean will have his better half back and you'll be dead. Everyone already wins."

Castiel pursed zir lips, seeing that the demon would not budge on this point.

"The choice is yours – the moose or the runt?" Crowley challenged.

"Sam, then," Castiel said without hesitation. Ze had known when first offering up the terms for both of Dean's brothers that Crowley would only agree to save one. "But then I will have some provisions of my own to add."

"Oh?" Crowley quirked an eyebrow, but by the amused twitch of his mouth he had expected this as well.

"If the covenant is to bring Sam Winchester up from the Cage, it will be done properly," Castiel dictated. "He is to be alive, completely whole and not missing any part of himself, physical, spiritual or mental. He is to be purged of the addiction to demon blood and you will see to it that he does not retain any memories of the Cage. Furthermore, once you have returned him to his brother, you will instruct your underlings to leave the Winchesters and any of their immediate allies in peace. They are not to be permitted to make any more deals with your kind."

Crowley roared with laughter, and Castiel briefly thought the demon was expressing his amusement at Castiel's demands, but instead, an expression of respect flickered over his borrowed face.

"It's a shame you're an angel, Cas," Crowley said, and Castiel shuddered at the sound of the nickname Dean had given zir as it rolled over the demon's tongue. "You might have made a good Crossroads Demon – or a lawyer."

"I have known your kind to find loopholes in everything – for example, the soul of Robert Singer that you have yet to return."
"Now, now, precious, you know I can't discuss other clients with you," Crowley chided. "I'll agree to the rest of it, but I have business with our Mr. Singer as of yet."

There was another heavy silence, this time where Castiel had to weigh the potential cost of pushing the point. In the end, ze decided to leave it; as with the situation of Adam, the Winchesters were unlikely to allow Crowley to retain their adopted father's soul once they discovered the demon's intentions. As it was, time was becoming a constraint; the longer Sam remained below, the more difficulty there would be in bringing him back up.

"Very well," Castiel finally agreed.

Crowley watched zir, amused.

"You'd really tip the scales on a cosmic scale, just to keep one angsty, damaged human soul from having to cry himself to sleep at night?" he inquired. The implication that Castiel was handing Hell a potentially game-changing weapon remained unsaid.

"I believe the Winchesters are as important to the cosmic balance as all the forces of Heaven and Hell," Castiel replied earnestly. "That much has been proven already."

"Point," Crowley conceded. "However, seeing as how this is a deal, I'm required to make sure you fully understand what you're doing. Events could just as easily turn out in my favor if you do this. In fact, it's more than likely they will."

"I have faith."

Crowley chuckled humourlessly. "I thought you would have lost it ages ago."

"I have faith in Dean," Castiel corrected. "Dean has faith in Sam. Together, they will endure. And I would rather Dean didn't sell his soul this time, considering the trouble I went through to get it back before."

"Which brings us back to what he's going to say when he finds out you brought his brother back by giving up your life," Crowley pointed out.

"I don't imagine he will say much," Castiel shrugged, ignoring the vague sense of hurt that flittered within zir grace at that knowledge. Dean would likely not care how it had come to pass, so long as his brother was safe. "Not that it will matter. I will be dead."

"And you're all calvin with that, then?"

"I have made peace with the likelihood, if that is what you wish to know," Castiel agreed. "Death does not frighten me; if anything, the peace of oblivion will be a welcome change. Besides. I believe God knew I would do this when he brought me back this time. He knew I would be the only one who could carry out this act without truly dire consequences."

Crowley shook his head. "There are always consequences, Feathers. In fact, what exactly are the consequences if I don't actually agree to any of this?"

"Then I will be forced to explore a different avenue," Castiel said frankly. "I am still an angel, as yet, and there are those who would support me in laying siege to Hell. It may be unlikely that we would succeed, however I'm sure that the destruction caused by another assault on your demesne would be detrimental. I would imagine that Hell's foundations are still unstable after our last foray into the Pit."

Crowley sniffed. "I'll admit, that sounds a mite bit messier than I generally like my affairs."
"Yes, your reputation is known even in Heaven," Castiel agreed. "That same reputation assures me that you honor every deal you make."

"Them's the rules," Crowley acceded. He sighed dramatically. "Alright, then, we have an accord. Give me twenty-four hours and I'll drop the Boy Prince Who Wasn't right on his brother's doorstep, in mint condition, and all will be right with the world. D'you need a moment to look over the contract?"

Castiel shook zir head. "The stipulations are clear to me. You will take immediate possession of my grace and the deal will be fulfilled instantaneously."

"Anything else you'd like to add? I'm surprised you didn't demand your pets to lead the lifestyle of the rich and famous once you're gone."

"They would not be happy in such a life," Castiel replied vaguely. Ze squared zir shoulders and focussed on Crowley. "The usual methods will suffice?"

"Well, you sure know how to make a girl feel special, don't you?" Crowley mock-sighed. "I swear, you feather brained git, if I end up burned up by this I will find a way back into being for the sole purpose of giving you a good kick up the bottle."

Castiel ignored the threat and slowly approached the demon. Zir forays into the art of embracing humans was limited to the incident at the den of inequity with Dean, but it was unlikely anything more complicated than that would be required to solidify the deal.

Ze hesitated a few inches from the demon, unable to ignore the festering maw of its true face. Obviously sensing Castiel's uncertainty, though, Crowley reached forward, fingers gripping none-too-gently into the vessel's neck and hauling Castiel's face to within an inch of his own.

"Last bit's gotta be all you, ducky, or it won't work," the demon smirked.

Steeling zirself, Castiel closed the last bit of distance and crushed their mouths together.

Castiel was briefly aware of the scrape of stubble and the taste of sulfur, blood and something alcoholic, before zir senses were overloaded.

There was a searing pain and blinding light.

And then everything went dark.
Dean goes to give the "apple pie" life a try, but gets a surprise visit and makes a strange discovery. Sam and Dean leave Indiana, intent on discovering how Sam returned, but they are waylaid by unexpected problems. The brothers run into two factions who aren't really pleased with them...violence ensues.

Braeden Household
Cicero, Indiana
Friday 14 May 2010

Dean Winchester knocked back two fingers of bourbon, wishing not for the first time that evening that he was chugging a bottle. Lisa was a health nut, though, so he figured he should just be grateful he was drinking something remotely alcoholic.

He grimaced.

Gratitude was the last thing Dean felt right now. In fact, he could feel very little besides the same numbing disbelief that had taken over about the same time he had watched Sam throw himself into a portal to Hell.
Lisa was moving around the kitchen with the kind of nervous energy that if he hadn't known her, might have made him ask if she'd just snorted a line of coke. She kept trying to fill the awkward silence in the room with light chatter, and was opening and closing drawers with more force than necessary in her quest to find him something to eat.

Dean wasn't hungry, but when she'd asked him when he'd last eaten and he hadn't been able to remember, she'd insisted on heating up the evening's leftovers.

Across the table, Ben didn't even pretend not to stare. He watched Dean with a focused intensity that would have done any angel proud.

The kid was two years older than when Dean had seen him last, a few inches taller and broader. If he'd thought Ben resembled him back then, it was impossible not to notice it now. Despite inheriting Lisa's dark hair and eyes, there was something about the jut of Ben's chin and the way his brow wrinkled as he frowned that was disconcertingly Winchester-like.

Not for the first time did Dean wonder if Lisa had been completely honest with him about the boy's paternity.

'Knock it off,' he told himself with a mental shake. 'Even if she did lie, you can't blame her. Not like it changes anything.'

It wasn't like it made losing Sam any easier.

He tightened his grip on the tumbler and took another draught, if only to give himself something to focus on. He had been trying to avoid thinking about Sam for a day now, with little success.

'Watching your little brother dive into the deepest pit of Hell to save the world isn't exactly forgettable,' he thought dourly. And he'd seen a lot of impressive sights in his thirty-one years — a forty year stint of his own in Hell notwithstanding. The calm look in Sam's eyes as he consigned himself to an eternity of suffering was something that would haunt Dean for the rest of his existence.

After everything they'd been through, it was still impossible for Dean to comprehend. He and Sam had spent their entire lives hunting down the creatures that regular people only ever saw in their nightmares. He couldn't believe that that part of his life was now over.

Sure, it hadn't been the easiest or most glamorous job — the pay was shit and the health package usually boiled down to a swig of whiskey and a sterilized needle — but it was necessary. In fact, with the exception of credit-card fraud, casual con-artistry and the occasional run-in with the law, hunting was remarkably honest work.

It also brought with it the unspoken satisfaction of being able to take out the bad guy, which wasn't necessarily a given in the 'normal world'.

"Saving people, hunting things," Dean had once said, and it was as accurate a description of the life as any. Even Sam, who had grown up wary of the lifestyle Dean and their father thrived in, had been hard-pressed to admit he didn't enjoy the perks sometimes.

Personally, Dean had always thought there were worse ways to spend a life than on an unending road trip. Even though Sam had always griped about Dean's music being limited to the greatest hits of mullet rock and Dean had always maintained that Sam's preference for light salads over red meat was a sure sign the latter was hiding a vagina, their relationship had always been a constant.

Until one day it wasn't.
Bad dealings with some of the shadier demons traipsing across the physical plane had almost completely severed it a few times. Dean had sold his soul to protect Sam from giving into his dark side, only to have a shifty demon bitch all-but invalidate that sacrifice while he rotted in Hell.

Things would have gone a lot differently if it hadn't been for Castiel.

The rather taciturn angel – with his inability to grasp neither the concept of personal space nor pop culture references – still made Dean gravitate between laughing and pulling his hair out.

Not only had he been the first angel to appear to the Winchesters in their many years of hunting, but Cas had fought through the fires of Hell to rescue Dean and resurrect him.

Dean was still coming to terms with the repercussions.

Even a self-confessed nonbeliever like him had nearly pissed himself upon realizing that, yes, angels were real. At the time, he had covered it up by lashing out at the bastard, but the implications had kept him awake on more than one occasion. That fact wasn't helped by Cas's tendency to make cameos in his dreams when he was starved for conversation.

He wasn't the only angel with the tendency to do that, unfortunately.

Over the past two years, Dean had learned that angels tended to be bigger d*cks than demons. In the first few months of their acquaintance, Dean had been sure Cas was just another winged d*ck; over time, though, he'd come to respect the guy, even rely on him. Against all odds, a friendship had emerged.

Even though Cas didn't manage to help Dean stop Sam from accidentally releasing Lucifer upon the world, he had died trying. Literally. Even after being resurrected by God, Cas hadn't abandoned them. When the denizens of Heaven and Hell tried to manipulate them into playing out the Apocalypse, Cas had sided with them and their insane plan of trying to stop it.

In retrospect, not the smartest decision, but Sam and Dean had been raised to fight; damned if the end of the world was going to be something they just lay down and accepted.

So they had fought harbingers of Judgement Day, defied archangels and battled Tricksters; they had made and lost friends and family, including a brother they hadn't even known about, and forged cautious deals with demons. In the meantime, Cas – cut off from Heaven for throwing his lot in with the Winchesters – searched for God with the hope that the Creator could set right the chaos being wrought by the followers of the two archangels Lucifer and Michael.

Only to be told as events came together that God would not intervene in his children's wars.

Yeah, God was kind of a d*ck too.

Through all of it, Cas had stood by them, helped them and believed in them (and sometimes for them) even when his own faith was shattered.

"I gave everything for you," Cas had told him once when Dean was hovering on the brink of giving in.

The idea had stunned him more than the unholy smack-down that Cas had subjected to him to afterwards, when words failed. There was just something wrong about a creature as powerful as Cas voluntarily diving into the mess that was humanity for the sake of a man who had been one of Hell's more notorious torturers.
Dean had always wanted to ask Cas 'why', but he had figured the answer might be more than he was ready to hear. So he had just accepted it. It was easier than trying to decipher the tangle of thought and emotion that came from knowing an angel had defied Heaven for him.

Instead, he told himself that Cas had finally seen humanity as more than an abstract concept and had thus decided to defend it.

On the inevitable day when Sam finally said 'yes' to the Devil and lost himself to the power of Lucifer, and the only thing Dean could still do was drive onto the field of battle to be there for his family – not just Sam, but his estranged half-brother Adam too – Cas had followed him.

Followed him and died, again, beside Dean's adopted father Bobby to buy him a few more minutes trying to reach Sam.

Sam had managed to overcome Lucifer's control, but only temporarily. Dean had still had to watch him make the ultimate sacrifice, dragging the two archangels and Adam with him into the Cage.

'So much for not thinking about it,' Dean reprimanded himself, going for another sip of bourbon only to realize he had already finished the glass. He frowned down at it, as though the container had done something to personally offend him by being empty.

Even though Cas had been resurrected (whether by God or whoever was now calling the shots), Dean still felt an unwavering sense of abandonment. The feathery bastard had completely bailed on him at the one moment when it might have been nice to have a friend around. He hadn't even bothered with a goodbye.

Of course, it was to be expected – angels didn't understand grief or feelings, and so Dean shouldn't have been surprised at being ditched so that Cas could go play Clint Eastwood up in Heaven.

Still, in the past few weeks he'd started to think that Cas was finally beginning to get the whole 'humanity' thing. It was a bit of a letdown to realize he hadn't. Probably never would, now that he'd gone back 'on high'.

The microwave beeped, bringing Dean back to the present, and a few moments later, Lisa was there, putting down a plate of food. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Dean said, even though his lie was obvious. "I'm good."

Lisa offered him a sympathetic smile; she knew there was something he wasn't telling her, but she hadn't pried. Most likely she was waiting until Ben was in bed to ask him about what had happened, and it was something he wasn't looking forward to. Even though Lisa knew some of the details of his life, he wasn't sure how to share all of the particulars with her yet.

And talking about Sam being gone would just hammer home a reality Dean was still coming to terms with.

"You need salt."

"Huh?" he glanced up, the sentence a familiar one but completely out of context in his current location.

"You should put salt on that," Ben repeated quietly, offering him the salt shaker. The kid lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Mom's meatloaf's more of a tofu-loaf, if you know what I mean."

Dean forced a smile, while in the background Lisa quipped, "I heard that."
He obligingly reached for the offered condiment, even though he was pretty sure he wouldn't really be able to taste anything anyhow.

Across the street, a light flickered and went out, drawing his attention. A lifetime of hunting made you aware of even the smallest things. Being in a suburb in Indiana, he figured he would probably see a racoon or a large dog hanging by the lamppost. He nearly looked away before his brain caught up with him.

For a second, he froze, seeing a shadowy outline beneath the streetlamp that was too familiar.

"Sam," he murmured in disbelief, his eyes wide.

He dropped the salt and was on his feet in an instant, torn between hope and something else he couldn't quite put a finger on. Ben was following his gaze, but whatever Dean had seen was gone now.

Before he could give into disappointment, he felt a spike of pain.

A sudden, sharp burning pulsed through him. It radiated out from his left shoulder and surged throughout his entire body like splintering arcs of lightening.

"Dean?" Lisa asked, worried.

Dean hissed in discomfort, clutching his shoulder in a reaction of surprise. His vision swam and something unseen barreled through him, its force knocking the breath from his lungs. He gasped for oxygen, reaching out his free hand to steady himself. Blistering heat washed over his body, like every blood vessel and bone had been torched, and he felt himself break into a sweat.

"Mom…" Ben sounded unsure, a hint of alarm in his voice; Lisa was instantly beside Dean, trying to get him to look at her. Dean jerked away from her touch, which was painfully cold for some reason.

Lisa's eyes were wide, and when she spoke it was with a forced calm. "Dean – are you alright?"

He tried to answer her, tried to pass it off as though he had just stood up too fast, except he couldn't make his mouth move. He concentrated on trying to breathe.

"Mom, is he okay?" Ben's voice was a little panicky now. "Is he, like, having a heart attack?"

As soon as the words were out, Dean tried to shake his head – he was pretty sure that wasn't what this was – but his movements were slow and sluggish. Lisa seemed to take his inability to move as some kind of sign that Ben might be right, because she started trying to loosen his clothes.

"Call 911," she told Ben in a would-be-calm voice, gently but firmly pushing Dean back into his chair.

Dean tried to protest, but he was suddenly wracked with tremors from head to toe. Somewhere inside, something was coming undone, like a rope that had frayed at the edges and was now snapping apart one strand at a time.

He was aware of a flurry of movement and a strange, insistent pounding in the distance, and voices streaming in and out of his hearing.

" – Dean – !"

" – going to be okay, just don't move – "
"Dean!"

Despite his numbness, Dean knew his body was seizing. His focus narrowed precariously, and for a moment all he was came down to one tiny pinprick of clarity –

'Cas,' he thought inexplicably, and an incredible feeling of emptiness took hold. All sensation disappeared and he imagined a thunderous rushing noise before all sound faded out.

His eyesight wavered once more and then went completely white, but he was still conscious somehow. In an agonizing instant, everything inside him came undone, the lines holding him together sliced apart; for a terrifying second, he was without control of his body, a puppet whose strings had been viciously and irreversibly severed.

And then stars exploded in his vision and the world rushed back to him, his body flooded with sensation once again.

He was being simultaneously frozen and scalded, and his stomach rebelled as the entire world spun on its axis. Feeling surged back into his body, like invisible hands grasping blindly to regain their purchase.

The pounding noise he had heard before got louder, and Lisa and Ben's voices were getting more frantic; there was an explosion of sound like wood splintering and then someone shouted, "DEAN!" in a voice that he knew and should not be hearing anymore.

'Sam,' he thought dimly, and the world sharpened.

'Take your brother outside as fast as you can and don't look back. Now, Dean, go!'

It was an ingrained reaction to danger, the thought that Sam needed him and he had to get out of whatever trouble he had fallen into. Even knowing Sam was gone, that instinct helped to centre him. He mentally grasped at that, clinging tightly to it as he felt awareness return to him.

Control came back slowly – numbness slipped from his fingers and toes, retreating backward to where it had originated. His shoulder continued to ache, although now it was more the memory of pain than a physical sensation.

Once he was completely conscious of himself again, Dean blinked up at the ceiling.

He was on the floor, his chair knocked over a few inches away. His gaze fell on Lisa, who was standing several feet from him with an expression torn between worry and fear; she had planted herself between him and Ben, who was determinedly trying to peak around her, cordless phone in hand.

Neither of them seemed overly concerned with him, though; they were both staring at something else.

Someone.

Someone who was kneeling over Dean right now in a blatant disrespect to his personal space.

Out of habit, Dean wanted to think 'Cas', except he didn't feel the same charge in the air that would have accompanied the angel's presence.

Slowly turning his head, his mouth went dry at the realization of who it was.
His brother, in all of his lanky, awkward glory was looking down on him with an anxious expression, his too-long hair hanging into his face. He looked exactly as he had when he backed into the portal to Hell, his eyes all wide and earnest. He smelled of blood and dirt and Sam.

The emotions that Dean had been sitting on for the past twenty-four hours suddenly overcame him, and he grasped at the most obvious reason for the presence of his brother.

Dean had to be dead.

Again.

His stomach clenched at the realization.

"Are you kiddin' me?" Dean croaked, his voice trembling unforgivably. The illusion of Sam frowned at him in worried confusion. "I fight off the forces of Heaven and Hell, and a friggen heart attack takes me down?"

"Takes you down?" not-possible-to-be-Sam repeated, bewildered. "Dean, what are you talking about?"

"S'the only way I'd ever see Sam again," Dean murmured to himself, trying to get up but being held in place by the gigantor's huge hands. "Someone upstairs – or, I guess here – has been screwing around." He raised his voice. "Cas!"

There was a long silence in the kitchen.

"Dean?" Lisa asked, her voice wary. She continued to keep Ben behind her, eyes flitting from Dean to Sam, which Dean thought was a little weird. It didn't exactly jive with the eternal memory loop of Heaven – he didn't have any memories of standing in this kitchen with his brother, Lisa and Ben – but maybe things had changed since the last time he'd been dead. "Who are you talking to?"

"The dick that I'm pretty sure is responsible for me being here," Dean grunted, glaring upwards even though he wasn't exactly sure of directions in Heaven. "Not that I don't appreciate the sentiment, Cas, but I know it's not real and I know it's not Sam, so can you put me back now? I'm really not down for the Matrix treatment just yet."

"What is he talking about?" Lisa demanded, directing her question at the Sam-clone; her tone was laced with confusion and anger. "Who's this 'Cas' person?"

"He thinks he's dead," fake-Sam said, realization colouring his tone. "He thinks he's in Heaven – but Dean, Cas is dead. I – Lucifer demolished him, I remember –"

"Cas came back," Dean retorted firmly, finally slapping away the hands that held him and pushing up off the ground. Not-Sam inched away and Dean wobbled to his feet, using the table to steady himself. "And considering this is obviously not Hell – which I would definitely recognize – where else would it be? I wouldn't be seeing Sam if I was still alive, because he's gone and you're not him – so, s'cuse me while I rip a certain angel of the Lord a new one – CAS!"

Fake-Sam's face became strained, and Dean felt a measure of guilt at being the cause of it, but shrugged it off. He didn't particularly feel like apologizing, especially not to a Heaven simulation.

"Sam, what's going on?" Lisa asked in a loud whisper, like she was afraid Dean would hear her – another thing that didn't make sense, but Dean couldn't dwell on it. He was pacing back and forth, trying to think back to his last stint in Heaven. Maybe he could make it to the Garden – or Ash and the Roadhouse…
Why hadn't Cas showed up? Sure, he and Dean hadn't exactly parted on the best terms, but if Dean was dead and Cas had orchestrated it all to give him some crappy version of Sam to make him feel better, he would have thought the angel would at least be there to welcome him upstairs.

After Dean spoke to him about appropriate sympathy gifts, of course. 'Seriously, dude could have just dropped off a pie.'

"Dean." The Sam-clone was trying to get his attention again, but Dean ignored him; he couldn't allow himself to get used to seeing his memory's version of Sam if he was going to get Cas to pull him back to earth.

The fact that the angel wasn't answering him was annoying, and for some reason his brain kept coming back to the phantom pain that had incapacitated him. He had a niggling suspicion it was related, but he couldn't quite make the connection...

"Dean!" the fake Sam had grabbed him by the shoulders and was shaking him lightly. "You're not dead – you're alive and standing in Lisa's kitchen rambling like a mental case. And I'm really me, I swear." Dean tried to pull away, but the other man was gripping him tightly and staring him down. "Dean, look at me."

Something in his tone made Dean at least level a defiant stare at the image of his brother.

This Sam's hazel green eyes were as intent and focussed as Dean remembered, practically pleading with him to believe him. They were the eyes of someone who had seen and experienced more than any human should – a hunter's eyes. But where Sam's gaze had always retained some softness, some glimmer of the innocent little kid Dean had helped raise, now there was a hollowness there. It was the gaze of someone who had survived the worst kind of horror imaginable and somehow lived through it.

"...Sammy?" he choked, the feeling in his legs threatening to give out again.

Sam gave him a strained smile. "Well, this isn't exactly the welcome I would have expected. A punch in the gut or a talkin' to – maybe some holy water in the face?"

"You're…real? Or…or am I just…and I'm not…"

"It's me, Dean."

Hunter's instinct flooded back to him, overpowering the abrupt flare of hope. Dean narrowed his eyes. "Prove it."

For a moment, possibly-Sam looked like he was at a loss, before quickly patting himself down and
coming up with the silver switchblade he always carried on him. He took it out, slowly, so that Dean could watch him and have time to react if he tried anything. Rolling up his left sleeve, he flipped open the knife and drew it across his forearm with the smallest grimace of discomfort.

A thin trickle of red wound its way down to his wrist, but otherwise there was no reaction.

The flare of hope became a lot stronger, but Dean still didn't move. Sam had grabbed the abandoned salt-shaker from the table, poured himself a handful and swallowed that.

The grimace was more pronounced this time, and he murmured, "That's nasty." Rubbing the salt from his hands, he fixed Dean with an intent look and finally pulled down the collar of his shirt to show off the unblemished anti-possession tattoo. "It's me. I mean, if you've got some holy water lying around or you want to draw a banishing sigil just to be sure –"

Dean wasn't even aware of moving, his arms already encircling his brother in a tight embrace.

"You stupid son of a bitch." Sam was unnaturally tense against him, but a moment later relaxed and gripped him tightly in return. "How…?"

"I don't know," Sam murmured into his ear. "I just…am."

Dean pulled back, just staring at his brother for a time. He felt dazed by the situation, couldn't really think of what to say first, and so he focused on Sam's appearance and frowned. Little chips of wood were tangled in his hair and on his clothing. "Dude, you get in a fight with a beaver down there? You've got splinters all over you."

"Uh, yeah, I kinda…broke down the door."

"Which you're paying for, by the way," Lisa piped up, startling Dean. He had temporarily forgotten she and Ben were still there.

She was still standing protectively in front of Ben, who was watching Sam and Dean in utter bemusement. Lisa, at least, seemed on her way to recovering from the shock of a giant Sasquatch barging into her house. Ben slowly put down the phone. "You couldn't just ring the doorbell like a normal person?"

"I just saw Dean collapse, I sort of…reacted," Sam said, half-defensive and half-apologetic.

"Saw me collapse?" Dean had let go of his brother by now and was making a face. "When? And when did you get here – how did you get here? Last time I checked, Hell doesn't give time off for good behaviour."

A steely look flickered in Sam's eyes. "I have no idea –"

"Hold on," Lisa interjected, considering them both with wide eyes. "Hell?" She looked from one to the other, "As in, fire-and-brimstone-eternal-suffering-Hell?"

Dean and Sam exchanged glances. "…Yeah."

Lisa gaped for a full five seconds and then shook her head as though to clear it.

"You – " she pointed at Ben, "Bedtime. You –" she indicated to Dean, ignoring Ben's sudden protests, "– sit down before you fall down. And you –" she jabbed a finger at Sam, "– get the bottle of bourbon from the cupboard over the fridge." She crossed her arms, determined. "You guys have a lot of explaining to do – " Dean opened his mouth to protest and she cut him off with another
"…and then things kind of went dark. Next thing I know, I'm standing under a lamppost watching Dean flip out," Sam finished.

There was a long silence around the kitchen table, and Sam automatically regarded Dean. His brother was looking uncomfortable and overwhelmed. He hadn't taken his eyes off of Sam since they sat down, even when he'd volunteered his own side of their story. Sam hadn't been able to meet his stare at certain parts, although his heart had swelled when Dean told him how God brought back Castiel, and that the angel had then saved Bobby.

Having yet another loved one die because of him would have been too much for his conscience.

"That's another conversation that's going to be heart wrenchingly awkward –Hi Bobby. I'm alive. Sorry I let the Devil use my body and ended up killing you. Beer?"

Lisa sat at the head of the table, her eyes bright and wide. She opened her mouth to speak, couldn't seem to come up with anything, and instead took a gulp of liquor. She'd already refilled it twice since returning from forcing Ben to go to bed (time during which Dean had drawn a hasty angel-banishing sigil on the kitchen table, just to be sure that Sam still wasn't hosting Lucifer).

Sam thought she was taking it rather well, actually.

Dean was the one to break the silence, finally focussing his full attention on Sam. "You really don't remember anything?"

The question was tentative, for Dean.

"Nothing," Sam affirmed. He shrugged. "I know time passed – I know it felt like…years. And I'm pretty sure it wasn't a picnic…" He trailed off, the void of his memories doing nothing to quell the frayed feeling somewhere deep within him. Dean nodded in understanding and continued, "but I can't remember anything since jumping into the hole. It's like there's this…wall."

"So, you've got no idea how the hell you got out."

"None. Though, when I saw you having some kind of seizure, I figured you might have done something."

Dean grimaced. "Like what?"

"I don't know – a deal, maybe."

"I told you I wouldn't."

"And I didn't believe you any more than you believed you."

"Well, I didn't do anything," Dean snapped, defensive and regretful at the same time. At Sam's raised
eyebrow, he made a face. "Not yet, at least. I was going to at least try not to…Wasn't sure how long it would last. But I was going to try."

Sam instantly felt guilty, but before he could apologize, Lisa finally spoke up. "A deal? You'd sell your soul to a…a demon? Again? Didn't you learn your lesson the first time?"

She didn't look impressed.

Much as it was kind of refreshing to have someone else nag Dean, Sam decided to cut off that argument. He interjected, "It wouldn't work anyway. No demon could swing this. The only way to get out of Hell is if something stronger than a demon gets involved. And where I was…let's just say it was probably a lot harder to get to than where Dean was. So whatever put me here was – is – really powerful."

He barely repressed the shudder at the memories he didn't have but could only guess at.

"Could your friend have done it?"

"Huh?" Both Winchesters considered her.

"Cassiel? Cas?" Lisa clarified, hesitating slightly as though she couldn't believe she was actually having a discussion about angels and demons in the middle of her kitchen. "The one who pulled Dean out of…of Hell. The angel – could he have done something?"

"Castiel? Not without a lot of power backing him," Sam answered. "When he went to get Dean, he was part of a whole garrison of angels. It took them months – technically years – to get to him."

"But couldn't he, like, pull some strings or something? Dean said that he was brought back different somehow. More powerful."

"Even if he did get brought back more powerful, it would have taken longer than – what did you say it's been? A day and a half?" That was directed at Dean, but when his brother didn't answer, Sam turned his attention on him. "Dean?"

Dean's eyes had suddenly widened in a look of horrified comprehension. Before Sam could ask him what was wrong, his brother had stood up and hauled off his coat. Ignoring Sam and Lisa asking him what was going on, he frantically rolled up his left sleeve.

And swore.

Sam didn't immediately understand what Dean was so upset about, until he realized there was something missing.

The skin of Dean's left deltoid was completely unblemished.

Castiel's handprint was gone.

Lisa, to her credit, seemed to understand immediately. "Is that where…?"

"Son of a bitch," Sam managed weakly, exchanging a meaningful glance with Dean, whose jaw was set in a grim line. "You don't think…?"

Dean wasn't listening to him, because he was on his feet, glaring skyward again. "Cas, you have, like, ten seconds to get your all-hallowed ass down here before I introduce the shit to the fan."

"Dean!" Lisa hissed, scandalized. "You can't talk to…to an angel like that!"
"Well, I ain't in a praying mood," Dean retorted with a scowl, not taking his eyes from the ceiling.

"This is actually still pretty polite for Dean," Sam assured her, trying to keep things light despite the unease he was feeling. His brother didn't even offer him a dirty look.

When the ten seconds passed without the appearance of Castiel, Dean dug out his phone and started to call him.

"Angels have phones now?" Lisa wanted to know.

"This one does," Sam answered.

Lisa poured herself another finger of bourbon. Sam was impressed; most women her size would probably be on the floor by now. Maybe all that yoga helped her burn it off faster.

Dean snarled and tossed his phone onto the table with such force that Sam was surprised it didn't shatter. "Straight to voicemail. Goddamnit, Cas!"

"Maybe he forgot to charge it again?" Sam supplied hopefully.

"Or he did something stupid," Dean groused. He blinked, and sent Sam an apologetic look. "You know what I mean. I want you safe, Sam, but I never thought Cas would…I mean, how would he…?"

"I get it," Sam assured him. "Besides, maybe that –" He pointed at Dean's bare arm, "– has nothing to do with all this. Coincidence."

They were silent a moment. Both of them knew that there was no such thing as coincidence. In fact, not only was Sam pretty sure that Castiel's lack of answer meant he was involved in Sam's return, but that the angel had done something a lot worse than selling his soul to do it.

'And I'm also pretty sure that he didn't do it for me,' Sam added to himself, taking in the tense way Dean held himself. He always looked like that when he was worried about something, poker face or not.

Dean scrubbed a hand over his face and exhaled wearily. "We should find out what went down. Except…"

He was watching Sam now, doubtful; Sam read the torn expression for what it was and mentally finished the sentence. 'Except you don't want to do anything that might mean I go back to Hell.'

Sam remembered that same look from the year after Dean sold his soul, and how he had resisted Sam's help at every turn out of fear that trying to break his deal would cause Sam to die. So even though it was clear that Dean wanted to find Castiel, or at least figure out what he had done, he wouldn't. Even though Castiel was the closest Dean had to an actual friend, he wasn't going to do anything that might harm Sam.

'Which is a nice sentiment, but you'd think after dying to save the world, Dean'd stop treating me like I'm four,' Sam thought, not for the first time. There were occasions Dean needed to be saved from his own martyr-complex. Besides, while he might not have as strong a bond as his brother and Castiel had, Sam still considered the angel a friend.

So, in a firm voice, he declared, "It's Cas. Half of what we've managed to survive wouldn't be possible without him. We'll figure this out."
Dean's face remained impassive, but Sam didn't miss the appreciative glint in his eyes.

Lisa was looking from one to the other, and finally shook her head. "As dramatic as all this is, you both look like you're about to pass out. You need to get some rest before you do anything else."

"If Cas is in trouble, every minute could count," Dean deflects.

"Is there anything you can actually do about that right this second? Or tonight?"

"No, but –"

"Then take a few hours to sleep before you get ready to ride off into the sunset again," Lisa said simply. "You'll be able to function better that way. There're couches in the living room. You're both welcome here for as long as you need." She frowned at Sam. "Or at least as long as it takes you to either pay for or fix my door."

Sam snorted. "You are taking this way too calmly."

"Two years ago I thought I watched my son spontaneously combust and last week my neighbour's cat gave birth to a litter of snakes," Lisa remarked. "I'm still iffy on the whole angels and demons front, but I've accepted the fact that the world isn't what I thought it was. I just happen to be really good at ignoring it, I guess." She finished her drink, considered pouring herself another, and then shook her head and began to clear the table. "You two, though, still have a job to do. And considering how important it is, I want you to be in good enough shape to do it." She replaced the significantly emptied bottle of bourbon in the cupboard. "I'll be right back, I need to make sure Ben hasn't snuck out of bed. Then I'll find you some blankets."

She disappeared from the kitchen, leaving the brothers alone. Without the excuse of a test to bridge the uncomfortable silence, they simply stared at each other, neither really knowing what to say.

Sam decided to try the usual method of diffusing a tense situation. He forced a grin. "Dude, marry that girl."

To his credit, that got the barest hint of a smile from Dean, but it was without any real humour. His brother continued to exude an air of distraction.

Sam furrowed his brow. "Dean, you okay?"

"If someone asks me that one more time tonight, I'm gonna start throwing punches," Dean told him seriously. "What about you? You're the one who just cashed in your Get-Out-Of-Hell-Free-Card. You're the one I'm worried about."

"And the missing angel," Sam pointed out. "But yeah. I'm fine. Better than fine, I think. It's almost like…back in Ilchester. I'm not even craving, uh… Ovaltine…anymore."

Dean snorted. "Think it was God again?"

"If it was God, why didn't he bring me back with Cas at the graveyard?" Sam asked.

"Point."

"What about Death? He'd probably be powerful enough. And he seemed to like you. Sort of."

"Doubt it. The guy was pretty firm on the whole me-leaving-you-to-rot front," Dean shook his head. "Also, I get the feeling if he comes for you personally, that's it."
"Right."

"You sure you don't remember? Anything?"

"Nothing," Sam replied. "I'd say 'I wish I could', but I really don't."

"Well, that's something at least," Dean said, sounding partially relieved and partially frustrated. He went quiet again for a long moment, and then added quietly, "So, you've got no idea if...if Adam...?"

The question trailed off and Sam winced. He hadn't even thought about Adam, not really. Even when they had told Lisa about him, it had been in the detached, afterthought-like way that seemed to characterize the entire relationship.

Sam had never really forgiven their father for not telling them about Adam. No matter how pissed off he had been about Sam leaving for college or how much he believed keeping Adam and his mother out of their lives was supposed to protect them, there was no excuse for not coming clean about the fact he'd had another son.

"No...the last I saw him was when Michael tried to keep me from jumping into the Pit," Sam said softly.

They didn't say anything for another beat.

"That's Winchester luck for you, I guess. Even if you beat the Devil, you're still screwed over in some way," Dean finally managed.

"Are we really surprised by that anymore?" Sam asked lightly.

Dean allowed himself a light chuckle, before clapping Sam on the shoulder. He squeezed, a little too tightly, but then didn't let go. It was the closest to a declaration of 'I love you and I'm glad you're not in Hell anymore' that Sam was going to get.

"We'll figure this one out," Sam assured him. "We'll find out what's up with Cas. And if we can help him – and Adam, too – we'll do it. It's like you said. Winchester luck."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Jury's still out on whether it's good or bad, Sammy."

"Idjit."

Dean always marveled at Bobby's ability to fit the perfect blend of condemnation and affection into one word. Even over a phone line, the tone didn't lose any of its effectiveness. Dean exchanged a knowing look with Sam, who was taking measurements of the Braedens' front door, and replied, "That's what I said."

"Damn fool angel's been hangin' out with you boys too long," Bobby groused, more to himself than others.
"To be fair, we don't know that he's even involved," Sam remarked.

"What'd he say?" Bobby wanted to know.

"He said we can't prove Cas actually did anything," Dean repeated.

"Smack him upside the head for me and ask him if his stay down under rattled his common sense," Bobby ordered.

Dean grinned. Only Bobby could make a trip to Hell seem so casual.

Sam, who had no problem hearing Bobby, snorted and made a mark on the notepad Lisa had provided him with earlier; she hadn't been kidding about the door. She'd informed Sam that after she got home from dropping Ben off at baseball practice they would be making a trip to the local Home Depot to look at frames.

Dean made a mental note to remind Sam to look for iron door sills as well.

"Way I see it, whether your angel did anything or not, we've still got a mystery on our hands that I'd rather puzzle out before the other shoe drops," Bobby continued. "I'll get started with the lore I've got here, but you two best get here in the near future."

Although he didn't say it, Dean could hear the implicit, 'I want to see Sam with my own two eyes and put him through whatever tests you didn't think of.'

"Will do," Dean answered. "We just have some stuff to finish up here and we'll be on our way."

"Let me know if things change."

"You too."

They disconnected and Dean turned to Sam. "Bobby says you've got a horseshoe up your ass."

"Even if I did, it's still not getting me out of whatever he's going to put me through when we get to his place."

Dean grinned, warmed by the idea that they were once again thinking along the same lines.

"Probably not."

Sam studied the door. "This should only take me about an hour once we pick up the stuff. We can leave this evening, if you want. Sooner, if you do the actual restoring. You're Mr. Fix-It."

"Yeah, well, you're the one who broke it down," Dean retorted. "Besides, I've got other stuff to get done before we go."

Sam nodded, understanding.

Dean tended to be a little obsessive compulsive when it came to protecting the people he cared about. Considering they didn't know what brought Sam back, it was better to be careful; with their track record, it was only a matter of time before something targeted them.

So, while Sam busied himself with replacing Lisa's door – accompanying her to the hardware store once she and Ben returned – Dean went about warding the Braeden's home against any kind of evil that might try to get in. Whether it was the average kind of evil or the 'you-know-the-Winchesters-I'm-going-to-use-you-as-leverage' kind of evil.
With his mother gone, Ben idled around watching Dean work. He looked as though he was filled with questions but couldn't bring himself to actually ask them; it was rather incongruous with his outgoing nature. Dean suspected that the kid had been eavesdropping the night before and knew more about the current situation than his mother intended him to know. If he was anything like Dean, he wasn't asking because he figured that would out him.

Lisa obviously didn't want Ben getting involved in anything supernatural after their first experience. Privately, Dean agreed with her. He hoped Ben could have a nice, normal, ghost-free life.

But he also knew what ignorance could do to you.

"Here," he said, tossing Ben a tin of salt from his bag of tools and paint. "Make sure every window and door in the house is lined."

"Salt?" Ben asked, staring down at the box.

"Don't knock it. Most things can't cross a salt line. It's a pure substance, so it wards them off," Dean explained. "Plus, it's cheap, easy to get, and doesn't draw attention. If anyone ever asks about it, you can tell them you're trying to deal with an ant infestation." He caught Ben's eye. "That's the most important part of all this. Not drawing attention to yourself. You get it?"

"Yeah," Ben said, setting his jaw. "It's like why Peter Parker wears a costume. So none of his enemies can find him when he's not being Spider-man."

"Something like that," Dean allowed, mentally adding, 'Kid needs better taste in comics. DC's where it's at.'

Ben set off to accomplish his task with determined intent, while Dean painted a Devil's Trap on the underside of the rug in the front hallway.

Throughout the day, Dean taught Ben other important tips and tricks of the trade – nothing that would get him in trouble, either with his mother or with a casual passerby who might ask questions, but things that any hunter's kid would know. He had Ben help him paint symbols, and taught him some code words to give Dean in case he ever needed to reach him and it wasn't safe to do so.

If Sam were around he'd probably suggest Ben read one book or another, but Dean could imagine the uninterested look on the kid's face if he tried that avenue, and so he ended up talking about how heavy metal used a lot of pagan imagery. Ben's eyes lit up at that and Dean could guess what he'd be googling later that night.

When Lisa came home, Dean showed her how to load and use a gun while Sam distracted Ben with some of the more PG stories of things he and Dean had seen. Once they were both far out of earshot, Dean also walked Lisa through hex bags, exorcisms and banishing sigils.

"It's a last resort," he told her, drawing the required symbol on a piece of paper. "I really, really hope you'll never need this. In fact, I doubt you will, seeing as how this place is tighter than the Pentagon right now. But in case you do…"

"It's better to be prepared," Lisa agreed.

"And you might want to think about getting some more permanent protection," Dean remarked, handing her two anti-possession charms. "Always keep these on you. Ben's still a bit young for ink, but you wouldn't lose anything by getting some."

"Except my self-respect," Lisa huffed, her eyes sparkling.
"Aw, come on – classy little tat, right here –" He grinned and reached around to brush the small of her back, and Lisa laughed and slapped his hand away. "In all seriousness, though, some body parts make it more effective – over your heart, your spleen, your solar plexus –"

"Sounds like the locations of the seven chakras."

Dean blinked. "Uh, yeah."

"Yoga instructor, remember?" Lisa grinned. "And as I recall, you and I had a conversation about chakra the night we met. Specifically the tantric aspects…"

Dean's eyes glazed over briefly and he leered. "Good times."

Sam and Ben appeared before Dean could suggest a re-enactment, which was probably for the best, considering.

They left the next day.

Dean spent the morning doing a precursory check of the Impala before they left, while Sam gave Lisa a few last minute instructions in case Dean had left anything out.

Ben was unhappy to see them go. He grunted out a sullen goodbye to Dean and Sam after breakfast, and then disappeared up to his room. AC/DC blared accusingly from his room for the remainder of Sam and Dean's sojourn at the Braeden's home.

Lisa shrugged, apologetic, while Sam loaded up the last of their things in the car. Lisa had given them a cooler of food for the trip. "He's just upset you're going."

"There are worse ways to throw a tantrum," Dean allowed. He faltered for a moment, and then cleared his voice. Half-joking, he went on, "I know I've asked before…but you'd tell me if he was…you know…right?"

Lisa smiled sadly. "Would you stay if he was?"

"Yes," Dean said without hesitation.

"Liar."

"Not about this," Dean replied.

"Then…and don't take this the wrong way –" Lisa bit her lip and looked away. "Yes, I'm sure he's not yours."

When she met his eyes again, there was a meaningful glint in them. Dean felt a lump appear in his throat. "Lis…"

"You've got important work to do," she told him, firmly, like she was telling herself as well. "And your job brings…risks with it. You understand?"

"Yeah," Dean swallowed, and nodded lowly. "Yeah, I do."

"I'm glad," she told him quietly, and then smiled again. "That being said, if you don't come around for a visit more than once every year, I'm going to do some hunting of my own. And you're not going to like it."

"Is that a fact?"
"That's a promise."

"Then I guess we've got no choice," Dean smirked. "We'll call you when we know more about what's going on."

"You'd better," she replied, leaning forward and brushing her lips against his. She pulled away before he could deepen it, and prompted, "And you're absolutely sure you can't stick around a little longer? It's only been a day—"

"If we knew what to expect from this whole thing with Sam and with Cas, I'd stay a month," Dean replied earnestly. "The past two years have been…messed up. Once I'm sure we're in the clear, we'll be back."

"Then I'll keep a few cold ones in the fridge."

"Tell the kid I'll see him around."

Dean ducked into the car, giving a final wave to Lisa as he did so. The passenger door slammed shut, and Dean pretended he didn't notice the flutter of warmth in his chest at the sight of Sam riding shotgun. Still, he allowed a satisfied smile to break out on his face and slid the key into the ignition. The Impala hummed to life beneath him and he backed out of the driveway.

The smile left his face as he watched Lisa wave them on through the rear-view mirror as they started down the street. Sam already had his laptop out and open, but he was staring out the window with a preoccupied expression.

They drove in silence for a while.

There was an uncomfortable tension in the air that reeked of unspoken sentiments and awkward words. It was the first time they were completely alone without the possibility of someone walking in on them; that possibility had so far staved off Sam's tendency to emote uncontrollably and Dean's usual gruff brush off. Nevertheless, Dean was still expecting and half-dreading his brother's first foray into the chick-flick moment of the drive.

He swallowed heavily, thinking of the last time he had been in the car with Sam –

'Christ, it was only four days ago,' he realized in disbelief. It felt longer than that – that day without Sam had felt almost as terrible as Dean's first thirty years in Hell.

Every now and then, he felt Sam's eyes on him from the passenger seat. Maybe Sam was thinking about something and was just as reluctant to break the silence as Dean was, he thought.

After about fifteen minutes of the awkward quiet where Dean tried to decide whether he should be the one to broach the subject or not, he gave up. He wasn't going to worry about it right now. He had Sam, his car and a destination in mind. Everything else could wait.

Dean shoved a tape into the player, twirling the volume up, and the car filled with the familiar bass intro to 'Crazy Train'. Beside him, Sam snorted and shook his head.

"Not even the Apocalypse is going to make you broaden your musical horizons, is it?"

"If by 'broaden my musical horizons' you mean 'listen to hack musicians slitting their wrists to the sound of a synthesizer', then no," Dean replied automatically. He felt himself relax; this was familiar territory. Mysterious return from Hell or not, this kind of banter never changed.
Dean turned past a church and then took the exit for the IN-32 West.

"You actually think we'll go back and see them?" Sam asked.

"Depends."

Dean wouldn't risk putting Lisa and Ben in danger if there was something out there gunning for them again.

"They'll be okay."

"I know that. It's not them I'm worried about. Their place'll give Bobby's a run for security, right now. I just want to find out where Cas is."

"And Adam."

There was an uncomfortable quiet, broken only by the sound of a few cars passing them. It was a mark of how distracted Dean was that he didn't give into his inner Mario Andretti and show exactly what the Impala could do.

"And Adam," he agreed. He and Sam were both pretty sure they knew where Adam was, even if they hadn't voiced it yet. Even so, Dean struggled past the sudden lump in his throat. "There's no guarantee, but I figure if you're up here, Adam was brought back too. Maybe he just showed up in a different place. I mean, Windom's on the way, we could stop in…"

Sam pursed his lips. There was a long, heavy pause as they both tried hard not to voice all the problems with that theory. "Dean, you really think we wouldn't have been brought up together?"

The lump got more painful, and Dean gritted his teeth at the thought of yet another younger brother that he had failed to save.

"Then we definitely have to find Cas. He can help us help Adam."

Dean felt Sam gazing at him sideways, sensed the expectant question there and shrugged as he tried to find the right words.

"Cas did something," he finally murmured, frowning at the steering wheel. Sam didn't even ask him what he was talking about. "Or maybe something was done to him. I dunno. But the last two times he died, I never felt…"

"Yeah?"

Dean opened his mouth, and then shook his head dismissively. "Man, I couldn't even tell you what it was. I was, like, anchored to something, and now I'm just…cut loose. Or whatever."

Sam made a thoughtful noise. "So, we're sticking with the Cas-angle on all this then?"

"Who else could have brought you back? We've already nixed God and Death."

"Yeah, but – Dean, I was in the Cage," Sam said him patiently, his voice low as though he really didn't want to remind either of them about that fact. "Another sixty-six Seals would have had to break in the one day that I was down there before it opened again. Considering the world is still intact –"

"– that didn't happen."
"Exactly. Also, the first and last Seal were kind of set. Unless another 'righteous man' broke in Hell or someone resurrected Lilith just to kill her again to break a Seal…I know Cas is a good guy and all, but I doubt he would have gone through all that trouble to bring me back."

Dean shifted uncomfortably at the unspoken, 'Though I'm sure he would have tried if it was you.'

"So he found another way," he deflected. "Cas is our kind of stupid – remember the box cutter stunt in Van Nuys?"

Sam grimaced. "I try not to remember that day, Dean."

Dean tried to avoid thinking about it too. He had sunk to a new low, letting Cas put his life on the line to pull off a plan that would probably see Dean becoming an archangel's sock puppet. He still didn't regret his decision at the time – making a deal to protect his family trumped everything else. Having Cas finally lose faith in him, though, however briefly, had hurt more than he would have thought.

He blinked suddenly, running through that last thought in his head. An idea came to him. "You don't think…you don't think Cas could have maybe made a deal?"

"What?"

"A deal. Cas might have – deals make things happen, right? Even the impossible – I mean, Bobby's deal with Crowley got us a meeting with Death, so who's to say maybe Cas didn't make a deal to bring you back?"

"Maybe…but he has no soul. What the hell would he have dealt with?"

"I don't know – maybe he convinced someone else we know to pony up the collateral."

"The only person who would even consider something like that is Bobby, and his soul's already in hock –"

"– Which is another thing we've got to worry about – making sure that demon douchebag doesn't try to keep it –"

"– and I seriously doubt that one human soul would be enough to power a deal like that," Sam finished.

"Or else it would have been done ages ago by some emo kid who was hot for Satan, you mean."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Right."

Dean frowned, and another idea occurred to him. This one made his stomach clench. "What about his grace? It'd be more powerful than a human soul, right?"

"I don't see how he could have," Sam mused. "Remember how Anna's burned up the demons when it manifested? Any demon who tried to take an angel's grace probably wouldn't get much time to enjoy it."

"You'd think," Dean remarked. "I dunno. That human soul we saw when we dealt with Famine looked a little bit like grace to me – you know, what little I saw without my eyes getting burned out. What if it's like that? What if being given grace by an angel somehow diffuses it?"

"Don't you think Cas would have mentioned something like that to us?"
"Why would he? It's not like we'd ever have a reason to consider an angel selling his grace to a
demon."

They exchanged a meaningful look and lapsed back into a silence that was a hundred times tenser
than it had been. Dean's hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles appeared bone
white, his mind racing furiously as they passed through Lebanon and headed for Crawfordsville.

Because not only could he imagine Cas doing something monumentally stupid like sacrificing
himself for Dean, but he was also fairly certain that it was exactly what had happened. As an angel,
Cas didn't understand certain nuances in conversation and as Dean thought back to the last words
he'd said to Cas, he knew how Cas might have taken his absolute frustration and anger at Sam's fate.

He had never asked Cas to do anything about it, though, because he'd known with certainty that
nothing could be done. It was why he had promised Sam not to try to save him.

But it seemed Cas had taken Dean's scathing words and bitterness as an indication that he wouldn't
be able to live without Sam. The fact that it was true to an extent didn't change the reality that Dean
had never intended Cas to give any more of himself to the umpteenth-times-damned Winchester
cause.

Dean wanted nothing more right then than to call the angel to his side and chew him out for his
stupidity. If he really had traded his grace for Sam, though, then he wasn't going to be showing up
any time soon.

Cas would probably never show up again.

The idea that the angel was dead and gone forever hit Dean with an inexplicably strong wave of
melancholy. It was almost on par with how he felt when he was separated from Sam, only different
to a degree.

Dean blinked, an idea occurring to him as they passed yet another dirt path leading toward a farming
community. Without completely thinking it through, he swerved around on the empty two-lane
highway and headed for that trail.

Sam yelled in surprise, gripping at the dash to ground himself as the car headed down the lane.

"Dean, what the hell?!

"One way to find out, right?" Dean said, his jaw clenched and his eyes trained determinedly in front
of him, searching. He ignored the sound of rocks and debris hitting the undercarriage of the car.
"Time to talk to a local."

Sam saw the sign for the crossroads before the car even stopped.

"Are you kidding me?" he demanded, immediately realizing what Dean's plan was.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Dean retorted, tuning off the motor and getting out of the Impala.

"Dean, we just survived the biggest celebrity death match since ever," Sam reminded him urgently,
tripping as he too climbed out of the car and met his brother in back of it. Dean was already opening
the trunk and propping it up with a shotgun. "You really want to go poke the hornet's nest again?"

"There'll be no poking unless they ask for it," Dean assured him, grabbing the demon-killing knife
from amidst the rest of their armaments and sticking it through his belt. "Besides, it's not like I'm
going to make a deal or anything. I just want some information."
"And what makes you think you'll get anything from a demon other than lies and a hard time?"

"Demons don't tell the truth unless they know it'll hurt, right? They got an angel down there, they'll probably want to gloat."

"And if they don't?"

"There'll be one less demon in the world when I'm through."

"What if it's Crowley? He's not exactly easy to kill."

"Way I see it, we've already got a bone to pick with him. He shows up here, bonus. I only wish we still had the damn Colt."

Sam opened his mouth again to come up with another argument, and then closed it again. He watched Dean dig around for the proper materials to summon the crossroads demon, and sighed. "I still think this is a bad idea."

"I never said it wasn't," Dean said, snapping closed the tin and heading for the middle of the crossroads. "But seein' as how neither of us has a better one right now..."

"All the more reason you shouldn't do it."

"Sammy, if you're gonna bitch, go wait in the car and turn on some Morrissey or something."

"Jerk," Sam scowled, but didn't move to leave. Instead, he reached into the trunk and grabbed one of the other shotguns.

Dean knelt in the mud at the dead center of the crossroads and dug through the moist earth with his bare hands. Once he made the hole a decent depth, he buried the tin and scraped the dirt back over it with his hands. Sam loitered warily by the side of the road, keeping his ear out for innocent passersby or the expected demon.

Except no demon came.

Several minutes passed in silence, and Dean looked expectantly left and right. "Come on, lady, it's not like you've got anything better to do with Satan locked up tight."

The crossroads remained empty but for the two of them, the only change being a brief pick up in the breeze.

"Why the hell isn't it working?" Dean fumed.

"Did you put everything into the tin?"

"Of course I did!"

"Were the ingredients fresh?"

"Seriously?"

"What? Sometimes it can affect the summoning –"

"It's not the ingredients, Sam."

"How do you know?"
"Because when I made my deal for you, half of the stuff was stale or broken and the demon still showed up," Dean grumbled. "There's something else wrong."

Sam wrinkled his brow, and after a moment's hesitation went back to the Impala. He returned several minutes later with a tin of his own and was folding one of his fake ideas into it.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Dean cried. "The hell are you doing?"

"I'm going to see if it's just you," Sam replied, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Dude, you just got back from Hell – no way am I letting you put your soul on the line just so we can find out if Cas is down there."

"I thought you said we were just trying to get information."

"I did –"

"Then shut up and watch my back."

Sam crouched to dig up Dean's tin, tossed it at him, and then replaced it with his own. He buried it quickly, dusted off his hands and surveyed the four routes of the crossroads cautiously.

They waited in tense silence for almost ten minutes before exchanging meaningful glances and returning to the Impala.

Much to Sam's discomfiture, Dean stopped at three more crossroads along various stretches of highway as they made their way to South Dakota. He seemed determined to prove the first one had just been a fluke, but when each time yielded no result, he became tenser.

Sam knew better than to comment on it, and instead of rising to the bait as Dean speculated out loud about possible reasons for what was going on, Sam called Bobby. They carefully avoided talking about Sam's mysterious resurrection and Sam filled the older hunter in on the latest development.

"You'd think you two would be finished summonin' demons for kicks by now," Bobby's growl was grainy over the phone line.

"Hey, it was purely fact-finding," Dean protested loudly. "I'd rather not get caught with my pants down, thanks."

"Leave your pants out of it," Bobby replied. "Cause it ain't just you boys."

There was a ringing silence.

"What do you mean?" Sam asked. He already had a bad feeling he knew what Bobby was going to tell them.

"I mean, as soon as Dean left for Indiana, I tried to summon Crowley to get my soul back. Short story is, he never showed. Even though I did the summoning spell exactly the way I shoulda. I figured he was tryin' to welch, so I went to see if I could beat it outta the nearest crossroads demon. No go."

"Nothing?"

"Nope. And I ain't the only one. Spoke to Rufus and after he called me every name in the book, he tried it himself. It didn't take."
"Damn it," Sam murmured. "Why didn't you say anything before?"

"I figured you both had enough on your plate. Never figured you'd be stupid enough to go lookin' for demons right off the bat. I thought you'd be sick of their kind by now."

"More and more every day," Sam sighed. "So you're saying Hell's shut down?"

"Not exactly. Tamara exorcised some demons from a movie theater in Wisconsin yesterday, and I spoke to Garth this morning. String of Hellhound attacks up in Vermont, which means someone's still dealin' in souls."

"So there are still demons around, we just can't summon them. Right when we need to."

"Looks like."

"Just us, or all hunters?"

"I'm still waiting on some other contacts to let me know – it'll take a while, considering most aren't stupid enough to make a deal for themselves on a good day, let alone risk their soul just for some information on a bad one. But I get the feelin' it's just the people who don't spit on the name of Winchester."

Sam groaned again. "This just keeps getting weirder and weirder."

"We should go the psychic route," Dean spoke up. "We can't find out what we need to from the usual channels, might as well try that." He raised his voice so that Bobby could hear him on the other end. "Any psychics between Albert Lea and Sioux Falls?"

"None that I know of who'd help you. Word travelled fast about what happened to Pamela. Your best bet's probably Missouri Moseley out in Lawrence."

Sam and Dean frowned at each other. They weren't exactly keen on returning to Lawrence so soon after the Apocalypse That Wasn't. In fact, Sam was pretty sure that if he never again returned to his hometown it would be much too soon.

"Thanks Bobby, we'll keep that in mind," Sam said, deciding he and Dean needed to figure out the next step of the game plan first. "We should get to your place within the next three hours. Less if Dean keeps driving like Bo Duke."

"Please, the General Lee's got nothin' on my baby," Dean scoffed automatically, although Sam could hear the strained note in his brother's voice.

Stale jokes aside, their situation was yielding more questions by the hour, and even Sam couldn't blame Dean for his preoccupation with Castiel's disappearance. He was feeling his own brand of worry about their friend.

He gazed out the window, wondering idly if he and Dean would ever get to experience a normal day again. At this point, he wasn't even feeling picky – obviously 'apple pie' wasn't in the cards for either of them, but he had long since started yearning for the days of easy hunting when the most troubling choice he and Dean had to make was whether to take out a coven of witches or clean out a vampire infestation.

'We've survived the Apocalypse and we still don't get to take a break,' Sam mused in angry resignation as they stopped at a rest stop to fill the tank.
The sun was just starting to go down when they pulled back on the road, Lisa's rations a distant memory.

It was another thing that Sam regretted. His return to Dean meant that his brother was once again denied a chance at normal. Standing outside the Braeden's home the night he had mysteriously showed up, Sam had struggled for a full ten minutes about whether or not he should even reveal his presence to Dean. Perhaps if his brother hadn't collapsed, he might have simply turned around and walked away. Maybe Dean wouldn't be as worked up as he was now.

'Or not,' Sam thought after a pause. Dean was as curious about Sam's return as he Sam was, but he was also just as intent on finding out what had happened to Castiel. Eventually Dean would have realized the angel wasn't around, and maybe that would have propelled him back to hunting.

Sam wasn't sure if Dean had admitted to himself just how much the angel meant to him. Castiel had been there for Dean when Sam hadn't – whether by choice or not. As much as Sam hated to entertain the thought, Dean had obviously transferred some of his protectiveness and affection for Sam to Castiel. In fact, Sam was pretty sure that Dean's priorities these days proceeded along the lines of 'Sam – Bobby – Castiel – Impala – Sex – Pie'.

Which made the situation that much worse if Castiel had actually sacrificed himself for Sam. Not only would Dean be depressed at losing one more thing he had grudgingly come to care about, Sam would have yet another thing to feel guilty over. Granted, nearly being responsible for ending the world was still high on the list of things Sam had to atone for, but being the reason for his brother's misery ran a close second.

"We should go to Lawrence, I think."

Sam glanced up when Dean's voice broke through his thoughts. It took a moment for him to catch up with where their last conversation had left off before he answered, "What about Bobby? We said we'd stop in there first."

"It's not like he's going to ground us for not showing up when we said we would," Dean evaded. "And he already said he's got no idea what's going on. We're saving time this way."

"I don't know…"

"Come on, Sam, first Cas isn't answering and now demons aren't even jumping at the chance to monologue at us?"

"I get that. But this is all way too specific to be any other day's work. This is obviously something big, and we should treat it like that," Sam reasoned. "I mean, it's almost like someone changed the laws of the universe on us when they brought me up."

Dean considered that thoughtfully, and then suggested, "Point. We already knew some serious mojo happened. You think you coming back was just a side effect of something bigger?"

"More than that, I think we're in some serious trouble. It's like we've been cut off from Hell – which, you know, normally I might think is a good thing –"

"Except it's really not," a voice piped up from the backseat.

Dean swore loudly and nearly swerved off of the road in surprise, and Sam whirled around, switchblade already open and in hand.

A familiar, shapely brunette in her mid-twenties sat in the back of the Impala, mouth twisted into a
smirk and once-blue eyes flashing a bloody red. She waved cheekily.

"Bela!" Sam gaped, reaching for the knife under his seat.

"In the flesh – so to speak," she purred as Dean got himself and the car under control and flipped her hair. "This meat actually belongs to a rather distant cousin. My body was sadly shredded when you boys left me to die, but she had such a remarkable resemblance to me…"

Her smile widened.

"You're a…you're a demon," Sam murmured, craning around to stare at the woman who had caused so many headaches in the year after Dean made his deal.

"Very observant, Sam – did your stay in the Pit rattle your brains so much that you can only state the obvious now?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dean demanded.

Bela ran a finger along the upholstery. "Funny how you were so keen to ward your girlfriend's home with hex bags, but not your car."

"Goddamn it, I'm going to draw a devil's trap on the backseat if you sons of bitches keep popping in."

"Don't be dramatic, darling, we all know you'd never defile your beloved fossil," Bela retorted. "Besides, I was under the impression you've been trying to get our attention."

"'Our'?” Sam asked. "You rockin' the royal 'we' now?"

"Very funny, but no; at the moment I just happen to be the right hand of upper management. You should be honored."

"Screw honor," Dean snapped. "Do you know anything about Cas?"

"Who?" Bela blinked, sounding oblivious. The boys knew her too well to trust only that.

"A friend of ours. An angel," Sam said through gritted teeth. "Pretty sure he had something to do with me being topside."

"Well, I don't know about any angels in Hell other than the two down in the Cage," Bela shrugged. "I'm sure if your friend were down there, all of Hell would be lining up to take pot-shots."

"Shut up!" Dean snarled.

"Honestly, Dean? After all the fun times we had?" she purred. "Up here…down there…you'd think you'd be the slightest bit happy to see me."

Sam gaped at Dean in surprised, but his brother ignored him. "So help me, bitch, if you don't get out of here, I will end you."

"Oh, relax, I was teasing," she pouted. "Besides, as I said, I was sent here for business, not pleasure."

"What do you mean, 'sent'?" Sam asked, trying to reorient the direction of the conversation.

"A mutual friend of ours is in the middle of securing a very lucrative real estate deal," she
pronounced, examining her nails. "Crowley's got quite a following, and seeing as how he still holds the top job in the Crossroads department, his word is pretty much law down under. He's put the order out that no one's allowed to deal with you boys."

"Why would he do that?"

"If he had a better side, I'd assume it was a kind of gratitude thing."

"Which it's not."

"Not likely. I figure he's got an agenda of some sort, but it's above my pay grade to ask about it."

"Bullshit. You always know every angle of something before you get in on it."

"Maybe before I spent over two hundred years choking down my own intestines," Bela replied coolly. Sam winced, and she went on, "My boss may have decided you boys are to be left alone, but there's still a decent amount of demons still gunning for you." Her coy smile returned. "You see, they haven't quite gotten over the massive fiasco that was Lucifer's not-quite debut. You may want to lay low for the foreseeable future."

"Great," Sam scowled.

Bela's smirk widened. "Oh, I can just imagine all the things they'll do to you when they find out you're up here." She crossed a leg and tilted her head at Sam. "How did you manage that, anyhow?"

Sam remained quiet, glaring at her furiously.

"Oh, that's precious. You have no idea," Bela trilled. "Too bad. I know demons who would sell their non-existent souls to know how to get in and out of the Cage. And considering you boys and your absolute stupidity when it comes to family, I would have thought you'd at least have shared the secret with your latchkey brother."

Both Sam and Dean froze.

"You mean…Adam's still down there?" Sam whispered, unable to keep the emotion out of his voice.

"Did you think he wasn't?" Bela smirked. "Of course he's still there. Funny how whatever got you out of the Cage thought he was so unimportant in the big scheme of things." Her eyes flashed red in mirth. "He has such a distinct voice, you know? And he keeps calling out to you, Dean. Seems absolutely positive that you can save him."

"Shoot her, Sam," Dean growled furiously, reaching for his own concealed gun even as he said it.

"Actually, you might want to brace yourself," Bela remarked conversationally.

Before Sam could make a move, there was a sudden explosion of sound and the world abruptly shifted.

Something careened into the side of the Impala in a way that was depressingly familiar. Sam had the impression of a grill and headlights as the passenger side of the car crushed inward. Dean was yelling, and the world became a swirl of color as the Impala flipped off of the road.
The force of the impact was powerful enough that the Impala completed a full revolution, and Dean and Sam were forced to brace themselves against the interior of the car.

Glass exploded inward from all directions, and Dean clenched his eyes shut, gritting his teeth. He heard the sound of the roof skidding along the pavement, and felt a jarring sensation when the vehicle came to a shuddering, upright stop.

There was a beat of silence, broken only by the sounds of glass spilling from the windows and the suspension creaking in protest. Dean was thankful that the Impala was from the pre-airbag era in that he at least wasn't trapped in his seat. Still, the amount of bruising and the possible concussion that would come from this latest accident wouldn't be a joking matter.

"Sammy?" he croaked, his first reaction in any situation. He opened his eyes and gingerly moved his head to one side to examine his brother.

"M'okay," Sam managed, wincing in pain as he tugged his arm free of the badly dented metal that was once the passenger door. "Don't think anything's broken – just really bruised."

"Story of our lives," Dean grunted to cover up his relief. A passenger-side collision could be deadly or at least seriously injurious and he'd already lost Sam once this week.

As he struggled to get the door open, he noticed that Bela was conveniently missing from the backseat. Probably she had disappeared back to Hell after giving her crappy information and her ill-timed warning. He cursed her under his breath as he finally managed to get out of the driver's seat, wincing at every new exposed piece of abused metal that he saw.

He moved aside, allowing Sam a chance to get out of the car after him; his brother was cradling his right arm, and when he straightened up Dean saw that he was favoring his left leg as well. Once he was satisfied that Sam was more or less alright, he took in the damage to the Impala.

He held back an unmanly whimper at the unsightly dents and bulges in the body, and the ugly skid marks against the roof. The smell of burnt rubber, fluid and oil mingled in the damp night air. The damage was still better than the time an eighteen-wheeler had careened into her, but his baby looked a lot rougher than he had seen her of late. The crash had hit the side with the gas tank, and Dean could hear the sound of liquid spilling onto the pavement. They were lucky it hadn't gone up in flames.

Movement caught his eye, and his awareness of their situation rushed back to him.

They had ended up on the opposite side of the road, just in front of one of the rarer forested areas you sometimes found in Minnesota. Across the street was the car which had swerved up unexpectedly on the shoulder of the road and careened into them; a battered four-by-four prior to the accident, its front grill now punched inward, despite the protective bar on the front, and smoke rose from beneath the hood.

It wasn't what made Dean tense up.
At least three other similarly tricked out vehicles had pulled off behind the first car, and in the time it had taken the Winchesters to climb out of the Impala, their passengers had lined the deserted stretch of highway. At least half of them were aiming firearms at them, while the rest carried other weapons – crossbows, knives – one of them held an old, medieval looking mace flail.

Hunters.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say this isn't highway patrol," Sam murmured under his breath, and Dean inclined his head only slightly.

There were more than a dozen of them; Dean even recognized some of the faces.

The foremost hunter had a brush of mousy brown beard that fell halfway down his chest and was thick-featured under matted hair. His face was heavily scarred, as though he had been too close to a blast of rock-sat, and his nose was round like a tomato. Along with his potato-shaped body, Dale Houston was probably the most unfortunate looking hunter Dean had ever come in contact with, but looks didn't mean anything to a man who had killed more wendigos than anyone else on the west coast. Considering the expert way he was holding the blood encrusted machete in his hand, Dean doubted his physical appearance would impede his ability to kill if he had to.

In his shadow stood "Trigger" Luther, whose father Skip had been a well-known hunter and had also worked with John Winchester on a few of his cases where he'd deigned to accept help. Trigger was probably one of the youngest ones there. He was fresh-faced and smaller than the others, carrying a compound hunting crossbow with an arrow on the string and six more in a quiver clipped to the side of the weapon.

Beside him, Dean made out Spencer Case – a tall, bulky man who had enough tattoos up and down his arms to suggest he had spent more than one term in prison. He had a bowie-knife in his belt and was levelling his shotgun purposefully at the Winchesters, while beside him, Lonnie Thomas, a middle-aged black man with weathered skin and squint lines around his eyes, did the same.

There were others that he might have seen at the Roadhouse once or twice several years before, but no one else whose name he knew.

What he did know, however, was that he and Sam were in a particular sort of trouble.

He moved surreptitiously so that he was adding his bulk to the barrier provided by the Impala, hoping he was providing at least a little extra protection for Sam. Not likely, considering Sam's Sasquatch frame, but it was the best he could manage.

Attempting to stall, Dean pasted a grin on his face and prayed to whoever was listening that no one would try to shoot him in the face.

"There a problem here, guys?"

"You've got a lot of nerve, Winchester," Lonnie said quietly as the group of hunters began to cross the road toward them.

"Way I see it, you were the ones to run us off the road," Dean replied with false ease. "Kinda scratchin' my head as to why."

"You shouldn't be," Spencer growled. "You shoulda figured we'd be lookin' for you boys. You got a lot to answer for."

"Came in over alligator radio that a real beaut' of a car was drivin' up the highway," Dale interrupted,
his tone also elaborately casual. "Thought we'd look into that."

Realization took hold, and Dean inwardly kicked himself for not thinking about it earlier. He was talking about the CB radio system that truckers used.

Hunters got a lot of their information from truckers; when you spend your life on the road, it stood to reason you needed as many contacts as possible. And the folk who made their living driving cross country were more aware of the things that went bump in the night. In fact, a large proportion of hunters had started their lives as back road truckers.

"She don't look like much now, though, does she?" a nameless hunter piped up.

"Keep talkin', buddy," Dean growled, flexing his fingers, itching wrap them around the other man's throat for the slight to his car.

"Dean," Sam warned him quietly, in that tight tone that told Dean his brother was trying to think out the various angles of a plan.

'Hope he's doing better than I am right now,' he thought tightly, considering their odds.

Outwardly, he tried to make himself look as non-threatening as possible. As it was, it was a miracle they hadn't been shot yet, but Dean attributed that to the unspoken courtesy that existed among hunters – you go to put one of your people down, make sure you tell them why you're doing it. It somehow helped justify the act, he supposed.

"Haven't you guys heard?" he asked lightly. "End of the world's over. Time to go back to your day jobs."

"Mebbe so, Winchester," Lonnie responded quietly. "But lots of people died. Lotta men here lost friends…family…all because of you boys, if the story's true."

"Depends where you're reading your stories, man," Dean remarked. "If you're talking National Enquirer, I've got a bridge to sell you."

Sam kicked him.

"Hull and Janklow are good hunters," Spencer defended coolly. "Never lied to me in all the years I've known 'em. And the way I heard, Roy and Walt took you boys out – yet here you are. So I'm willin' to go on a little faith."

'Not good,' Dean thought desperately at the name of the men who had killed him and Sam a few months before. His movements masked by the Impala, he began to dig into his coat pockets for something that could be of use. All of the weapons were still in the trunk, except for the demon killing knife he still had stuck in his belt – but he knew if he made a move, they'd shoot him.

"There's a lot you guys don't know," Sam tried, his voice causing some of the other hunters to take notice and refocus their aim on him. "It's really not as simple as – "

"Don't much figure you've got a right to talk right now, Sam," Dale interrupted, cocking his rifle. "It don't right matter about the whys and wherefores – fact is, you're the reason this whole mess got started. What makes you think you get to just go back to normal?"

Dean barely heard the injured noise his brother made but knew that Dale had hit a nerve. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the strained expression on his brother's face that told him Sam had just realized the gravity of his resurrection.
'Cas, you son of a bitch, if you're not dead, now would be a really good time for you to beam down,' Dean thought anxiously, still searching his pockets as whispers of discontent broke out amongst the other hunters.

"–Ain't right –"

"– Just as bad as the sons of bitches we hunt –"

"– Walkin' around, like nothin' happened –"

"– There's a price to pay, boys, step up and take it like men –"

Urgency ignited in his brain as his eyes flicked around the site of the collision for anything that might help. He and Sam had seen worse odds before, but that was usually a bar fight where none of their opponents were schooled in decent fighting or carrying firearms. There wasn't much they were going to be able to do in this position, but if he could manage some kind of distraction, get a hold of a shotgun –

There was a bright explosion of light that temporarily whitened out the entire strip of the road, before the brightness diminished into something smaller, and more concentrated. The arcs of lightning rippled into the shape of wings and Dean felt the bottom drop out of his stomach as the glass on every vehicle's window suddenly shattered. The electricity from the massive wings sparked violently, igniting the gas that soaked the pavement.

Dean made a sound of dismay as flames roared to life beneath the Impala and followed a trail of fluid to the vehicle that had hit them. Several of the hunters ducked reflexively, but none of them let go of their weapons. Instead, some of the hunters shifted their attention from the Winchesters to the tall, well-built figure that stood in the flames without being burned.

"Shit," Dean muttered.

"I warned you and my brother not to leave me in that hovel, Dean Winchester," the archangel Raphael intoned coldly, either unaware or unconcerned that about half of the hunters had firearms pointed at his back. "You should have listened to me."

"I don't listen to anyone, what makes you special?" Dean returned, pretending his heart wasn't beating about twice as fast as usual.

The archangel ignored him. "Your bravado does not amuse me, and you no longer have a failed angel to guard you. I would suggest you show me some respect."

Dean tensed at the mention of his friend. "You know what happened to Cas?"

"Castiel's grace no longer perverts the Host," Raphael smiled unpleasantly. "The first in a long line of improvements to Heaven, I am sure."

"Who's the douche angel?" Sam asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"That's Raphael," Dean muttered back.

"What, not Donatello?"

Dean snorted in amusement, while Raphael levelled a gaze at Sam. "Your return to this plane is unexpected, abomination. But it is not unwelcome. You may have halted the smooth execution of the Apocalypse before, but it was only a delay. One I intend to rectify immediately."


Dean tensed in response to that, while beside him Sam gave a quick, violent jerk.

"Hold on there, partner," Spencer stepped forward, raising his shotgun. "Me and the boys might have a problem with that plan of yours."

Raphael's expression didn't change, although he did incline his head slightly over his shoulder in order to be heard.

"Depart, all of you," the archangel ordered in a bored tone. "Heaven will pass judgement on these men, not you."

To Dean's surprise, this pronouncement didn't cause any of the other hunters to budge; they continued to point their weapons at the angel, although some of them looked a little nervous. Dean would have put money on the fact that none of them had ever actually interacted with an angel before.

Lonnie stepped forward, raising his rifle. "You'll have to forgive us, friend, but we're not so keen on Heaven bein' involved. Not after the shitstorm of the last few mo – augh!"

Lonnie's warning dissolved into a howl of pain as the weapon in his hand – in fact, in all of the hunter's hands – suddenly seemed to glow red. Steam rose from the twisted, scorched tools that the men were forced to drop when the pain of holding them became too strong.

Sam hissed a curse under his breath, but whether it was in sympathy or alarm, Dean couldn't tell.

"I will not tell you twice," Raphael told the hunters simply, returning his attention to Sam and Dean. A sinister smile appeared on his face. "We have work to do. However, before that, I will enjoy taking out the proper retribution on your feeble, mortal bodies. Many times over."

He raised his hand in a familiar gesture that usually meant a bout of stomach cancer or broken bones was on its way. Dean tried to mentally prepare himself for that.

"I don't think so," Sam interjected, moving suddenly.

He brought his hand up, and in the firelight Dean saw that it was glistening red. Raphael's eyes widened in realization a second before Sam pressed his palm against his left side, but there wasn't time for him to react. There was a violent pulse of energy that propelled Sam to the ground, and a yell of rage, and the archangel was gone.

Dean was immediately on his knees, crouched beside Sam, who was clutching his left side and trying to stifle a curse. "Sam?"

"I'm fine – just, I think I might have rearranged all my internal organs," his brother said, offering a grin. He turned to one side and removed his hand, showing Dean the roughly drawn banishing sigil that was carved into the flesh of his hip. It wasn't a deep cut, but still bled profusely, and there were pieces of fabric stuck in the cuts; obviously his brother had carved it through his jacked with one hand when the angel appeared. "Took a page out of Cas's book."

Dean grimaced.

"You two aren't allowed to play together anymore," he told Sam, keeping his eyes on where the hunters were recovering themselves. Dean helped his brother to his feet and studiously avoided looking at the still burning Impala. "Come on, we gotta bail."

He figured that if the hunters had been holding a grudge for the Apocalypse before, it was nothing to
how they would be feeling now that they knew an archangel was once again going to try to use Sam
and Dean to restart the end of days.

'Just can't win,' Dean thought in annoyance.

They headed for the trees in the distance. If they could get far enough away, they could regroup and
take the hunters out one at a time. It was their only shot right now.

They hadn't gone thirty yards when gunfire erupted; evidently some of the guns were still working,
or the hunters had retrieved their spares. Dean tried to keep them running in a zigzag, which would
make them a harder target, but it was hard to do while also trying to shield Sam from any of the
blasts.

Bullets whistled past Dean's ears, and he felt two graze his right shoulder and left thigh. The pain
served as an incentive to keep running. The one thing that Sam and Dean had going for them right
now was the fact that on foot, they were a hell of a lot faster than the other hunters. He just hoped
that their pursuers decided to run after them instead of coming in their cars.

"Dean, look!" Sam cried, and he glanced up.

About a football field's length away, an abandoned looking two-storey farm-style cottage was nestled
within the broadleaf trees. Dean felt a note of triumph.

'That could work.'

By the time they made it to the cottage, Dean felt like he had been kicked in the ribs by a horse and
then had his windpipe frozen with liquid nitrogen. Sam vaulted forward kicking in the front door,
while Dean rushed in after him.

Dean pushed the door shut and dragged the first piece of furniture he could grab – a chair – over to
barricade it. Sam started to go to each window, closing the shutters and drawing the drapes; the move
was perfunctory, but might at least stop anyone getting a clear shot off through the windows.

The cottage itself had obviously been unused for a long time. The small foyer was empty and quiet
and the hardwood floor was covered in an inch of dust

The room where Sam and Dean found themselves looked more like a storage area than a place that
had ever served any kind of function. Cobwebs lined the corners and dangled from the lamp hanging
from the ceiling, and the large fireplace was filled with years’ worth of ashes. A mounted trophy of a
deer with antlers looked like the mildew had gotten to it before the place was abandoned, and the
shelf rack in the corner had two broken shelves. There was furniture piled up in random places – a
cot in the corner, an old termite-damaged desk near the wall and an end table with drawers that Dean
went to rifle through right away.

"Anything useful?" Sam asked, navigating gingerly around an old couch in the middle of the room.

"What do you think?" Dean wheezed, examining the broken telephone on the end table with a look
of disgust. He went to the other entrance to the room and barricaded that as well, and then tried to get
a glimpse out the window.

"They out there?" Sam asked.

"No, Sam, they just up and decided that after going through the trouble of chasing us here they'd take
a coffee break," Dean snapped, jerking his head toward the window. "See that?"
Sam shifted to the side near the window, peeking through the closed curtain so as not to present a target. The hunters were surrounding the house, armed but without the cars after all. "Crap. I'd say there's still at least seven out there."

"No shortage of ugly," Dean agreed. "Any ideas yet?"

"Considering this is usually the point in time where we haul out the salt or draw a banishing sigil, not so much," Sam replied. "Take 'em out one at a time?"

"That's as far as I got too –"

There was a blast of sound as someone came crashing through the nearest window, tearing the blinds as he knocked into Sam, who made a pained noise as the solid body collided with his injured arm, and slumped to one side.

The hunter – Spencer – tried to knock Dean's skull in with the butt of his shotgun, but Dean grabbed out, stopping the blow, at the cost of sacrificing his footing. Spencer threw his whole weight against him, heaving Dean backward; he landed on the table which broke beneath him, sending a cloud of dust in the air while the shotgun flew from his hands.

Spencer recovered himself and pulled out his bowie-knife; he tried to take a swipe, but Dean managed to avoid it at the last second by rolling off of the ruined table.

Sam, now on his feet again as well, attempted to tackle the hunter from behind. But Spencer sensed him coming and turned to catch Sam by the throat, then pulled back his free arm - knife glinting in the dusky light.

With the gun out of reach and a walking Alp about to gut his brother, Dean seized the closest thing at hand – the stuffed deer head from the wall – and charged Spencer, scoring him slightly in the side with one of the antlers. Spencer roared in pain, dropping a now gasping Sam, and whirled around to slash at Dean.

The deer head provided a decent barrier for now, blocking the knife the first time, but Dean knew he couldn't keep fighting with the taxidermy monstrosity forever. He shoved it forward, using it to maneuver Spencer aside as Sam, wheezing for breath, inched toward where the shotgun was still lying.

There was a crunching noise, and Dean realized another hunter was trying to come in; he had punched through the back door and was reaching around, trying to find the knob to unlock it.

The momentary distraction cost Dean.

A searing arc of pain throbbed across his senses; Spencer had managed to knick him in the arm. It would have been a lot worse if Dean hadn't shifted at the last second, but that move lost him his balance. He fell back onto the hard floor.

By now, Sam had managed to get the shotgun in hand and was aiming for Spencer, but before he could pull the trigger, the door was kicked in and Dale glided into the room.

He came at Sam with a machete, which Sam blocked using the butt of the gun; he snapped it forward, dislodging the machete, and then tried to land a knock-out blow. The gun connected with Dale's cheekbone, but it didn't do anything to slow him down.

Dale jutted his head forward over the handle of the rifle, head-butting Sam hard enough that he staggered back and loosened his hold on the gun. Before he could correct his grip, Dale threw him
roughly away from him, slamming him into the shelf rack. As the gun dropped again, Dale came at Sam with a right cross to the face and an uppercut to the solar plexus.

Sam doubled over, almost on the ground; as Dale leaned over him, no doubt to bring down the final blow, Sam caught sight of the machete at his feet. Snatching it, he thrust upward and plunged it into Dale's chest.

Dale choked, eyes widening at the fatal blow.

Across the room, Spencer was closing in on Dean, who was still weaponless. Sam darted forward, machete in hand, but Dean was already moving, stooping forward to grab the end of the throw rug beneath his assailant's feet. As he yanked it out from under him, Sam crouched down and grabbed the shotgun once again.

Spencer stumbled backward, not falling, and Sam took a shot – and missed.

"Any time now, Samantha!" Dean snarled as Spencer took another lunging swing forward. Dean avoided it, grabbing onto the hanging lamp above him and using it as support to deliver a hard kick to the hunter's face.

Spencer went flying backward into the desk by the wall and fell back, only to get up again with an angry yell and rush forward.

Sam pulled the trigger. This time, the hunter went down.

Something flew in through the broken window, and Dean jumped back.

Glass and flames exploded outward as the Molotov cocktail hit the floor, igniting the cobwebs and old furniture.

"Son of a bitch!" he growled, just as Lonnie and Trigger burst in through the front door. Trigger let loose an arrow, which caught Dean in the upper thigh, and he went down, narrowly avoiding a patch of burning alcohol.

"Dean!" Sam yelled. He took a shot at the new intruders, but missed. Lonnie grabbed the gun, trying to jerk it out of his hands. As Sam fought to keep hold of the weapon, he stepped down roughly on the instep of his assailant's foot, making the man curse and let go reflexively. While Lonnie recovered, Trigger shoved Sam back into the sitting room with a well-placed front-kick, sending him flying over the back of the now flaming couch.

Smoke was beginning to fill the air, making it more difficult to breathe or see.

Ignoring the pain from the arrow shaft in his leg, Dean seized the bowie knife from Spencer's cold grasp and hurled it at Lonnie, pinning his hand to the wall behind him. As the man yelped in pain and anger, Trigger was moving forward, crossbow raised and aimed at Sam, who was still struggling to his feet.

Dean moved as fast as he could, sneaking around behind Trigger and bringing the bookcase down on top of him.

As the dust settled, Trigger struggled and tried to push the new weight off of him. Sam crept forward and used the butt of the shotgun to knock him out.

There was no time to celebrate the minor victory as several other objects flew in through the window, and as the smoke dispersed a little, Dean saw what they were.
"You've got to be kidding me," he growled as he realized that some kind of grenade had been launched in beside them. "Come on, Sam!"

He hauled his brother away from the timed explosive, knowing they could have anywhere from five to ten seconds to get clear of the blast. He pushed Sam through the sitting room and up the rickety stairwell, stumbling when something caught him around the ankles.

Lonnie, it seemed, had pulled free of the knife, and was now grasping at Dean with blood-soaked hands.

"Dean?" Sam cried.

"Just go!" Dean snarled, snapping his leg around and kicking Lonnie in the face. He told himself didn't care that he felt and heard the snap of the other man's neck as they ran up the stairs. Heading into the nearest room, Dean seized an old lamp from beside the bed and flung it through the window. Once the glass had shattered, he and Sam both hurried through the empty pane and down onto the gabled roof, jumping off of it without a pause.

They landed painfully – even as he rolled to his feet, Dean was pretty sure he had twisted, if not sprained, his left foot – but didn't hesitate for a second. They were running as fast as they could from the decrepit cottage, trying to get as far away before –

THOOM!

A huge fireball enveloped the lower level cottage and sent whatever hunters remained nearby to the ground, downed by debris and glass. Sam and Dean didn't wait to see if anyone got up again, instead taking off deeper into the trees.

They ran until Dean couldn't any more, his injured thigh and foot throbbing too painfully; Sam had to help him sit down for a spell.

Panting, the brothers exchanged appraising glances.

Dean offered a pained grin. "If I were Buffy, I'd totally be punning right now."

"You are such a child," Sam wheezed disdainfully.

He led them back to the site of the collision and headed for one of the hunter's tricked out jeeps; one which still had most of the glass in the windows.

Dean slowed his gait as they passed the Impala, a tortured feeling rising up inside at the sight of the flames. Everything they owned was in that car –

"Dean – not the time!" Sam cried, though he too was glancing at the car with a pained expression.

"I can't just leave her –"

"Would you rather stick around and get lynched?" Sam demanded desperately, looking beyond Dean. "It won't be long before they come after us again."

Dean squared his shoulders, making up his mind to leave the car that had been his and Sam's home for their entire lives – but not before he darted toward the trunk and removed the bag that held some of their belongings, a good proportion of weapons and Dad's journal.

Knowing it was all he could do at the moment, he ducked into the passenger's seat of the jeep.
Whoever owned it had left the keys behind, obviously not expecting Sam and Dean to return. The roar of the engine as they drove off was so far from the comforting purr of the Impala that if Dean had been a lesser man he might have cried. He watched the flaming ruin that was his car disappear in their rear-view mirror.

"Anyone coming after us?" Sam asked.

"Not yet."

"That was way too close."

"You think?" Dean grumbled, trying to sit comfortably in the car despite the crossbow bolt. Once they got far enough away he'd tend to it. "I thought we were hidden from all the dickless wonders."

Sam massaged his ribs, where Cas had once branded him with protective sigils. Dean had a matching set. "I'm pretty sure we are. He probably knew the other hunters were looking for us and followed them to us."

"Damn it," Dean said again.

"Call Bobby," Sam told him once they were a decent distance away. Dean blinked at him uncomprehendingly for a second, and Sam added, "He needs to know about this – besides, he can send someone to pick up…you know."

Dean nodded, woodenly, feeling around in his jacket for his phone. He pulled it out, noting that at some point during the night, the screen had cracked.

Bobby answered on the first ring.

"Don't come here."

Dean blinked. "Uh, okay."

"Couple of hunters come by here just now, lookin' for you boys," Bobby told him. "Somehow, they knew you two idjits are still up and about, and they ain't too forgiving about the whole Apocalypse thing."

"No shit," Dean growled. "Sam and I were just run off the road by a group of them – the Impala's trashed. Had to leave her behind – and a few of the bastards are dead. Sam and I hightailed it –"

"Good. Keep hightailin' it. And not here, either. The guys that came in here seem real intent on me givin' you boys up. You and Sam need to lay low for a while."

"Thanks for stating the obvious, Bobby – that'd be helpful if the people hunting us weren't, I don't know, hunters?!"

"Don't take that tone with me, boy, I know exactly what kind of trouble you're in," Bobby groused. "You gimme a chance to get a word in between your bellyachin', I can point you in the direction of help."

"Yeah?"

"I got an old friend who owes me a favor. Doesn't like hunters, so she won't likely give you up to 'em if they come lookin'."

"Just as long as it's not a demon or a witch."
"You like breathin', you probably won't compare her with either of those things within her hearing."

"Jesus, Bobby, where are you sending us?"

"I won't lie, boy, you ain't gonna like it. And that's all I'm gonna say on the matter," the older hunter told him. "It won't work if you're not willing, and she can explain it better than I can."

There was a pause, and Dean finally sighed. "Alright. You got an address for me?"

"Remember that haunted painting job you told me about? The one where the little girl was doing the killin'?"

'New Paltz, New York,' Dean's memory supplied after a moment's lapse. "Yeah?"

"Head that way. I'll give you more when I can."

"Right," Dean exhaled. He forced his voice to remain steady. "Bobby – the Impala's on the side of the I-90 just outside of Albert Lea. I don't know if those bastards will leave much of her, but can you – ?"

"I'll make a call," Bobby assured him. "You boys just try to keep outta trouble."

He disconnected.

Dean stared at his phone for several seconds, fighting down the overwhelming desire to beat the dash of the battered jeep and curse to the high heavens. He didn't, though, because losing control in front of Sam was something he had long since schooled himself not to do.

"Head for New York," Dean told his brother heavily. "Bobby's sending us to someone who can help."

Sam snorted. "Help? Who's going to help us? We have ticked-off hunters on our tails, renegade demons trying to track us – "

"Probably angels too, seeing as how I figure Raphael has supporters."

"Great," Sam groused. He took a few aggravated breaths, visibly calmed himself down and then asked, "So what now? Assuming this friend of Bobby's helps us – what then? We keep running into more and more problems."

"We take 'em one at a time. And in the meantime, we figure out how to spring Adam and find Cas."

Sam full on stared at him this time, ignoring the road.

"Dean…are you sure? It's not going to be easy…"

"It never is. Obviously it's gonna be a bitch to find Cas, considering we've got no leads on him, other than…what Raphael said," Dean reasoned, only just managing to speak around the sudden lump in his throat. "But we do know where Adam is now."

"Just because some two-faced demon – who was already a two-faced sociopath when she was alive, might I add – says he's down there, doesn't mean he is," Sam argued. "Demons lie."

"Except when they know the truth will hurt," Dean reminded him. "You remember how hard it was, knowing that Dad was down there – that I was down there?"
A shadow passed over Sam's face at the reminder. He turned his eyes back to the road.

"If Cas found a way to open that door and get you out, it means there's another way." Dean was adamant. "And we're going to find it – I don't care how many people are after us or how hard it is."

Sam was hesitant. "Dean…I was serious before, when I said it's too dangerous to try to open the Cage. After all we went through, do you really want to risk letting Lucifer and Michael out? This whole thing will just start all over again."

"With Raphael on our ass, it's going to start all over again anyway," Dean said. "We might as well have as many people on our side as we can get – even if it means going to Hell for them."

"Dean…" There was silence, and then Sam slowly nodded in acceptance. "Okay."

"Good. We're clear," Dean said decisively. "He's family, he's innocent, and we're getting him out. Same goes for Cas, wherever he is."

"Alright," Sam nodded. After a beat, he sighed, "But before we even consider doing that, we're going to have to go off the grid. If you think staying out of trouble is hard now, it's going to be worse when we try to jailbreak Hell."

"Which is why we're going to New York," Dean said. "Bobby's got a friend or something there, and as sketchy as all this sounds, I guess we can't be too picky this time…"
Chapter Summary

A sleeper wakes...

Chapter Notes

AN: There is a short instance of gender neutral pronouns (ze/sir/zirself) in this chapter. Like, a few paragraphs. Afterwards, you probably won't see them anymore.

Interlude I

There was nothing.

And then there was darkness. This was the only frame of reference it had, of any sort of beginning or end within the void. The concepts were, in and of themselves, strange. And yet familiar.

Familiar to what?

There was awareness there – it was the consciousness. It existed in obscurity, oblivious of anything except the dark. And now itself.

The darkness was terrifying. It was constantly sucking the consciousness deeper within it, suffocating it. The sentience was too weak, too fragile, to fight it off. In the end, it simply floated – if it even had enough form to float. It didn't know.

At an indeterminate point, something changed.

Something rippled within its being, something that was there but not present in any way that it could define. That something caressed the consciousness, prodding it more and more until it became a constant. Soon it was something else that existed, along with the darkness and the consciousness. This... feeling.

The blackness still frightened it, and while the presence had no true sense of itself, it recognized that
this feeling was somehow safe. It grasped at it with what little strength it had, and used it to center itself. The more it held onto the feeling, the less hold the darkness seemed to have. It preferred it that way, and held on tighter, drawing strength from the feeling.

After an eternity of time, suddenly there was light.

The new sensation was too bright for the consciousness, almost excruciating in its intensity and the glaring, nagging familiarity. It shied away, briefly losing its grasp on that persistent feeling of safety.

The darkness returned, but it was such a terrible thing that the sentience sought out the light again, ignoring the burn and the agony of it, because it was nevertheless so much better than being lost in the void. It gripped tight to the secure, grounding feeling, and soon this became a little less difficult.

Even so, difficulty remained.

The light continued to be hard to endure after so long a time lost in darkness, and the consciousness nevertheless had to let go of it sometimes when it became too weak to hold on. But the times of illumination were beginning to last longer, until the consciousness spent half of its time in obscurity and half basking in the light.

Shadows moved on the periphery, sometimes, and these seemed sinister to the consciousness. It began to venture into the light only when there were no shadows about.

And then, another constant was altered.

The feeling that it had cleaved itself too changed, bringing with it the fleeting impression of something else. The sentience knew what it was, knew there was a name for this flash of…

_color_, it told itself after many cycles of light-dark. It..._remembered_...color. It knew that there were many different colors, shades and hues. It knew it had seen that infinite spectrum once. But right now, it could only focus on this one color.

Green, it recognized, its indistinct and feeble awareness saying the word over and over. Slowly, it recalled the names of the other colors, and those began to move around within it, almost in a blur. It continued to feel comfort in the memory of the color green, though, and realized that much of the safe feeling which had brought it out of the darkness was associated with that color.

It couldn't remember why, and the matter seemed important, and so the consciousness focused all of its energy on trying to deduce the reason.

Slowly, the color took shape, becoming more intense, and the sentience imagined it flashing different ways, conveying different emotions – anger, sadness, amusement, concentration, gratitude –

'Dean,' its mind-voice whispered, the first true pseudo-sense it could remember using. The word – the name – was important, and with it came other names, notions that it had once known.


_Castiel._

This last word felt like it belonged, and the consciousness knew that the name for the being experiencing these thoughts and feelings and memories must be 'Castiel'. It had – _ze_ had – a name; many names, in many tongues, although this one was the most familiar. Despite that sense of ownership, though, there was an undercurrent of alienation that the word brought with it. Ze decided _ze_ had an affection for Cas; it seemed closer to who _ze_ was than the other name. Both were given to
zir by others. One, ze was born with – brought into being and assigned – and the other was a diminutive, given to zir by someone important –

Dean.

Dean was a being as well. A person. A human.

Castiel had not been human, ze was – had been? – was still? – an angel.

That knowledge seemed to open the floodgates, and remembrances rushed in, seeping like sand in an hour glass. Gradually they became more in volume and in strength, bringing zir back through the millennia of zir life.

Ze had never experienced this confused jumble of thought and remembrance, nor the difficulty in trying to unravel and categorize and understand zir experiences.

It was fast becoming painful, like too many objects being stuffed into a container that was excessively small. The pressure threatened to explode, threatened to rupture zir very being. Ze wanted it to stop, wanted the recollections to stop coming, but ze couldn't find a way. There was no way to express that discomfort – ze knew ze should be able to, but couldn't remember how just yet.

Ze knew millennia of existence, but those memories didn't stick. It seemed that the farther back ze went, the more indistinct the remembrances became, until they were nothing more than flashes of color and events that ze forgot almost before ze'd experienced them. They were consigned away to some part of zir mind that ze would likely never revisit again.

Some of the memories felt like burning, like ripping and shredding and pain and despair, and although those things had never been done to zir, ze had seen it. It had been all around zir, and ze had felt the negative energy eating into zir, but there was light somewhere, light ze needed to save – This was a memory of Hell. The light was Dean. Ze had to save Dean.

Ze had saved Dean.

That knowledge somehow made things easier, made it less of a strain to quantify everything that came before and after.

It was the 'after' part which concerned zir.

Ze could now recall the time – two mortal years out of zir long angelic life – with precision, summoned up how it had felt to experience the echoes of emotions and sensations for the first time. Could remember the friends and loved ones – not just Dean, but Sam and Bobby as well – that had come to mean more to zir than the Host of Heaven. Ze remembered the tearing feeling of betrayal and the bubble of hope. Ze considered Dean's palpable suffering at the knowledge of his brother's fate.

And then Castiel thought of the deal ze had made, and it threw everything into sharper relief.

Sensation flooded back to zir, but ze could not move. Time passed, and ze was aware of it, but wherever ze was – whenever ze was – ze was trapped.

Castiel had not expected this.

Having been dead twice before and experienced the utter oblivion of non-being, ze was bewildered to find that wherever ze was now, ze was hurting. It was exactly that which puzzled zir, for angels
did not feel pain – not in the mortal sense, anyhow – and yet it seemed like zir vessel had been
crushed beneath the weight of a million stones, and ze was feeling every single application of
pressure.

Ze was breathing, ze realized, and every draw of breath was like dragging sand across an already
inflamed wound. Ze knew the pulsing beat of the vessel's heart, heard blood rushing in zir borrowed
ears as that organ pumped life's essence through the entire body. There was a gnawing sensation
deep in the core of zir vessel, vaguely uncomfortable, which ze instinctively knew from memory and
knowledge of human anatomy to be hunger. The acrid taste in zir mouth and the accompanying
dryness suggested thirst.

In that instant, a chilling insight occurred.

Castiel could no longer feel zir grace.

Not a trace of it remained. The only thing ze was aware of now was zir body – not zir vessel's after
all, because without Jimmy Novak, ze was alone in it – and because of that, the pain. It was
somewhat familiar, in a vague way; ze knew the diminished sense of self from zir time cut off from
heaven, that sense of frailty.

Ze was mortal.

No.

He was mortal.

Humans had gender. Now Castiel did as well.

At that realization, Castiel struggled to bring zirself – no, himself– to wakefulness, desperate to
confirm zir – his - suspicions, but some deep-rooted exhaustion continued to hold zir – him –
hostage. This in and of itself confirmed his fears, and in that instant he knew the truth.

Such a thing should have been impossible, Castiel reasoned. He was supposed to be dead. The deal
with Crowley had been straightforward and ironclad, the terms and results clearly understood. The
demon could not have done anything to change it even if he wanted to, because the act of handing
his grace over to the demon was a stipulation written down by God.

'Did something go wrong?’ Castiel thought, suddenly desperate.

Perhaps not wrong, but unexpected.

Ze – he – had given up his grace, his very being. The first time he had been cut off from Heaven, it
had still been there; there had remained a fraction of it to keep his sentience in place, the quality of
himself that had always been Castiel, in any guise, human or mortal. But now that he knew he was
completely graceless, he had no idea how it was that he continued to…endure.

Was it possible that his unexpected survival might have affected the deal? The gnawing in zir – no,
in his – stomach was joined by a sinking, heavy sensation. Did this mean that his sacrifice had been
invalidated, if he was here? Was Sam down in Hell even now – and by corollary, did that mean
Dean was continuing to suffer?

Out of habit, he attempted to reach out across the connection that he and Dean shared since ze – he –
had grasped him tightly from the mire of broken souls and suffering in Hell – only to find nothing
there. Somehow this hit him harder than when he had realized that he was cut off from Heaven.
It was the first time in his entire existence, Castiel was truly alone.

Agony ripped through him, followed closely by something else – fear.

For the first time, he felt the true ravages of fright, unfiltered by his grace and the body he wore.

He was alone.

A sweeping hysteria threatened to take up space within him, but he tamped it down with effort. He couldn't afford to give into that emotion, not until he knew what had happened to him.

It had to have something to do with the deal, he decided, trying to concentrate on the problem at hand and not the emptiness he felt without both the Host or Dean to keep him grounded. Humans often believed themselves to be alone and managed to withstand their trials and tribulations. He could do so as well.

Was ze – he – even in any condition to live as a human, though?

Castiel tried to focus his thoughts and responsiveness, tried to take a better inventory of his self despite the current mental blocks he was encountering.

He could now sense that the shadows milling about him were people – he could smell a sharp, slightly familiar smell of disinfectant, urine and blood – but he could not achieve any active reaction to it beyond observing it. Although he could feel the weight of his body and the scratching itch of material beneath him, he couldn't move. He couldn't seem to remember how to speak, or how to see. He had known how to do so once, had manipulated the actions of his vessel, but now it seemed impossible.

The insurmountable nature of the task exhausted him, and he was forced to lessen his efforts. He would have to try again when he had not expounded so much energy regaining his awareness.

Completely cut off from the concept of time, he didn't know how long it would take, but he had millennia of practice in patience. He would bide his time and heal himself from whatever had happened to him.

For now, he was obliged to let his mind recede back into the darkness.

A huge 'thank you' goes out to those of you who have been reading along so far and who have taken the time to review, most especially: Anna, ashwingsmokefeather, Crimson Vipera, Fallen Seraphim, Jade Chase, jdluvva, netherlady, primarycolours123 and sonofafluffymuffin.
Chapter Summary

The Winchesters go to see a woman in New York about a way to shake their pursuers...and have to make a quick decision and a few days later, wake up somewhat...changed. Sam and Dean go to check out the lead Aggie gave them, only to run into some trouble of the supernatural variety, and the brothers are both made offers to save Castiel and Adam, and must decide if the price is worth it...

Two

Club2-N-1,
New York City, New York
Tuesday 18 May 2010

"I am not going in there."

Sam rolled his eyes and shot Dean an unimpressed look.

His brother was staring up at the building in front of them with an expression that suggested he was once again standing at the gates of Hell. Part of Sam understood the sentiment – this place was so far from their usual watering hole it might as well be a foreign country – but at the same time, he knew they were here for a specific reason.

The club they faced had once been a fire station, judging from the large garage bays on either side of the domed entrance. It looked as though it had been built in the nineteen twenties, and its façade had been painstakingly restored down to the tiniest detail, with the exception of the deep shade of purple it had been painted.

They could hear the music even in the street – the repetitive drum patterns and synthesized medleys of the weekly R&B hits. While he might not have been as averse to techno as Dean was, even Sam had to wince at the music. He'd never been the type to enjoy clubbing. He'd endured it a few times in college, for Jessica's sake, but it wasn't his cup of tea.
He'd never actually been to a gay club, either, whatever Dean might like to insinuate on any given day. Personally, Sam didn't get the big deal, but Dean wasn't the most open-minded individual when he was in the best of moods, let alone when he was in a snit. And at the moment, he was in a full-on sulk.

Dean had been bitching since they arrived in New York City late the day before. They had had to spend the night in the cluttered, mildew Cherokee they'd stolen outside of Mason City because there were no vacant motels in the immediate vicinity. Sam privately blamed Dean for that, considering he had refused to enter the city during daylight – when there might have been more places open.

Dean had said he was just trying to keep off the grid, but Sam had known it had to do with their last experience with the New York rush hour. Still, he knew better than to say anything. Especially not while Dean was still seething about the Impala.

Bobby had called once they were on their way to New York to assure them that the Impala's wreckage was taking up space in the salvage yard instead of some chop shop. The word 'wreckage' had had Dean grinding his teeth for the two day drive, along with a few not so coherent curses about angels. Sam was pretty sure those weren't all directed at Raphael.

'Cas, wherever you are, I hope you know he's going to kill you when he sees you again,' Sam thought, and then winced at the idea that maybe Castiel might actually already be gone for good. It was a possibility he had refrained from voicing in the past two days, not least of all for his own feelings. Part of the reason he hadn't complained about Dean's less than stellar mood was because if his brother was focussing on something mundane like the Impala, he wasn't worrying about some of their more pressing problems.

Castiel's mysterious disappearance was the number one priority, whatever Dean had to say about Adam. Even though they both wanted to save the poor kid who had had the misfortune of being born a Winchester, Adam was barely more than a stranger to either of them. Whatever Sam and Dean knew about him had been playedact by the thing that killed him. The few hours Sam had spent with Adam had shown him an understandably resentful and angry teenager who wanted nothing to do with them. As much as it was on them to clean up Dad's mess – because that's what it was, when Sam got right down to it – and get the kid out, the fact of the matter was that Castiel meant more to them than Adam did.

And then, after dealing with the Adam and Castiel problems, there were Sam's own personal demons. Whatever brought him back may have taken away any memory of the thirty-six hours he had spent in Hell (though it had probably felt like more down there), but it hadn't taken away the guilt. The knowledge that he had almost caused the end of the world plagued him – probably would for the rest of his life, he knew – but that wasn't what was grating on his psyche.

Every night since being brought back, Sam dreamed unapologetic montages of himself at his lowest and most depraved. He watched himself committing the same mistakes, over and over; sometimes the same decadent pleasure filled him that he had felt when Lucifer allowed him to rip apart the demons that had ruined his life. Except in most of the dreams, it was Dean that he was ruining.

Sam shuddered.

He hadn't let on to Dean exactly what he was going through. Knowing his brother, Dean would drop everything and try to focus on protecting him from his guilt. Considering Sam wasn't even sure he should be protected– and boy, would that be a fun argument to have when it came up – it was just easier not to talk about it.

Better to focus on the problems that might have actual solutions. Because even jail-breaking Adam
from Hell would be easier than working through the post traumatic damnation disorder Sam was trying to deal with.

"Are you sure Bobby's not just dicking us around?"

Sam blinked, Dean's question bringing him out of his thoughts, and glanced back at the club.

The place was pretty packed for a Tuesday night, with people arriving and meeting all along the rather impressive line that wound back to the corner of the street. Couples, mostly, but he also saw a few groups of friends huddled together against the night chill. The venue might have been a problem under normal circumstances, but considering some of the looks he and Dean had gotten since they started hunting together again, Sam figured they might actually blend in for once without having to try too hard.

If he could force Dean in through the door.

He sighed; the cool, damp air carried upon it the smell of sewer and cigarette smoke that Sam could almost taste. "Seriously? You gonna let your inner homophobe take point on this one?"

"What are you talking about?" Sam levelled a look at him, and Dean snorted with disgust. "It's not that I have the problem with. To each their own and all that shit." He made a vague, uncomfortable gesture. "The music's making my ears bleed. And I'm outside. Can you imagine what it's like in there?"

"Yeah, actually, I can. And you're going to have to suck it up," Sam replied. "This is the address Bobby gave us, and unless you want more up-close-and-personal encounters with the latest members of our fan club, we're going in there."

"Can't we meet this chick in a place that isn't here?"

"This is the only address Bobby would give. He said there's a reason for it."

"Christ, he's enjoying the cryptic crap these days."

"That's not fair, Dean, he's trying to help us out."

Dean had the decency to look ashamed, and after a moment he exhaled a loud, grudging sigh. "Fine. We'll go in – but does it have to be tonight? Can't we come back tomorrow before it opens or something? The hex bags and sigils will cloak us fine until then…"

"What's wrong with tonight?"

Dean pointed to the long line of enthusiastic looking patrons, some of whom were rather flamboyantly dressed. "Besides the obvious?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Okay, yeah, it's awkward…on the other hand, according to Becky Rosen, we'd fit right in."

Dean stared, and then shook his head in disgust. "And I'm the one who went to Hell first? Really?"

Sam shrugged. "Well, like all older brothers, you get to do the cool stuff before me."

Dean narrowed his eyes, opened his mouth to retort, and then closed his mouth again. A moment later, his shoulders hunched forward a bit and he grumbled in a low, defeated voice, "Know how I know you're gay?"
Insults were the only way Dean could cover up losing an argument. The usual protocols for this called for Sam to gloat about it, but instead he grinned at his brother and retorted, "Dude, you're the one who watches Dr. Sexy, M.D."

Dean opened his mouth to protest, but the words were cut off when someone behind them said, "Ooh, I love that show! Did you see the finale? I can't believe that Dr. Sexy almost died – and it's terrible what happened to Dr. Piccolo!"

The speaker sounded male, but when Sam and Dean turned toward him, they were confronted by a tall, mini-skirt wearing blond in a leather jacket and go-go boots. Sam had to admit, if he hadn't heard the voice first, he might actually have confused the guy for a woman. The only tell was his Adam's apple.

Dean's expression turned strained, though Sam honestly couldn't tell if it was because he was uncomfortable being seen with a drag queen, or because he'd actually missed the season finale on account of the near Apocalypse.

Knowing Dean, probably the latter.

When neither of them could think of anything to say to that, the guy flushed beneath his make-up and quickly murmured, "Oh, I'm sorry, that was kinda rude of me. You two were obviously having a private chat, and I – well, you guys look a little lost there, and I thought – know what? Never mind."

"No, it's okay," Sam answered, trying to work the polite angle he knew his brother wouldn't be able to fake right now. "This is, uh, kind of a first for us."

"I figured," the guy said, recovering himself quickly and regaining his smile. "You boys don't look like this is your kind of thing."

"It's really not," Dean said firmly.

"But we were told this place is pretty decent," Sam added quickly, sending Dean a warning glance. "Our – er, a friend of ours said that the owner treats her patrons well."

"Aggie? Oh, she's a doll. She comes around every so often to check up on the place and make sure everyone's having a good time. Her club's not like a lot of the other places down here, where anything goes, if you know what I mean." The guy made a face as if to show what he felt about that.

"She's got really strict rules, and she doesn't make any bones about throwing someone out if they don't follow them," the guy said. A moment later, he swore. "Crap, I'm sorry, I'm really being a clod tonight. I'm Gil. I work the bar."

"I'm Sam," Sam replied, adopting a friendly smile. Then, because he was just not in the mood to act like he was dating his own flesh and blood, he added, "And this is my brother, Dean."

"Brothers, huh?" Gil said, though his smile wavered a little in confusion. "That's…interesting. If you don't mind me asking, are you both…?"

"I'm just here for moral support," Sam explained quickly, and then because he just couldn't resist, he went on in a conspiratorial voice, "Dean's – you know, friend – up and disappeared a few days ago. He's taking it kind of hard."

Dean shot him an expression of horror and indignation, while Sam tried to hold back his laughter. For all his virtues, he was, after all, still a younger brother.

"Oh, no!" Gil exclaimed, staring at Dean in understanding. "How long were you two together?"
"Two years," Sam supplied before Dean could ruin the whole thing; he had to work hard to keep his face schooled into one of sympathy. It was made all the more difficult because of the way Dean's eyes bulged and the vein in his jaw began to pulse. "I've never seen Dean that close to anyone. And then, the guy just left. No goodbye or a note or anything."

"Asshole!" Gil said emphatically, shaking his head. "No wonder you look so tense." A look of resolve appeared in his eyes, and then he nodded, almost to himself. "Tell you what – I start my shift in like half an hour. You come with me and I'll help you get at least a little settled in there. It's always hard your first time – no pun intended."

This time Sam couldn't help letting a chuckle escape him, despite the terrible joke.

Dean coughed awkwardly. "It's alright – I mean, you've got better things to do than babysit us, right?"

"Honey, it's my job to look after the customers," Gil told him. "I can at least get you a drink to settle your nerves – I make a mean highball."

Before Dean could more vehemently refuse and thus consign them to a night of waiting in line for a club he'd rather be in and out of quickly, Sam cut in, "You know what? That sounds great. We're in. Anything to make my bro here feel better."

Dean mouthed a revolted 'bro?' at Sam, but Gil didn't notice.

"Great! Come on, then!"

The guy had the same bouncy energy as a five-foot-three cheerleader, which was impressive on someone that was almost as tall as Dean.

"If we didn't have a street full of witnesses right now, I'd murder you," Dean hissed under his breath before they followed Gil past the bouncers and into a narrow black-lit hallway. The music became louder with every step, causing the floor to vibrate.

"No you wouldn't," Sam grinned at him. "Besides, I never actually said anything that wasn't true. He made his own assumptions."

"So much Nair in your future," Dean growled, and that was the last thing Sam heard him say for a while.

The interior of the old fire station had been hollowed out into one huge room, with a dance floor and DJ in the center, while a kind of tiered floor led up to galleries and a few cubicles with tables and lounge furniture within them. Black-lights and an actual disco ball created patterns across the walls and the people. The club was filled almost to capacity, mostly with couples and single revellers who occupied sections of the dance floor or places at the bar, but there were enough groups of friends there to fill in the little space that remained.

Bass heavy music pounded away as they followed Gil through the throng of people, dodging the occasional interested brush against their shoulders or invitation to dance. Sam had been to a high-energy place like this before, though there had been a significantly lower number of guys when he and Jess had gone clubbing. That little bit of experience helped him to better maneuver himself through the crowd with better ease, trying to sync his movements at least slightly to the music. It was difficult, considering his height, but he was still doing better than Dean, who was just marching determinedly forward and trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

Once they reached the bar, Gil excused himself so that he could go clock in, but assured them he
would return to look after them as soon as he could. When they were once again alone, Dean rounded on Sam and glared. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the music. "This place is like Hell."

"Oh come on," Sam called back. "You can't seriously be comparing this to the Pit."

"If there had been a soundtrack down there, this would be it. And it's just as crowded here as it was there."

"Don't be melodramatic. Besides, we've been to concerts that were more crowded than this. I don't know what you're complaining about."

"You do not get to compare Ozzy to this," Dean said, shoving a finger in his face. "I've forgiven a lot of crap, Sammy, but that level of blasphemy doesn't get a pass."

Sam knew better than to touch that one with a ten foot pole, and so, he occupied himself with looking around and trying to come up with a game plan instead. Now that they were inside the club, they had to find this Aggie person. Once Gil returned he would ask him where she might be, but not right away. He didn't want the guy thinking that Sam and Dean had just used him to jump the line – which is exactly what they had done. So he would have to play the supportive younger brother card a little while longer.

'Speaking of,' Sam thought, nudging Dean none-too-gently. "Would you relax? We're here for a reason."

"Bite me, bitch."

"Jerk."

But Dean did stop glowering at anyone who looked his way. Still, it wasn't until Gil returned with a drink in hand that Dean finally relaxed, his shoulders loosening up as he gulped down the alcohol without asking what it was or taking a breath.

"You gonna live now?" Sam asked him, amused.

"Another few of these and I think I might," Dean said, glancing at the now empty glass contemplating. "Dude wasn't kidding about settling my nerves."

"I told you," Gil said smugly. "Want another?"

"Hell yes."

"Don't give him too much," Sam told him. "I care about him and all, but I don't want to be carrying him out of here."

"Not that you'd have a problem with that, would you, hon?" Gil asked, looking Sam up and down. "I'll bet you can lift your own weight and more."

"Uh…sure," Sam said, awkwardly realizing the interested gleam in Gil's eyes. Luckily, someone else claimed Gil's attention and the bartender waved cheerfully as he went off to do his job. Sam exhaled in relief.

Beside him, Dean adopted a mocking smile. "He thinks I'm the one into dudes and he's still eyeing you like a piece of meat. What's that tell you, Sammy?"
Sam replied snidely, "He's got good taste?"

"You would say something like that," Dean rolled his eyes. He finished the dregs of the drink and then adopted a businesslike expression. "Alright, what are we doing now? The sooner we find Bobby's friend the sooner we can get the hell out of here."

"No arguments there," Sam said as Gil passed by again with another highball for Dean and a wink for Sam.

At that moment, an older man came to sit beside by them. Sam wouldn't have paid him any attention, except that he looked even more out of place at the bar than Sam and Dean did. He was sharp-featured and bald, with piercing amber eyes and a hooked nose; he was also not exactly dressed for the club scene. His suit looked like it cost more than the brothers made in a month of poker and pool winnings.

When he noticed Sam watching him, he adopted a cool smile.

"Well you two certainly look like you just walked out of the bush," he remarked, eyes performing the familiar up-and-down consideration Sam had come to expect since entering the club. Thankfully there was nothing flirtatious in this glance, but the amount of judgement in it put him on edge.

"Not interested, pal," Dean muttered, downing his second drink. He sent Sam a scathing look. "'Sides, I'm apparently taken."

"Mazel tov," the man said in an obviously detached manner. Then, he bluntly asked, "Are you the friends of Robert Singer?"

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but Dean cut him off, demanding brusquely, "Who wants to know?"

"My employer sent me to look for the most country-looking unfortunates in the establishment. Considering almost everyone here but you two has obviously at least glanced at a copy of Out within the past twenty years, I'd say that's you," the man replied snidely.

"And diminish the suspense? Perish the thought," the man drawled, gesturing for them to follow him.

Sam and Dean hesitated for a moment, and then started after him.

Navigating the crowd was easier the second time, possibly because Sam stuck close enough to Dean that anyone wanting to approach them might get the wrong idea. He was glad Dean was in front of him, because if he noticed what Sam was doing, he would probably throw a fit.

They came to a thick metal door with an 'Employees Only' sign behind the main dance floor, which the old guy promptly led them through. Once it was closed behind them the music lessened, and Sam saw his brother visibly relax – only to seize back up half a second later when two tall, bulky men appeared, effectively blocking access to the hallway.

"Weapons," one of them said, crossing his arms.

"Are you serious?" Dean demanded.

"We've dealt with hunters in the past," the old man said. "It never fails to amaze me what ingenious places you decide to stick things." He smirked. "Maybe a cavity search is in order…"
"Whoa, hold on," Sam spoke up, holding up his hands defensively and slowly reaching behind him to remove the handgun tucked into his jeans. He passed that to the nearest bodyguard, and at his expectant look also passed him the knife in his belt.

Dean made a noise of disgust, but also forked over his concealed weapons – a gun, a knife and a small wooden stake he had brought with him just in case. Neither of the bodyguards or the old man seemed surprised at hidden stockpile, and after giving them the rudimentary pat-down, they allowed Sam and Dean to continue on their way.

The backroom was a large private office-cum-lounge, furnished with industrial looking furniture that had obviously been arranged according to some form of feng-shui. The music from the club was even less pervasive here. Across the room, a dark-haired someone was bent over what looked like paperwork.

"Lady Agdistis – the mud people you wished to see," the older man intoned gravely. In front of him, Dean bristled at the insult, but Sam frowned. The person's name was familiar to him somehow, but he couldn't think how.

"Thank you, Ethon."

The man crossed the room and disappeared through a door that Sam hadn't noticed before.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves?" she inquired smoothly as they crossed the room to join her by the desk.

Sam couldn't tell upon first glance – or even his second or third – whether their host was a man or a woman. In fact, if it hadn't been for Ethon's greeting or that Bobby had told them they were meeting with a woman, he wouldn't have been able to make a definitive judgement. The voice was so androgynous it could have been male or female, and the woman herself could have passed for either. She looked at once like the female lead from the *Matrix* and the psychopathic shrink from *Batman Begins*. Thankfully, instead of a leather bodysuit she wore denim pants and an open collar shirt.

"I'm going to be bleaching my ears for a week, but otherwise, yeah," Dean grumbled.

"I know exactly what you mean. The music's enough to make Chinese water torture seem fun," she agreed, amused.

Sam blinked. "Isn't this your club, Lady, er, Ag –"

"Just call me Aggie," she interrupted. "Everyone and their mother does. And I'd prefer that to your barbarian mangling of my actual name. And, yes, it is my club. But that doesn't mean I actually enjoy blistering my ears every night."

"Then why do you play it?"

"It just happens to be the type of music to draw a crowd. The more people come in here, the more business I get. We all have to make sacrifices." She smiled a rather sinister smile. "And besides, it blocks out the screaming."

In that instant, she seemed to transform. Her youthful appearance was suddenly at odds with the very ancient look in her eyes, and she was giving off a distinct aura of *otherness* that Sam usually associated with the creatures they hunted.

From Dean's tense stance, his brother noticed it as well.
"You're not human," Dean stated roughly, his eyes shifting around the room in the instinctual search for a weapon.

"And you're not Hugh Jackman, but you don't see me complaining, do you?" she replied coolly. "Now, are we going to stand here and state the obvious at each other, or are we going to get down to business?"

"What are you?"

"I'm insulted you don't know – well, actually, no, I'm not. There aren't many mortals who've been around my kind and survived. Although, I heard interesting rumours about what happened to some of my relatives down at some hotel in Indiana last month –"

Sam and Dean's eyes flicked to each other meaningfully.

"You're a pagan god," Sam realized. His body went rigid, a standard reaction to the presence of something old and powerful which would probably enjoy picking its teeth with his bones. Frantically, he tried to remember if he had ever heard of a god called Agdistis. "Why would Bobby…?"

"Send you to a flesh eating monster? Go on, you can say it."

"It's not like you sons of bitches have the best track record," Dean grunted defensively, not relaxing at all. "At least not the ones we've met."

"And killed, am I right? Considering you're still alive."

"You going to get all weepy on me 'cause we ganked some of your cousins? Start telling me about equal rights for monsters?" Dean shot back, his tone implying he was looking for a fight. He was too far away for Sam to kick, and so Sam had to content himself with hissing, "Dean!" in a warning tone under his breath.

"Of course not," Aggie said, both she and Dean ignoring Sam. "Those idiots deserved death if they were going to draw attention to themselves. One of the main rules has always been to keep the hunters off our asses – and no, hunters aren't a new thing. We had them back in the old days too. Although, back then they got epics written about them and didn't go skulking around the back roads like hermits. People were a lot wiser back then, too. They knew what we were – and they worshipped us to keep themselves safe. Simpler times, I think."

"So why shouldn't we torch your ass? Save some people?"

"Other than the fact you really need my help?" she asked sweetly, causing Dean to clench his jaw in anger. "I haven't actually killed and eaten anyone since about the time Jack the Ripper was making his debut across the pond."

"Meaning?" Sam prompted.

Aggie shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "Unlike the rest of my…people…I'm more reasonable. I don't get greedy and demand everything, and then get miffed when someone comes looking to spoil my buffet. I take only what I need to survive – it draws less attention, and sometimes, I even get a repeat customer. It's good business." She clapped her hands together once, business like. "Which brings me to you two; you must be in a monumental amount of trouble if Robert called me."

"Listen, lady – not that we're not grateful you're agreeing to Bobby's favor, but what exactly makes you so special that you can get angels, demons and hunters off our backs when no one else can?"
Dean asked. "I'm sure there's some hoodoo witch doctors down in New Orleans who could cook us up some protection just as easily."

"Oh, I'm sure there are others who could 'cook up' something expertly tailored to your particular brand of shit luck," Aggie said with a cold smile. "I just happen to be the person who will be asking the least for it."

"That doesn't answer anything," Sam pointed out. "What exactly is it you do?"

"In your case? I'm going to transform you."

"That sounds like the catchphrase from some lame make-over show," Dean complained.

"Much as you're both in desperate need of one of those, that's not what I meant," Aggie drawled. "What I do is more…extensive. I can completely alter your physical bodies. So much so that no one will recognize you."

"So it's basically a glamour – like what witches are able to do," Sam contemplated.

"I'm insulted you'd compare me with those little whores," Aggie remarked archly, her tone only half-joking. "Witches don't actually change their looks – they just change other people's perceptions. That's too easy to break. I actually change you. And not in the 'altering reality' way that angels and demons like to play around with."

"And how exactly does that help us?" Dean wanted to know.

"It's a bit complicated, but let's see if I can't break it down a little into a language you might understand," Aggie mused. After a moment's thought, she stated, "Your life sucks because of your genetic code, right? Vessels to those dicks with wings?"

Both Dean and Sam looked up sharply at this. "How…?"

"Oh, don't look so surprised, boys. Even if the entire supernatural world didn't know about the two of you, I could smell it on you a mile away. You stink of archangel." She made a dismissive gesture. "The easiest way to deal with that is to change it – your genetic code. See, I can bend matter and energy in a way that alters you physically – but also on a much more basic level. You get your vessel bloodline from Daddy? I alter your mitochondrial DNA so Mommy's genes have more sway. Or vice versa."

"That seems…kind of scientific for an ancient deity," Sam said after a moment of processing what she had said.

"It's the twenty-first century, Sam, I watch Discovery too – but I can explain it in Koine or Mycenaean if you want," Aggie rolled her eyes. "Or were you expecting some dactylic hexameter rhyming spell calling upon the moon and the stars?"

"Uh…no, that's okay."

She shrugged and continued, "The process will put you off of angel radar, because you won't technically be viable vessels anymore. And I can alter your thought patterns and looks so demons and hunters have a harder time recognizing you."

"So you're basically giving us the supernatural equivalent of Nip And Tuck," Dean said.

"If you want to put it in such crude terms, then yes."
Sam blinked. "And you're going to just do this because you owe Bobby a favor?"

"More or less."

"What exactly did Bobby do for you?" Dean wanted to know.

"It's Robert's story to tell, if he ever decides to," Aggie said, idly pushing a dark bank of hair behind her ear. "Although some of it isn't for such young ears…"

"Do we look twelve?" Dean grunted.

"No, but you do look like young men who don't need to or want to know the sordid details about the sexual escapades of an old friend – unless you're into that kind of thing, in which case – "

Dean held up a hand. "You know what? We're good."


"You said 'more or less'," Sam interrupted, trying very hard to wipe any images the goddess's words had conjured up. "What did you mean by that?"

"Just that I'm willing to help you out as a favor to Robert, but that it's a little more complicated than simply one favor for another. You're still going to have to give me something in return. That's how it works."

"How what works?"

"It's a pretty straightforward contract," Aggie explained, snapping her fingers. Sam and Dean jumped as they watched symbols and hieroglyphs the color of old blood creep up the skin of their wrists and arms, disappearing beneath their sleeves as they moved. "In a normal transaction, the payment I demand is whatever organs the human body can safely live without – spleen, gallbladder, kidney – even that useless little appendix of yours. Those are great on Melba toast."

Sam tried not to be nauseated at that image. "That's got to cut into a person's standard of life, though."

"Most people are so desperate they agree – they don't care what trouble they might go through afterward, so long as I fix their problem," Aggie explained, bored. "But Robert has informed me he wants you two as intact as I can possibly leave you, so I've agreed to mark down the usual price."

Sam scanned the glyphs on his skin, frowning as he tried to translate the few symbols of ancient Greek that he knew. Upon discovering that he was Lucifer's intended vessel, Sam had also found out that his already decent memory for languages had become stronger. At one point, he had been able to sight-read Coptic. The ability had faded, probably along with Lucifer's presence, but enough of it remained that he managed to get the gist of the words he was seeing.

His eyes widened on the third read-through of a particular section. "Our livers? Are you crazy?"

"I'm only taking a small part – they grow back," Aggie said, as though the issue was just a silly inconvenience. "I take a small part now and another small part when you want to turn back. I also want a decent amount of blood. You're vessels, which makes your blood a lot more potent than the run-of-the-mill Susie-Sobstory's. It should make up for a few of the delicious tidbits I'm letting you keep."

"Hold the phone – are you kiddin' me?" Dean broke in. "We're supposed to let carve us up just so
that we can go into some kind of supernatural witness protection? No! No freakin' way!" He was already on his feet. "Come on, Sam."

"How easy do you think it will be to save your brother when you have the combined forces of Heaven and Hell hunting you every minute of every day, Dean?" Aggie asked quietly before Sam could stand up. At their surprised expressions, she continued, "See, Bobby called me for a reason, and it wasn't just because I owe him. In addition to helping you give those Judeo-Christian dicks the slip, I also have a few contacts that consider Hell no more than a run to the corner store. Catch my drift?"

She and Dean stared at each other for a long moment. Sam knew that she had him – had both of them – because she had pulled the family card.

Trying to recover his own composure, Sam asked, "Why are you so desperate to get us to do this?"

"Do you have any idea how inconvenient it is to owe a human?" Aggie replied vaguely. "Also, you're being chased by my three least favorite groups. Pulling the wool of their eyes is a bonus."

Dean slowly sat down, glowering at Aggie, and then caught Sam's gaze.

"Say for a second I was actually considering this – which I'm not. How do we know she's not going to just eat us the minute she's got us vulnerable or give us up the second some hunters show up and play the pressure card?" Dean reasoned angrily, directing his question to Sam while keeping his eyes on Aggie.

"Puh-lease, I have a house in the Hamptons, a bichon frise and a different lover every night," she snorted before Sam could reply. "It's as close to the prestige of the old days that I'm ever going to get. In fact, it's better – way back when, a lot of the he-man-type gods had a problem with us gals having any kind of fun. If I decided to sell you out, your kind would take my information and then gut me like a pig without hesitation."

"Excuse me if that doesn't make me any more confident about this," Dean retorted.

"Well, that's between you and your foibles, sugar, because I don't have to be doing this," Aggie reminded him. "In fact, I can't do anything unless you believe I can help you, or it won't work. Phenomenal cosmic powers still come with a price. So you've got to ask yourself – would Robert have sent you here if he didn't know I could get you out of whatever trouble you've landed yourselves in?"

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, and Sam knew Dean was thinking the exact same thing as he was. Bobby would never have sent them here if he thought they didn't absolutely need to be there. And the possibility that she could point them in the direction of how to get Adam out of the Pit was something that they desperately needed right now. Without Cas in their corner, Sam knew that they wouldn't be able to do it. Hadn't he spent weeks doing nothing but trying to find a way into Hell to save his brother?

"Information first," Dean finally said, sounding frustrated. "There's no way you're getting a taste of this without something more than you 'saying' you can help us spring Adam."

Aggie shrugged, like she had expected this. "There's a guy in Elwood, Indiana. Him and his kind know the backdoors to every realm – Heaven, Hell, Purgatory – you name it, he can probably get you in there."

"And we're just supposed to trust your word on that?"
"When this is over, honey, I'll draw you a map. But other than that, I'm not telling you anything else. You're already getting off better in this little deal than any of my other clients ever do. And I've been doing this a long time."

This time the looks Dean and Sam exchanged were more searching. After a moment, Sam nodded in resignation and Dean sighed.

"Fine," he groused. "Just don't screw around with our ribs. We've got protective sigils carved into them and messing with them would make this whole thing a waste of time."

"We don't deal with bones anyhow."

Sam attempted a confident voice. "Let's do this."

"Just one last thing before we do," Aggie said, ignoring Dean's impatient grimace. "This all has to be done while you're awake, otherwise the magic won't take. The pain endured is a component of the spell – it's all part of the sacrifice you're offering to me. Think you can handle that?"

Dean's jaw clenched and he looked at Sam imploringly. Sam knew his brother was thinking of what he had endured in Hell – of what he'd done; Dean knew that he could endure any kind of pain that was thrown at him, but was obviously worried about Sam. Letting him go through with this deal was against his older brother's code, and Sam knew if he showed even a little bit of uneasiness at the prospect, Dean would bow out.

And they really needed to get off supernatural radar until they figured out their current problems.

Trying to appear more confident than he was, Sam nodded. "We've both been to Hell. Wasn't a picnic."

He just didn't add that he couldn't remember any of it.

Before Dean could argue, Aggie clapped her hands together. "Excellent. Then let's get this show on the road." She pushed a pen and paper across the desk to Sam. His confusion must have shown in his eyes, because she said, "Address. So my people know where to bring you afterward. Patching you up and transporting you back to your place of residence is all part of the service. Considering you're hunters, I imagine that's some decrepit motel somewhere." She smirked. "Unless you want to stay here during the recuperation process?"

Through the walls, another round of techno beats began.

"There aren't enough ways to say 'no'," Dean groused, grabbing the paper before Sam could make a move and scribbling down the information.

"I hope you're paid up for the week," Aggie told them. "Recovery usually takes at least three days."

She stood up and walked across the room, heading for the door Sam had seen before. "Right this way."

They started after her, when she suddenly turned around and fixed Dean with a penetrating frown.

"You," she intoned, looking as though she was properly seeing him for the first time. "You've already been reformed once."

Dean shifted uncomfortably, and for a moment Sam wasn't sure what she was talking about. And then he remembered those terrible four months of his life. Neither of them liked to talk about that
period, for obvious reasons. After the one share-and-care session Dean had forced out of him back when Sam had still been working with Ruby – his stomach clenched with guilt and discomfort at that memory – they had both agreed to never mention it again.

"That gonna be a problem?" Dean was asking.

"No," Aggie said. "It just means I've got to be careful not to break anything when I work. Your body and soul are still fragile. They were held together by…grace, was it? An angel reformed you?" At Dean's barely there nod, she whistled and went on, "It's not there anymore, though."

Dean coughed uncomfortably. "Yeah…kind of noticed that."

"Whoever did it, did a good job," Aggie said, sounding grudgingly approving. "Although, your friend recalled the grace a bit early. Any sooner and you would have been completely rent apart."

Dean tensed. "Recalled…? What does that even mean?"

"If grace is anything like a god's immortality, it stays connected to its host until it ceases to be. You said you felt it disappear?"

"Yeah."

"Then he's probably dead."

Dean paled, and Sam spoke up, hoping for a different answer. "But Dean said Cas died twice before and he didn't feel anything. Why's this time different?"

"Really?" Aggie frowned. "Huh. Well, it's interesting. It could mean that the grace had already separated itself from its host before your friend…had whatever happened to him happen. It's rare, but possible." She studied Dean again. "What little of his essence he used to hold you together might have formed a symbiotic relationship with your soul."

"But then why's it gone now?" Dean asked, and then seemed to realize what he was asking, because he added defensively, "Not that I'm crazy about having another dude's, uh, essence all up in my soul."

"My theory? Even though it melded with your soul, it still managed to retain that connection to its former host," Aggie suggested. "It probably returned if its host was in danger or in need of a power boost." She shrugged again. "But this is all a guess, I'm not going to pretend I'm an expert about angels. I try to avoid the bastards at all costs. Like I said, it just means I'm going to have to be careful."

She turned again, leading them down a sterile looking hallway and into a room that looked like a hospital operating table. The older man was there as well, although he had changed out of his expensive suit and into something akin to scrubs. He was standing beside a tray of several wicked looking metal instruments.

"Ethon will be carrying out the surgical part of this little procedure," Aggie explained, leading them into the backroom. "Don't let the geriatric look fool you – he's been doing this exact operation for millennia."

"One hundred percent success rate," the man grunted.

"I thought you said this was a spell," Sam asked.
"Oh, it is. We're just taking our payment up front," Aggie assured them. "He's the one who's going
to be carving out pieces of your livers. Once that's done, then the real magic begins."

Ethon smiled, looking like he was thoroughly enjoying this. "Who wants to go first?"

Dean awoke feeling as though he'd gone three rounds with a Mexican prizefighter and then chugged
a vat of battery acid.

A dull, pulsing throb encompassed his entire body, his skin stinging like he had spent too much time
in the sun. His head ached in an unfortunately familiar reaction to a night of excessive fun, but
thankfully he was without the urge to empty the contents of his stomach any time soon. In fact, there
was a gnawing sensation in his gut like he hadn't eaten in days.

Drained and feeling weak as a kitten, it took him several tries before he could finally force his eyes
open. Even then, his vision remained blurry for several seconds.

'Christ, I hope I got lucky last night,' he thought bleakly as the picture became clearer and his
awareness returned. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for his short-term memory.

He was lying on his side – alone after all – on a too-soft mattress, beneath a slightly moth-eaten
comforter. On the bedside table he could make out the stationary from the motel that he and Sam had
checked into – Motel Lorelei or something like that – after arriving in New York.

The familiar snore coming from somewhere to his left settled whatever bit of unease he might have
had from waking up slightly disoriented. If Sam was still sawing logs, there wasn't any immediate
danger he had to worry about. He couldn't hear anyone else in the room with them and there was no
uneasy sense that an angel was lurking nearby.

Something inside him twinged uncomfortably at the thought of that. Cas was still AWOL, and they
hadn't even had a chance to go looking for him yet, all because they had spent yesterday…

He frowned against his pillow.

'Was it yesterday?' he thought to himself, for the life of him unable to remember when they had
actually showed up. He had the vague sense of temporal displacement, like he had lost a few hours.
Or maybe days. 'I guess I got monumentally shit-faced at some point if I can't remember the date.'

Exhaling heavily, he heaved himself out of bed and padded toward the bathroom, grimacing at the
ache in his abdomen. He must have been really hungry, because it felt like his insides were trying to
claw their way out of him. Still straining to remember when it was the last time he had eaten, he
didn't pay much attention to the odd lightness in his steps or the feathery sensation on the back of his
neck.

He wandered into the bathroom, ignoring the light switch as a favor to his still sensitive eyes, and
turned on the tap. He waited for it to run clear – a lifetime of nomadic living had taught him just what
might come out of a motel sink – and then splashed some water on his face, hissing in surprise at the
way it felt against his oddly irritable skin.

'What the hell did I –?'

Dean froze, his thoughts grinding to a halt as he lifted his gaze and stared at the dripping face in the
mirror.

For an eternal second, his mind couldn't interpret the information his eyes were giving him – at least not in any way that made sense. Because there was no possible way that he was seeing what he was seeing.

Except he was.

A green-eyed woman with shoulder-length sandy-colored hair was staring at him with exactly the kind of abject horror that he felt rising within him. He raised his hands to his face again, tentatively wiping at some of the water droplets that ran down his chin; the woman's gesture was identical. Most terrifying of all was that he could see himself in her face. They had the exact same pattern of freckles, the same frown crease between their eyebrows, the same lines of exhaustion around the corners of their eyes –

Disbelieving, he gazed down at his body, hoping against hope that he was just dreaming, or that perhaps the mirror was cursed.

Instead, he found himself confronted with two raised bumps bulging up his now too-large Hell Hazers II shirt. Automatically, he moved his hands up to cup the breasts he knew he hadn't gone to sleep with, fighting back a choked groan when they felt exactly the way a woman's breasts should feel.

Impossibly, inarguably real.

Nausea swirled in his empty stomach, and he reached tentatively for the hem of his shirt to further examine the new additions. He paused before he'd gotten it half-way up his torso, staring at the pink scar that neatly followed the curve of his ribs. It didn't sting the way a newly inflicted wound would, and from the texture it looked to be months old.

As Dean continued to stare at himself in the mirror, mentally trying to break himself out of the shock that had overtaken him, his memories decided to make their first appearance of the day. He recalled the mediocre club and the terrible music, and the creepy bald dude, the knife cutting into his flesh –

And then he remembered the crazy goddess that had said she was going to help him and how he had gone against his own better judgement and accepted her help because they were in a jam. She had said she was going to 'transform' them, but he hadn't expected anything on this scale.

His eyes roved farther down the body of the woman in the mirror, and then he looked down at his actual body. With the same deliberate care he used when dealing with cursed objects, he worked his fingers downward to flip open the waistband of his boxers – which were also too loose on him now. Casting a pleading glance heavenward, as if it would actually do him any good, he cringed and peeked down.

Just as he feared, there was nothing but empty space where his junk used to be.

"No fucking way," he said, feeling his heart practically stutter at the sound of his voice. His usual smooth, deep Midwestern drawl had gone up several octaves. The sound still had a low, throaty quality, but now with a distinct feminine edge to it. It was something he would have found – in addition to the breasts – sexy on a woman.

Not on himself.

In all his years of weird, nothing could actually have prepared him for something like this. Even Gabriel hadn't tried anything remotely close, and that winged bastard had had one screwed up sense
"Sam!" Dean yelled, whirling around and marching past the room divider and into the sleeping area.

He grabbed hold of the comforter covering his brother and hauled it back. Part of him hoped it wasn't just him that was afflicted and the other part fiercely hoped he was going to reveal his dopy, sasquatch brother with his limbs lying akimbo and drooling on the sheets.

The person in the bed curled into a protective fetal position at the onslaught of cold. Sam had shrunk significantly, although Dean was pretty sure his brother would still be taller than him once he stood up. Sam's once stupidly long hair had grown longer, and his already soft features had become even smoother. He now sported his own brand, spanning new bosom which was thankfully covered up.

Aggie's supposed 'transportation' service had at least had the decency to keep them dressed. Dean was having enough trouble comprehending the idea of himself with tits, let alone his brother.

There was a groan and then familiar hazel eyes fluttered open. They stared at Dean, at first in confusion, and then in suspicion as awareness took hold. Sam shot upward, ready to fight off and threat.

"What's goin' on?" his now feminine voice slurred, retaining enough of Sam's inherent bitchiness to put at least some of Dean's mind to rest. Sam's eyes widened, probably at the sound of his own voice, and then he was staring down at his new and improved body, before gaping up at Dean in bemusement. "...Dean?"

Apparently he was a little quicker on the uptake.

"Yeah, Sammy, it's me," Dean said, weary. A second later, his hand flashed out and he cuffed his brother in the side of the head.

"Ow! What the hell?"

"This shit is your fault, that's what the hell!"

"How's it my fault?"

"It just is!"

Sam sent him a bitchy glare, which was made all the more effective because Sam actually was a girl now.

"You knew as well as I did we'd be getting a new look," he said, getting up off the bed and examining himself curiously. Dean had been right; Sam was still about three and a half inches taller than him, even as a girl. His hair fell down his back and despite the fact Sam now had rounded hips, his pants were slipping down over his hipbones. "Supernatural witness protection, remember, Dean?"

"Yeah, but I figured it'd be a goatee and gaining a hundred pounds!" Dean yelled. "There was nothing in the contract about growing a vagina!"

Sam had the decency to look slightly freaked at that, his eyes flitting in the direction of his crotch as though he didn't actually believe Dean. A second later, he took a deep breath and met Dean's gaze again. In a placating tone, he reminded him, "Look, it's only temporary."

"Damn right it's only temporary," Dean snarled, "because we're going back to that psycho and
having her set this right!"

"You're in that much of a hurry to get more of your liver carved out?"

"To get my dick back? Gee, let me think, Sam – YES!"

"Even though we're off the radar the way we are now?" Sam pressed. At Dean's expression of apoplectic disbelief, he made a defensive gesture. "Hey, I'm not crazy about the way this turned out either, but we might as well take advantage of it while we can."

"You know what? Maybe she didn't make a mistake with you," Dean snapped in disgust. "Maybe this is how you're supposed to be."

"Very funny, Dean."

"No! That's the whole point! This ain't funny!"

"It could be worse," Sam offered cautiously, obviously aware of just how close Dean was to a full on freak out.

"How? How the hell could this be worse?"

"She could have made us look like Ed and Harry."

Dean opened his mouth to argue, and then promptly shut it again. Sam did have a point. As much as he was livid at the idea that he had been pretty much castrated by a pagan goddess, he would probably have done serious violence to himself if he had woken up looking like one of those freaks from the Ghostfacers. Still, it didn't change the fact that this situation completely sucked.

The familiar tone of 'Smoke on the Water' interrupted any comeback he might have been able to muster up, and he stalked across the room to where his jeans had been tossed onto the chair. Ignoring the possibility that the creepy bald guy that had cut part of his liver out might have undressed him, he yanked out his phone. The barest glance at the caller ID told him it was Bobby, and so he flipped it open and barked, "What?"

There was a pause and a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the phone, before the older hunter actually spoke. "That you, Dean?"

"Well, it's obviously not Sam, because he's loving his new modifications," Dean growled. "I assume you know what's been done to us?"

"Might have gotten a call from Aggie after she had you two dropped off three days ago," Bobby answered, sounding gruff and tentative at the same time. "I gotta say, I didn't think you'd go for it. Either of you."

"Oh, bullshit," Dean bit out, dancing out of Sam's attempts to take the cell from him. "You knew exactly what was going to happen when you sent us to her!"

"Don't put that on me, idjit, it ain't my fault you didn't ask the right questions," Bobby retorted. "Thought you were taught better than that."

"Spontaneous gender fucked-upedness is not something I've had to deal with!" Dean hissed, jerking out of Sam's reach.

"Other hunters ain't gonna be lookin' for two women, are they?" Bobby reminded him meaningfully.
"So stop throwin' a temper tantrum and lay low for a while. Let things blow over some."

"We actually have the time to plan our next move now," Sam added gently. He didn't try to take the phone again, although he stayed close enough to Dean that he could hear Bobby on the other end. "Dean, we probably don't even have a record anymore, not in these bodies. I'm willing to bet she changed our fingerprints and DNA markers too. If we wanted to just up and leave all this behind today, we could do it."

"Except that's not what we're doing," Dean said tightly, the reminder ringing warningly in his tone.

"Of course not," Sam said hastily. "You said we figure out what happened to Cas and Adam, that's what we'll do. Just, now we don't have to look over our shoulders. As much."

Dean exhaled angrily through his nose.

"And on that note," Bobby continued, obviously able to hear Sam on his end, "Aggie gave me some information for you to follow. She told you about her contact in Elwood?"

"More like she mentioned him in passing and expected us to trust that he was real," Dean grumbled. "Considering the clusterfuck we've found ourselves in, there wasn't much of a choice but to trust her. You got a name for us?"

"Nope," Bobby replied. "Her kind don't use names unless they have to. Attracts too much attention. But she gave me a case that'll put you in contact with someone to help you. Supposedly."

"And you trust her," Dean deadpanned.

"Already told you I did, or I wouldn't have sent you to her," Bobby growled. "I know you're in a fix over there, boy, but Aggie's the best I could come up with on short notice. In case you've forgotten, there's a demon out there hangin' onto my soul. Excuse me if I haven't been as completely focussed on your problems as you think I should be."

Dean winced, Bobby's words hitting their mark. All things considered, he really shouldn't have been complaining.

"Now, d'you want the case or not?" Bobby continued, businesslike.

"Yeah, sure, here, talk to Sam," Dean muttered, feeling defeated. He practically tossed the cellphone at his brother and threw himself back down on his bed, trying to ignore the bounce of the new breasts as he did so. He couldn't think of them as 'his'. It was too weird, and it seemed too much like giving in to the cosmic practical joke that had been played on him.

Examining his hands – too small and too slender to actually be his – he frowned thoughtfully. The past week had not been the best ever, even though half of it he had apparently been out cold for. Aggie and Ethon must have put some major mojo on them to knock them out for three days straight. He'd lost his brother, his body, his car and his angel all in the span of days.

"Not that Cas is mine,' he thought distractedly, not noticing for several seconds that his hand had gone to rub the bare patch of shoulder where the angel's palm print had been. He had been trying for days now not to notice how weirdly naked he felt without the scar there. The sensation of having his metaphorical strings cut hadn't disappeared; if anything, it had gotten stronger.

"Okay, yeah, we'll check into it," Sam was saying.

"I'll keep lookin' on my end," Dean heard Bobby promise. "And tell Dean to relax. Stress is the
number one killer of women your age."

"Tell Bobby he's not funny," Dean snapped, sitting up and shooting a glare at the phone.

"He's already gone," Sam answered, with an unimpressed frown of his own as he flipped the phone shut.

"What's the case, then?"

"Kind of sounds like a tabloid article, actually," Sam said, sitting back on the bed with a thoughtful look on girly face. "Disappearances, reports of crop circles, bright lights in the sky – if Bobby didn't tell me Aggie was sure this was her guy, I'd say it was people trying to build up some kitschy UFO flap."

"UFO," Dean repeated tonelessly. "You saying ET's gonna beam us down to Hell and back?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying."

"Damn it, I need a drink…"

"You can't, you just had half your liver cut out," Sam reminded him.

"Then at least some damn coffee!" Dean shouted. Sam raised one eyebrow, and Dean pointed at him warningly. "I swear, if you even think the word 'Midol' I will end you." Sam lifted his hands in surrender, and Dean scrubbed a hand down his face. Even the familiar motion felt wrong. "You know this is messed-up, right?"

'We've been through stranger," Sam tried.

"Oh yeah? Name one."

"Suicidal teddy bear."

Dean considered. "Yeah, okay, I'll give you that one."

"So just…keep in mind that we're going to change back. We'll get through this."

"I need a timeframe on this, Sammy," Dean grunted. "Cause I really don't see how I'm supposed to focus on helping Cas or Adam when I'm not even me enough to do the focussing."

"We're still us. Just different packages."

"Great. Make it feel like I'm possessing some poor girl's meat suit."

"But you're not. You're still you. I'm still me. It's still our bodies and our blood, Dean; we're not actually using anyone else."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Rogers, it's still creepy as fuck."

"Fine – if you can't get past that, at least keep in mind this whole thing's giving us extra time that we wouldn't have had with hunters, angels and demons gunning for us."

"How much time, Sam? It could take forever to find anything!"

"Give it a month."
Dean made a noise of frustration. "How much sanity do you think I have? A week."

"Two weeks."

"Fine. And then we're going back to our pal Aggie and getting her to fix this shit, and we'll deal with the fallout after that," Dean stated decisively.

"Fine," Sam sighed. "Two weeks and we'll go back. Which means we've got to start looking now."

"Well, then let's check out of here and get going," Dean said, already grabbing for his duffel bag.

Sam didn't follow suit, instead cocking his head to one side and adopting a pained expression, like he knew what he was about to say wasn't going to go over well.

"Uh, Dean? There are a few problems we need to deal with first…"

Convincing Dean that they needed to buy some more appropriate clothing if they were going to follow Aggie's lead had taken less time than Sam would have thought. His brother wasn't stupid and he knew that they were bound to draw attention walking around in men's too-large clothing. Convincing Dean that they actually had to leave the motel room to do said shopping had been another story altogether.

It had taken the rest of the morning, and it wasn't until Sam had ventured out to the diner down the street and returned to bribe his brother with pie and coffee that he had managed to talk him around. And what a trip that had been.

Waking up as a woman was one thing, but walking around pretending he had always been one was more difficult. While Sam wasn't as freaked out as Dean was about all this – because Dean just wasn't as mentally flexible as he was – Sam still felt as though he had been thrown for a loop.

Even though no one knew what had happened to him, he felt as though everyone had been staring as he made the four block trek to the coffee shop and back. Well, they had been staring, but probably not for that reason. He knew he would have stared too, if he'd seen a woman walking down the street dressed in too-large clothing and walking like a man that was seven and half inches taller.

Even worse, the oddness of his appearance hadn't stopped some of the stares from turning into leers. Sam had felt the appraising look some of the men standing behind him in the coffee line up had been giving him, and he had felt his stomach jump uncomfortably. Because he had known he'd had that same look on his own face before, even if he had thought he'd been careful about it.

He had decided not to tell Dean about any of that, of course, because it would probably have made his brother decide to turn hermit, and they really needed to get down to business if they were going to make any headway within the next two weeks.

Dean had refused to drive, which was equal parts disgust at New York traffic and protesting being seen in the clunker they were using, so they'd decided to hail a cab to the nearest mall. Sam had decided that because they needed underwear in addition to new clothing, and shopping for panties in a second hand store was kind of gross, they should probably go to a different venue than their usual style. That, and there was the added benefit of no hunters ever frequenting such an establishment.
"Can't we just order some chick clothes online?" Dean complained for the hundredth time as Sam led them through the white-washed, columned atrium of the Manhattan Mall.

It was already packed in there, both because it was New York City and because it was Friday afternoon; groups of kids skipping school and nubile twenty-somethings starting their weekend shopping sprees thronged the hallways, packing it almost as closely as the club had been.

He tried hard not to notice the looks he was getting from most of the people they passed, or the embarrassment that flared up whenever he accidentally met someone's gaze. Especially when that someone was male and leering very obviously at Sam's braless chest; Dean had already nearly punched one kid out before Sam had managed to haul him away.

"Online stores don't usually deliver to motels – and I don't think Bobby would take too kindly to some guy from Victoria's Secret showing up at his doorstep. Not that we can actually afford to shop there."

Dean glared.

"How can you be taking this so calmly?" his brother demanded angrily.

"It's not as if we have much choice in the matter," Sam shrugged. Still, if he was honest with himself, he was forcing himself to be calm just to balance out Dean's temper.

They descended to one of the lower levels and headed for JCPenney, which Sam imagined was the most affordable option right now.

"Hi there," a blasé sounding blond teenager greeted, eyes roving over their rather slovenly appearances. Sam could read the judgement in her gaze. "Just to let you know, we've got our spring promotion on now, where if you buy two sets of lingerie you get the third one half-price."

The 'and you look like you really need it' went unspoken.

"Uh, thanks," Sam said, trying to muster up a friendly smile. "We'll keep that in mind."

"Can I help you find anything particular?" she asked; the question sounded stilted and forced the way it always sounded coming from someone who only made their money on commission.

"Actually, yeah, maybe," Sam said, knowing he knew absolutely zilch about shopping for lingerie.

Back when he and Jess had been together, he'd attempted to buy her sexy lingerie for Christmas. He'd ended up having the foresight to show Rebecca Warren what he'd chosen, and she'd promptly vetoed his choice as looking like 'something a stripper might wear'. After that, any time Sam wanted to get anything like that for Jess, he'd asked Rebecca to pick it out for him.

The problem right now was how to explain to this teenager that a woman in her late twenties didn't know how to shop for underwear. "See, the thing is…"

And his mind drew a complete blank.

Which was the exact point when Dean decided to become 'helpful' again.

"My sister and I grew up with the Angels of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Sword," he said, arranging his face into an approximation of shellshock. "Our leader believed many of your modern comforts were the work of the devil. Underwear, hairspray…toilet paper." He shook his head, ostensibly rueful. "We weren't even allowed to brush our hair. 'He Who Walks Behind the
Rows considers that to be vanity. We were only just 'liberated', as the law enforcement says.

Sam mentally groaned. Of all the stories Dean could have contrived, he had gone with that?

"Oh my gawd!" the teenager's eyes widened, and her bored look was immediately replaced by one of pity. "That's terrible!"

"Yes, it was terrible," Dean agreed, looking like he was fighting to keep his face straight.

Before he could come up with anything worse, Sam interjected. "So, now we're just trying to start over, and so we supposed - clothes were the best thing to start with. The agency that's looking out for us right now gave us a spending allowance, but we don't exactly know...you know, what to get."

"Oh, I can help you!" the girl said, her boredom now gone. "We can start with the simple stuff first - follow me!"

She waved at them to follow her toward the back of the store and Sam shot Dean a frown. "Dude, that was the worst story we've ever come up with. And it could have backfired."

"Tailor to your audience, man. She was wearing one of those 'Team-I-Think-Vampires-Wear-Purity-Rings-And-Sparkle' Shirts. No way has she ever seen Children of the Corn."

The girl, whose name was Kathy, led them to the store's lingerie department and began to chat with them about underwear styles and types of bras. With their permission, she took their measurements and confided in them that it was a good thing they were doing this before buying anything, because so many women wore the wrong size.

While she was looping the tape around Dean's chest, Sam noticed his brother adopt an odd expression. He thought it might have to do with not wanting to be touched while he looked the way he did.

"Is there anything in particular you might have in mind?" Kathy asked as she finished with the measurements and had proclaimed Dean a 32C and Sam a 34A. Sam had almost laughed out loud at the notion that Dean had a bigger cup size than him, but he had stopped himself just in time. They weren't supposed to know anything about bras.

Thinking back to the things Jess had complained about, Sam replied, "I guess comfortable is our biggest concern. And no padding. Padding is the devil's invention."

Kathy and Dean stared at him, Sam winced as he remembered himself, but Kathy had already disappeared to find a few items for them to start out with.

"I know we're going with the cult escapee story, but that was a little over the top," Dean remarked conversationally.

"It's something Jess always said," Sam replied defensively. "When you were with Cassie, didn't she complain about stuff like that? She kind of struck me as the opinionated type."

"Oh, she definitely was but we were both more focussed on other things, if you know what I mean," Dean waggled his eyebrows. "It's why it lasted as long as it did." His expression turned serious. "Now that I think about it, Cassie was probably the longest time I've stuck around anyone that wasn't family."

"Not true," Sam offered. "You and Cas have been hanging around each other a while."
"Longest time I've stuck with anyone I've been sleeping with," Dean corrected in a deadpan.

"And whose fault is that?" Sam joked.

"Nice, Sam," Dean frowned. "Who's being the jerk now?"

"Does that make you the bitch or the shorter bitch?"

"Ha, ha."

Kathy returned with several different colored items and styles, in both their new sizes.

"I'll just leave you two alone to decide what you like," Kathy told them as she led them to the dressing rooms. "If you need anything, give me a shout. I'll just be in the next section."

"Telling your coworkers about the clothing retarded cultists you're helping, I bet," Dean said quietly as she disappeared. He watched her go, and his expression morphed into the familiar Dean-leer that usually showed up when he was about to say something lewd. Strangely, it looked even more predatory on a woman's face. "Hey! I just thought of an upside to this whole mess. Girl on girl!"

Sam groaned. "Come on, man, I really don't need to be picturing that. Whether you're a girl now or not."

"Hey, I'm just trying to find the silver lining."

"Yeah, well, don't look for it there. She's still jailbait, whatever body you're in," Sam cautioned, picking through the piles of underclothing. He made a face, noticing that Kathy hadn't exactly followed his request for comfort.

Beside him, Dean muttered something under his breath and then dug out the flimsiest, laciest bra and thong set he could find, and then flung it at Sam. "There you go, Samantha."

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," Sam retorted. "Those things itch like crazy." Dean stared, and Sam realized what he'd just said. "No! Not like – I never actually – Jess had a few pairs she would wear on special occasions..."

"Whatever, man. No judgement here," Dean said in a tone that conveyed the absolute opposite of that.

"Oh shut up. The point is, she was always complaining about how itchy and uncomfortable they were. Considering our lifestyle, all I'm saying is comfort is probably more of a concern for us."

"And on that note, let's get through this so we can get back to that lifestyle," Dean said, finally just grabbing an armful of material and closing himself into the nearest cubicle.

Sam sighed and followed suit, heading for the dressing room beside.

As he struggled trying to get the bra on – because apparently just because he could unhook a bra one-handed didn't necessarily translate to being able to put one on with the same ease – he found himself thinking about Jessica again.

It had been a while since she had been so present in his thoughts, and he wondered if that had to do with his sudden transformation into a woman or if it was his subconscious trying to tell him something. With the end of the world not panning out, suddenly there was a faint hope once again blossoming up inside of him. Whatever happened with their quest to save Castiel and Adam – and
figure out what exactly had brought him back and why – the fact of that matter was that they didn't have to worry about the Apocalypse any longer, barring a visit from Raphael. Which meant there was a possibility of having a future again.

When he was a kid living in crappy motel room after crappy motel room, he had always imagined getting out, marrying a nice girl and having a normal family. He had wanted to do it right. He had almost gotten that with Jessica, but since her death he had filed it away as something he could never have. He hadn't actually been with anyone since Dr. Roberts in Iowa, and before that Ruby –

He shivered at the memory. That had been his worst judgement call to date, even worse than his decision to say 'yes' to Lucifer. At least the latter had been an attempt to stop the world from ending and protect his brother. Trusting a demon over his own flesh and blood, on the other hand…

He shook his head as though to clear it.

Obviously, normal wasn't going to cut it anymore; Sam had long since given up on his dream. He knew that no matter what happened – even if everything supernatural all of a sudden disappeared the next day – he wouldn't be able to just go back to normal. As much as it sucked, the hunters looking for him and Dean were right: once you almost destroyed the world, you couldn't just go back to the way things were. Sam wanted to do something with his life to at least try to make up for all of the crap he had done.

But at the same time, he wondered if that meant he would have to be alone to do it.

Dean didn't count, in that respect. He was his brother and that was an obligation thing as much as it was a family thing. Besides, even though now Sam couldn't see Dean giving up the life any more than he could see himself doing it, something told him that Dean might at least dial things back. If they managed to save Adam and find Castiel – *when*, Sam told himself firmly – Dean might just go the Bobby-route. Start up his own business and keep on the periphery of hunting.

'I'm getting ahead of myself,' Sam shook his head, considering himself in the mirror. He'd finally managed to figure out the secret of getting the bra on; it still weirded him out to look in the mirror and not see his own reflection. Objectively he knew that the reflection was just as much him as usual – same lanky build, his anti-possession tattoo was still in place – but it was so weird. Especially since the tall, pale woman in the mirror was someone he might have been attracted to if he hadn't known it was himself.

He idly traced the healing scar by his rib, and then feeling slightly foolish, cupped the smallish breasts that he had been given.

There was a swift knock on the dressing room door, and Sam abruptly dropped his hands.

"What's taking so long? Are you ogling yourself in there?" Dean's voice was muffled by the door.

"Like you weren't doing the same," Sam told him after he had changed back into his clothes and left the cubicle.

"I actually got stuff to look at," Dean said mockingly. "Unlike your itty-bitty-t –"

"How are you girls doing?" Kathy had popped up again; several feet away, two of her coworkers were idling, pretending to fold away some of the merchandise. Apparently Dean had been right about her chatty nature. "Anything else I can help you find?"

In the end they stuck to cotton bras and underwear, although for some reason, Sam imagined he saw Dean slip a pair of pink satiny panties into his pile of underthings. After a brief stop at the ladies
room – ("Holy crap, it's so much dirtier in here than the men's," Dean hissed as they entered.) – where they changed into their new purchases, they headed for the ladies fashion department.

After a brief argument about how much money they should spend on clothes they might not need two weeks later, they decided to stick to a pair of jeans each and a few shirts. Sam figured that they could still get away with wearing most of their hoodies and flannel shirts, and he knew Dean wasn't about to give up wearing Dad's leather jacket any time soon.

The next stop was the barber, where Dean was intent to cut off all of the extra hair tumbling over his shoulders. He grumbled about how much more women had to pay for a simple haircut than men, but offered the receptionist a charming smile when she asked him what he wanted done.

"I want it short," he said.

"How short?" she asked him politely. "Because with your bone structure, if we go too short, you'll end up looking like Justin Bieber."

Sam had roared with laughter while his brother gaped and then stalked wordlessly from the hair salon.

"I could cut it for you," Sam offered when he could talk without laughing.

"Right, so instead of looking like that Canadian douchebag I can look like I was attacked by a lawnmower? No thank you," Dean complained. "Gonna get my body back soon anyway, right? I can wait it out."

"But you'd look good with a swear-word shaved into your head," Sam had teased.

It was the last time either of them considered getting rid of their long hair.

"There's something else we might want to consider," Sam commented as they headed for the mall exit. He figured he'd put Dean through enough for one day.

"Yeah, what?"

"We need to be really careful if we're going to hunt like this," he continued. "I know these are our bodies, but we're not exactly used to them yet. I think we might need to train a bit before we go hunting."

"The swap didn't screw with our memories, Sam, I still know how to throw a punch," Dean deadpanned. "Jo and Ellen did a pretty good job hunting up until the end, so it's not like we can't hunt because we've got girl parts now."

"I'm just saying that things we're used to – like our strength and speed and reactions – it'll be different," Sam pointed out. "We should find out exactly how different before we go looking for this contact of Aggie's. Unless you really want to play the part of the dumb blond chick running through a dark alley way because you can't fight properly."

Dean made a thoughtful face. "Okay, yeah, makes sense. While we're at it, we need to make some new IDs. All my fake driver's licences have me as male, which Joe Cop is going to notice right away." He flashed Sam a grin. "Hey, d'you think I can get out of speeding tickets with this rack?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Yes, because that's clearly our biggest concern right now."
"…and that is why I believe Elwood has become a center of extraterrestrial activity," the heavy-browed older man sitting across from Sam and Dean declared excitedly. He prodded at a screenplay sized pad of papers for the umpteenth time. "As you'll no doubt be able tell from my work, I have personally recorded dozens of eyewitness accounts, strange lights in the sky, mysterious presences attempting contact –"

"Er, Mr. Whitaker," Sam ventured, sensing that if he didn't interrupt, the man would keep talking.

Whitaker was a newcomer to Elwood, Indiana and had apparently been drawn there by the reports of alien activity; for all intents and purposes he seemed like a complete whack-job. They had been sitting at the cramped diner cubicle for fifteen minutes, and Sam had yet to see the guy take a breath.

Beside him, Dean was distractedly tapping out the melody to 'Thunderstruck' on the table, probably to keep himself from reaching over and shaking the guy.

"Junior, Mr. Whitaker Junior," the man said blithely. "Mr. Whitaker was my father."

"Right, Mister...Junior," Sam amended as Dean shifted impatiently and gestured at the waitress to bring more coffee. "We spoke to the sheriff earlier this morning, and he insists these disappearances have nothing to do with, uh, aliens. He says it's just a string of missing persons' cases that got blown out of proportion –"

"Well, he would, wouldn't he?" Mr. Whitaker Junior said defensively. "It's all part of the cover up. Mark my words, ladies, there's something bigger going on here."

Dean bristled at the word 'ladies', and Sam knew he'd better wrap up their latest interview before his brother knocked over a table or something. "That's exactly what we think, too, but the Mirror was hoping for more than just idle speculation. The sheriff couldn't find anything linking the disappearance and the…strange phenomena. If we were to focus on your theory in our article, could you maybe elaborate a bit? Do you think there could be a pattern that the police have missed?"

"Oh, no doubt," Whitaker Junior nodded fervently as the waitress refilled their cups, putting a hand out to keep her from topping his up. "But it's probably one too complicated for humankind to follow. This is an advanced species we're dealing with, you know."

'Aaaaand, that's a wrap,' Sam told himself as Dean scoffed into his coffee. He stood and adopting a grateful smile. "Well, thank you for your help anyway, sir. If we need anything else for our article, we'll be sure to call you."

"I'm always around," Whitaker beamed, getting up to go. Sam started to hand the thick stack of papers to him, but the older man stopped him. "Oh, no, you keep that. I have so many copies lying about. Besides, it will help you write a more balanced, factual article."

"Right. Thank you, sir."

Dean offered a tight smile and a wave, eyes narrowing as he watched the man exit the diner and start across the street to where a UFO-themed bazaar seemed to be in full swing.

"Someone took the brown acid," he commented darkly.

"You never know, Dean, he could be right," Sam reasoned, although there was little conviction in
that argument. After spending an afternoon wading through the crazy of conspiracy theories and alien abduction stories, he was becoming more and more convinced that this place had nothing to offer them.

Two days before heading to Indiana, they had stopped in upstate New York to resupply, emptying their father's lock-up of whatever weapons and tools might come in handy in the coming weeks. They had arrived in Elwood the day before and spent the evening scoping out the town. It had turned out to be easier than usual to just observe from the sidelines, considering every UFO enthusiast and their entourage was visiting the town.

Almost every motel was packed, which had nearly resulted in the brothers camping out in their newest car, a black 2006 Dodge Charger that Sam had bought in New York – or rather, which Jane and Erica Campbell had bought with a little help from their Uncle Bobby. Before getting on the road, they had had to whip up a few new fake IDs, drivers licenses and credit cards. They had opted to use their mother's maiden name on their primary identifications, partially because no one in the hunter community would connect it to the Winchester name, and also because it helped them keep at least part of their identity. Considering their first names were too recognizable, they had had to change those as well.

The smaller the paper trail they left, even in their new bodies, the better for both of them. So far the hex bags and sigils on their ribs continued to hide them from the forces of Heaven and Hell, allowing them to concentrate on following the lead that the pagan goddess had left to them.

Which was turning out to be a massive waste of time, in Sam's opinion.

"This is ridiculous," Dean burst out, voicing Sam's thoughts. "Between this guy and the hippie chick that thinks aliens are coming to help humanity to the next stage, this whole thing smells like a set-up. I bet Aggie just sent us in this direction so she could skip town while we chased down a whole lotta nothing."

"Bobby said she's legit, so I'm willing to give it at least another day or so," Sam told him, ticking off the name Whitaker on his list of potential witnesses. "We've still got a few people we can check out. This next one – uh, Marion Allen – has been telling people it's fairies."

"You mean like Tinkerbell?" Dean scoffed. "What, flying saucers aren't insane enough for her? Let me guess – she's one of those shut-in broads with a couple dozen cats."

Sam ignored that. "It could still be credible."

"Two things I don't believe in, Sammy, that's coincidence and fairies."

"What about angels?" Sam asked, his feigned innocence pointed.

"Screw you."

The waitress appeared with the food they had ordered before Mr. Whitaker had showed up. Dean smiled winningly at the older woman, and although his charm didn't have the same effect it usually did, the waitress returned the gesture before leaving.

"You're gonna kill yourself eating like that," Sam said, staring with undisguised horror at the heaps of bacon, sausages, home fries and eggs on his brother's plate.

"Considering the creative ways we usually die?" Dean said, shovelling fries in his mouth. "Not a bad way to go."
"You think a heart attack isn't a bad way to die?"

Dean answered cheerily. "Better than being crushed by a piano."

"You don't even remember that."

"I can imagine it."

"You do know that in your new meatsuit that stuff's probably going to go straight to your thighs, right? Different metabolism and all."

"Aw, I'm touched by your concern, Samantha! You're the best little sister ever!" Dean said in a mocking, high-pitched imitation of his new voice, fluttering his eyelashes winningly. His expression returned to normal. "Way I see it, I'm not gonna be in this body long enough for that to matter."

He shoveled an entire Sunnyside up egg into his mouth to emphasize the point.

"Anyway," Sam rolled his eyes and started in on his fruit and yoghurt parfait. "As I was saying, there's still more people we can check out. Families of the vics. The father of the first kid who disappeared – Patrick Brennan – he owns a watch repair shop on the main street.

"Sumphslakkapahn," Dean agreed with his mouth full. He swallowed and stood up. "Hey, I gotta hit the head – if she comes back, tell her I need ketchup for my fries. And it better be friggen Heinz – none of that No Name crap."

Sam sighed as his brother disappeared. He wished Aggie had thrown in a 'basic common courtesy' option in Dean's remodel.

'Then again, he wouldn't be Dean if that happened,' Sam told himself with a grim smile. He remembered how even when the angels had taken them and plugged them into new lives, Dean's basic underlying attitude had remained exactly the same.

He went back to reading over the articles he had printed off his laptop that morning. He frowned thoughtfully, reading through the information another time in the hopes that this time he would notice something out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, all the articles read like run-of-the-mill disappearance stories. It could have been anything from vampires to witches.

'Do any of them have anything in common?' he wondered, pausing with his spoon in his mouth. 'Not really – whatever's doing this isn't selecting them based on age, gender or race – it's not going through families, because none of the families of the vics who have siblings have reported any more trouble – "

Sam tensed, suddenly aware that he was being watched. Glancing up, he noticed a younger, dark haired guy sitting in the nearest barstool, considering him. When he met Sam's eyes, he smiled and lifted his coffee in his direction. As was his usual reaction to a friendly patron, Sam smiled awkwardly back and quickly looked back down to his work.

'Hunh. That's interesting. According to this, all the vics were oldest or only children,' Sam realized.

A shadow appeared next to him, and he automatically said, "Hey, I think I've found something. It turns out all the – " He glanced up and saw that he was staring at the dark haired young man and not Dean. "Uh…can I help you?"

"I don't think I've seen you around here before," the guy said conversationally. He was still holding onto his coffee and standing awkwardly next to the table.
"Probably not," Sam agreed lightly, moving to surreptitiously cover up the articles on the table. "Just passing through for work."

"Oh yeah? What do you do?"

"I'm a reporter with the Mirr – " The guy slid into the empty seat that opposite Sam. " – or. You know, that seat's actually –"

"I'm Rick."

It was at this point that Sam finally clued into the fact that he was being hit on by the guy. It was still such a foreign concept that he hadn't recognized the obvious tactic for what it was.

Truth be told, he had figured Dean would be the first one to attract anyone's attention. His brother's new features had the kind of girl-next-door quality that Sam himself would have been attracted to if he wasn't very clear on the fact that it was his brother sporting them. In fact, Dean's new looks greatly resembled their mother, who Sam knew in that same objective way had been a beautiful woman.

Sam had thought the fact that he'd retained a decent amount of his height, along with his too-pale complexion and lack of cleavage, might discourage anyone who was interested.

Apparently he had been wrong, he realized. His awkward smile became more forced. "Good for you."

"What's your name?"

Sam pursed his lips and adopted an unimpressed expression, realizing that words were obviously not getting through to the guy.

"Come on, tell me," Rick wheedled. "Or do want me to guess?"

Murphy's Law being what it was, Dean chose that exact moment to return.

"Am I interrupting something?" Even as a woman, Dean's tone had a hard edge to it that any intelligent man would think twice about challenging.

Evidentially, Rick wasn't an intelligent man, because he didn't even spare Dean a glance as he answered, "Kinda."

Dean's eyes flashed, and he grabbed hold of the guy's shoulder, in what someone else might consider a friendly clap on the shoulder, but which Sam recognized as a strategic way of digging his thumb into the pressure point by the guy's collar bone. "I think you misunderstood – you're in my seat."

"Jesus, ow!" Rick hissed, allowing Dean to guide him forcefully from the chair and away from their table. "What the hell is your problem?!!"

Dean shoved him a bit. "The skeezy douche sitting in my seat."

"Relax, lady, we were just talking."

"Come on, pal, you were trying to get in her pants – own up to your shit," Dean scoffed. "Now move along. Neither of us is interested."

"Sorry," Rick grumbled, rubbing his shoulder and backing off with dirty look. "I didn't know you were together, sheesh."
"We are not together!" Dean snapped, more to the suddenly interested diner patrons than to Rick. He glared around, causing them to go back to their food, and then sat down with a scowl. "Why does everyone always think that?"

"I did tell you that you sometimes come off as too butch," Sam told him mildly. "Guess that quality carried over."

"You – you don't get to talk," Dean told him.

"I'm so intimidated by you," Sam rolled his eyes. "Incidentally, I could have handled that myself."

"Sure you could. Tell you what: next time, I'll leave you to the mercy of the sleezebucket who looks like he was rejected from the cast of Dawson's Creek," Dean shrugged and started back on his breakfast. Sam grinned at him, and Dean raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You totally would have been that brother, wouldn't you?"

"Huh?"

"If I'd have actually been born a girl and we'd had a normal life? You definitely would have been that protective older brother that beat up on any guy that tried to take me to prom, wouldn't you?"

"Are you kidding? I would have been the brother that had to pay someone to take you to the prom."

"Apparently not, if our friend Rick is anything to judge by."

"You high standards astound me," Dean jeered, going for another spoonful of food. "Although, all things considered, he's probably a better choice than Ruby."

Sam glared. "Low blow, dude."

The rest of the day passed in a blur of weird interviews with even weirder people. Sam and Dean spent more than an hour at a small home outside of the town center listening to Marion Allen explain about how fairies were clearly to blame for the disappearances, all the while insisting that the brothers interact with her rather (disturbingly) impressive collection of garden gnomes.

After making their escape, they stopped for lunch and then interviewed three of the victims' families. In each instance there was little new evidence they could glean from the victim's loved ones besides the pervading sense of disbelief. As each door closed behind them, Dean felt familiar anger rising up in his stomach at how even the things people didn't know could kill them.

The last stop of the day was the father of the first victim. They had decided to leave him until last because his shop was closest to the edge of the city, and if his account yielded nothing they would have less of a ways to drive to investigate the site of the disappearances.

Brennan's Watchworks was a small, hole in the wall mom-and-pop business nestled in between a futon shop and a used bookstore on Elwood's main strip. Inside, the polished furniture and strong wooden beams of the décor spoke of a time when watchmaking had still been a big business. Instruments and tools lay scattered across several desks that took up space in the shop, and antique lamps tried to light the area, which despite the daylight outside, was shadowy and dark.

An unshaven man who appeared to be in his early fifties was hunched over one of the desks, staring
blankly at a broken watch face in his hand. He had colorless, receding hair.

"Mr. Brennan?" Dean guessed as they stepped forward, unintentionally startling the guy.

"Yes?" the man asked, training hooded eyes on them. Dean winced inwardly at the haunted look in them, seeing the familiar glint of pain that only someone who had lost a loved one possessed.

"I'm Joan Larkin, this is Sandy Pesavento – we're reporters with the *Mirror,*" he explained, immediately seeing the man tense at the introduction. "We'd like to ask you about –"

"What? Is this about Patrick?" Brennan interrupted suspiciously. "Patrick's gone."

"Missing. Right," Dean said, raising an eyebrow at Sam. It wasn't often that a parent was so quick to agree that their child was gone. "Yeah, that was what we wanted to talk to you about. We heard your son was the first to disappear."

"First to be taken," Brennan corrected, looking back down at the watch in his hand.

"Taken," Sam repeated, considering the watchmaker with a confused frown on his face. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said, lady – he's been taken, and he's not coming back."

"You sound awfully sure about that," Dean pointed out. "It kind of sounds like you know something you're not talking about."

As though realizing how he sounded, Brennan suddenly looked up, his features carefully blank.

"You know what they say. Seventy-two hours. After that, the odds of finding a missing person drop to nothing, right?"

"Well, every case is different," Sam offered.

Brennan shrugged. "It's been weeks."

'Something is not right here,' Dean determined. He decided to throw politeness to the wind in order to provoke a reaction. "If you believe someone took your son, why didn't you report it to the authorities?"

"It wouldn't have helped."

"Why? Who do you believe took your son, Mr. Brennan?"

"It doesn't matter. He's not coming back."

"You don't – er, believe in all the alien hype going on around here, do you?" he tried again.

That finally struck a nerve for some reason.

Brennan jumped to his feet, cheeks flushed scarlet in anger. "Get out! Out! This isn't your business! No one can help me, my boy is never coming back! Now get out, before I call the police!"

Sam and Dean headed for the exit, although as they ducked outside, Dean turned back around and dropped one of their newly printed business cards on the counter beside the cash register. "Alright, we're going – but listen, call us if anything comes to mind."

The bell over the door clanged with finality as they exited. Once outside, it took a moment for Dean's
eyes to adjust to the brightness. Still, he saw the annoyed look Sam shot him without a problem.

"It never fails to astound me how much you suck with people," his brother pointed out.

"Hey, you're the one whose bread and butter is that wussified, dew-eyed crap. One of us had to get the looks."

"How did you manage to do this job before you came to get me?"

"Easy. I only took the jobs with hot chicks," Dean replied with a grin. "They were helpless to my charms."

"Yeah, I'd like to see that now." Sam snorted. His expression turned serious again. "So, what do you think?"

"I think Papa's hiding something," Dean acknowledged. "We might want to keep an eye on him."

"We still have to check out the place where his son supposedly disappeared from. According to the news articles I read, the 'crop circle' is still intact. The town's been making money off this UFO-craze, and they figured demolishing the circle would drive down business."

"Warms the heart to know some folks still cash in on other people's suffering," Dean sighed. "Why'd we stop the Apocalypse again?" Sam sent him an unimpressed glare. "Too soon?"

"The fact that you even have to ask that makes me think you're going to be useless if Brennan ever decides to fess up," Sam told him archly. "So, I'll stick around here in case that happens – you can go traipsing through the cornfields."

"No way, man, I finally found a pair of boots that's comfortable for this body," Dean protested. "You go wade through cow shit."

They exchanged unimpressed glances, and then Sam raised a closed fist in the universal invitation to play for it.

An hour later, Dean found himself on the outskirts of town after the sun went down, searching around with a flashlight and muttering curses about Sam cheating at rock-paper-scissors.

The field was quiet but for the insistent chirping of crickets in the distance. He couldn't sense anyone nearby, but that didn't stop him from leaving the motor and the lights on the Charger running just in case. He wandered through the tall stalks, ignoring how the entire situation reminded him of that time he'd been running for his life in an apple orchard.

'Huh. Also in Indiana,' he thought. 'I think there's a message in this…'

He finally made it to the section of cornfield that had been flattened into the crop circle and shone his flashlight around. At this point in time, he knew it wasn't very likely he'd find anything the cops had missed, but there was a small possibility.

He started at one edge of the circle and began to work his way inward, wandering in a circular pattern until he had gone through almost the entire section.

There was shuffling sound to his left, and Dean made a move for his gun. Out of nowhere, someone grabbed onto him, crushing his hand until he loosened his grasp on the weapon. He swore as his assailant threw him backwards, relieving him of the gun and his flashlight.
"I don't think you're gonna need that," a familiar voice said, and Dean heard the sound of his gun being tossed away into the distance. Recovering himself from the surprise assault, Dean squinted into the darkness that was lit only by the faint flow of the car's headlights, his mind and his vision giving him a better idea of his attacker.

"Are you kidding?" he groaned. "You're the moron from this morning. Dick, right?"

"Rick," the guy corrected, and Dean could hear the grin as he advanced, "And you, lady, just aren't too bright. Coming out here all alone?"

Dean laughed, injecting a taunt into his tone so as to hide his unease at the situation. He and Sam had sparred with each other in an attempt to get a feel for their new bodies, but he had yet to test out his reflexes on someone of Rick's girth. "Buddy, I've sneezed out bigger things than you. Do the smart thing and head back to town. I don't have time for this."

"I'll bet," Rick said. "Been watching you and your girlfriend all day." Dean bit back his need to correct the man who was trying to intimidate him. "I was gonna try again with her, but when I saw you heading out here all on your own? Too good of an opportunity to pass up."

"That was an interesting move you pulled this morning. You've got some fight in you. I like that in a woman. I'm going to enjoy this."

"Yeah? I bet I'm going to enjoy it more," Dean answered with a mocking smile.

Rick came at him with his hands out, ready to grab hold of him. Dean ducked his grasp, moving around behind him as he tried to come up with a plan of action. In terms of strength, Rick probably outclassed him at the moment, but he still had his speed and his reflexes. He just needed the right opportunity –

Despite Dean's dodging routine, Rick's big fist snapped open in the direction of Dean's face. The blow would have broken his jaw and several of the guy's fingers, except Dean jerked his head aside just enough to let it brush by his left ear.

In the same instant, he stepped in and swung his shin upward with precisely controlled force, aiming for Rick's crotch.

"Let's play Nutcracker," Dean grunted, before bouncing back lightly onto the balls of his feet. Rick bent and clutched himself for a moment. "Dude, didn't anyone ever tell you not to hit someone in the head with your fist? You'll break your hand before you break his head."

Rick snarled, and when he looked up Dean could see fury in his eyes. He seemed to have forgotten all pretense of actually getting a hold of Dean for any other reason than to beat on him. He lunged, whirling into a sweeping kick, which was well executed but went a little long.

Dean ducked, the foot sweeping over his head, and slapped his hand up, palm on the other guy's thigh. He pushed sharply, using more of his strength than he normally would have, and sent Rick flying backward on his ass.

Once he was on the ground, Dean's heel slammed down – not in Rick's face like he really wanted to do, but a deft blow to the gut with enough force to seriously wind him.

"Here's what's going to happen," Dean said, looking down his nose to the gasping heap of jerk. "You're going to go back to town and we're going to forget this ever happened. You're also going to stay away from me and my…sister. Because I don't think you want anyone to know you just got beaten up by a girl."
And he turned and walked away, heading back toward the car.

'Not like there's anything out here to help the case anyway,' Dean thought with annoyance. 'This whole trip has been a huge, stinking pile of noth –'

Fingers like steel rods gripped his throat from behind, digging in on either side of his windpipe. Dean choked, his hands reaching up instinctually to claw at the hand which held him, while another encircled his waist, pinning his arms to him.

"Here's what's going to happen," Rick's angry, wheezing voice hissed into his ear. "You're going to lie there and take this, and maybe you won't become another missing person."

Dean fought to drag air in through his mouth, his feet slipping and sliding in the mud and flattened corn stocks beneath him as he tried to gain purchase.

'Don't fucking pass out,' he told himself coldly, trying to force himself to calm down. He knew there were a number of ways out of a hold like this, but they all relied on strength he didn't actually have at the moment.

Thoughts racing, he allowed himself to go numb in his assailant's arm, like he was giving up.

"That's more like it," Rick said, chuckling like he was pleased with himself.

Instantly, Dean jerked his head backwards, aiming with as much strength as he could toward where his assailant's voice had come from. Rick's scream of pain was loud in his ear as the back of Dean's skull connected with his nose. He loosened his grip, allowing Dean to slip out of his arms.

Not bothering to pull his punches this time, Dean lashed out, aiming again for the guy's now shattered nose and then for his gut. After a flurry of kicks and punches – which were fueled by his own anger and frustration at the entire situation – Rick was back on the ground, definitively unconscious this time.

Wiping blood from his knuckles, Dean glared down at the guy. "Stay down, bitch."

He waited several seconds to make sure that Rick wasn't going to come after him again – because at this point, civilian or not, Dean was angry enough to actually kill the bastard – and then flipped out his cellphone.

Sam answered on the second ring. "Find anything out?"

"Just that this town is full of douchebags," Dean grumbled, massaging his throat. "Might want to call the sheriff's office and tell them there's a would-be rapist knocked out in a cornfield."

"What?! Are you okay?" Sam's tone hovered in the dangerous area of 'please share your feelings with me', and so Dean was quick to head him off.

"Oh, yeah, I'm good. Pissed off, but otherwise great. Have I mentioned how much I want my body back?"

"Only ten times a day," Sam answered, his voice still holding that worrying tremor to it. Dean cursed inwardly, knowing his brother would want to talk about this later on.

Already trying to think of a way to avoid that conversation, he asked, "How's it going on your end?"

Sam sighed. "The only thing this guy is up to is alcoholism. He hasn't done anything out of the
ordinary. You know, maybe I should go try to talk to him again. If he is hiding something, I'm more likely to get anything out of him than you –"

The car's lights, which had until that point been illuminating the area, suddenly went out.

"Shh! Shh!" Dean hissed, looking around him warily. He didn't think Rick would be waking up any time soon, but just in case –

There was a whirring noise.

"What?" Sam was asking, tone worried across the phone line. "You see something?" Dean reached into his boot for the extra gun, which he hadn't had time to go for in the fight. "Dean, what's up? Is that guy back?"

"Hang on a second," Dean answered as the whirring noise returned, louder this time.

Suddenly, something bright and luminescent loomed overhead, illuminating the corn stalks and the circle Dean was standing in. Squinting against the glare, Dean could make out a vaguely saucer-like shape.

"Holy…" He took a step back, and the thing followed him. 'Oh, shit…' He took off into the cornfield. "UFO! UFO!"

As he ran, he could hear Sam still talking. "Whoa! Dude, stop yelling! You're breaking up – I didn't catch that last part."

"Close encounter!" Dean yelled as he ran through the stalks. "Close encounter! They're after me!" A moment later, he realized that he had just run further into the field, in the exact opposite of the direction of the car.

Knowing his only choice was to turn back and try to fight his way out of the field, he reached into his other boot for his switchblade, holding that and the gun out in front of them.

'No friggen way ET's taking me without a fight,' he thought, squaring his shoulders. "Come on!"

The bright light loomed closer, and then grew, until it blocked out the night sky and everything else.

"Dean?" Sam asked warily. "Are you there? What happened? Dean?"

The silence on the other end of the phone was not comforting, and Sam knew from experience what that usually meant.

By the time he managed to hail the only cab in town and make it to the cornfield, Dean was long since gone. The only clue that he had ever been there was the still running car, an abandoned flashlight and his cellphone, which Sam found only by calling it repeatedly.

Several yards away, he found a still unconscious and beaten body. As he shone his flashlight down onto it, he recognized it as the guy who had been hitting on him that morning. Remembering what Dean had said about him, Sam simply did the responsible thing and called in a tip to the sheriff’s office. He had more pressing concerns right now, the foremost being that his brother had apparently been kidnapped by aliens.
Leaving the cornfield behind, he headed for the only person he figured would have any idea how to deal with an alien abduction.

He sped back toward Elwood, tearing through the city center so quickly he nearly hit Mr. Brennan as he was leaving the corner store, causing the man to drop his purchases on the street. In his rear-view mirror, Sam saw something like milk or cream spill out on the pavement.

The RV camp just outside of town had obviously been there before the alien craze broke out, although it looked as though it had recently started to hit capacity. Sam headed for the address that he had jotted down for Wayne Whitaker Junior and uncaring of the fact that it was about the time that people started to turn in for the day.

He rapped on the door of Whitaker's trailer, grateful when the heavy browed man appeared within the screen. "Oh. Miss Pesavento. Is there something I can help you with?"

"UFOs. They're real," Sam said, for the first time actually unsure of how he was supposed to break the news.

Whitaker didn't look surprised. "Like I said before, missy, the truth is out there."

"Yeah – that's why I came to you. You're the expert. How do I get them?"

"Come again?" Whitaker raised an eyebrow.

"You hunt ET's, right? Extra terrestrials? I need to know how to get them."

"If I knew that, I'd be a very rich man," Whitaker smiled gently. "If you want to look through thirty years of eyewitness accounts, they might –"

"Look, I already know they're real, my br – partner's been abducted, so I'm pretty much a believer," Sam ploughed on impatiently. "Now can you help me, or are you going to tell me to look at your badly punctuated and spuriously evidenced research again?"

"Young lady, I don't think I like your tone," Whitaker told him, his expression turning cold. "You seem upset. Perhaps tomorrow would be a better time –?"

Sam cursed himself for letting his worry overcome his usual people skills. Hadn't he just ribbed Dean about that this morning?

"No – No, tomorrow would not be a better time, I need to find hi – her now," Sam insisted.

Whitaker shook his head. "I can see that you're a little unbalanced. My expertise is clearly not the kind of help you need right now. I can recommend an excellent psychiatrist in town. He's given all of us free consults –"

Sam didn't try to hide his groan of frustration as he whirled around and stalked away. This was getting him nowhere!

"Have you considered the possibility of faeries?" a dreamy voice asked, and Sam glanced to the person seated by the nearest trailer. He recognized Marion Allen and her creepy lawn ornaments even without much light. She was sitting in an outdoor lounge chair, sipping tea from a dainty porcelain cup.

"What?" he asked, more out of the need to ask the question than any actual curiousity.
"Faeries," the dotty-looking woman repeated. "Sprites and spriggens. Bogarts and brownies. The little people have many names and come in many shapes and sizes. They're magical, mischievous beings from the realm next door."

Sam had been about to ask after the woman's sanity, but the word 'realm' made his ears perk up. "Realm?"

"The faerie realm," Marion nodded happily.

"So, it's like another dimension?" Sam asked, his heart beating faster at the possibility. "Like a… back door universe?"

"Exactly," she agreed, obviously overjoyed at the fact that he seemed to believe her.

"Why would they be abducting people, though?"

"Well, there are a few ideas, but obviously no one knows for sure. It's said that they only take firstborn sons, although if your sister was taken that proves that's just a myth," she chuckled, obviously failing to realize that this was something bad. "Personally, I think they're taken to Avalon to service Oberon, the King of the Faeries."

Sam didn't bother to point out that Oberon was a Shakespearean creation and hadn't actually been a part of any mythos until the romantic literature of the Middle Ages. Instead, he asked, "Say…say faeries are real…what can I do about them?"

"Sorry?"

"How can I interact with them? To communicate?"

Marion pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Well, if you want to win a faerie's favor, leave a bowl of fresh cream. They love cream."

Sam held back a growl of impatience. "Okay, great, I'll keep that in mind – and…and if I wanted to interact more forcefully?"

"Well, all the faerie folk recoil at the touch of iron, and the dark faeries burn when touched with silver," she mused out loud. "Oh! You can spill sugar and salt in front of them – no matter how powerful, the faerie must stoop to count each grain."

'And that's maddeningly unhelpful. Makes me want to believe in UFO's again,' Sam thought, but fixed a polite smile on his face. "Well…that's great. Thanks for the tips, Marion. I'm…going to go see if I can research any of that."

"Oh, any time," Marion beamed. "My trailer is always open to company!"

Sam suppressed a shudder as he glanced at the garden gnomes.

Feeling as though he was trapped between rock and a hard place – because between UFOs and faeries, this case had just gone from slightly weird to so far out of the norm for him and Dean that Sam couldn't think of any other metaphor, Sam got back in the car and headed back to the town center. He couldn't quite face the emptiness of the motel room right now, not until he knew he could get Dean back.

Instead, he drove aimlessly through the streets, trying to clear his thoughts.
He passed the place where he had almost run down the father of the first victim, and for a moment was consumed by guilt. He was allowing his protective feelings for his brother to get in the way of things again. What if he had actually killed the guy, instead of just knocking off his groceries?

Sam blinked, flashing back to that moment. Marion's words about cream returned to him, and he frowned at himself in the mirror. It wasn't the biggest leap he'd ever made, but right now he didn't have many options to consider. Sometimes it really was just a matter of a lucky guess.

The fact was, Sam needed to find Dean. And right now, Brennan was the best lead he had.

Deciding there was no other choice than to pursue it, Sam parked the car and started looking for Brennan. The watchmaker's shop was closed and dark when he got there, and so Sam went to the only other place he could think of.

He found Brennan in there, wallowing in a pitcher of whatever was on tap in the corner of the bar. Not bothering with the minutiae, Sam took the empty seat opposite him.

"Hello again, Mr. Brennan."

The man didn't even look up. "Leave me alone."

"I don't think I got to tell you earlier today how beautiful your work is."

"What?"

"The watches? They're pretty stunning – the amount of detail I saw in them? Just astounding – I've got to ask, though – you own that business yourself, right? So how do you manage to put out that much product?"

"Well, I – I just – "

"Made a deal with a bunch of faeries to keep your business going? Yeah, I kind of figured."

Brennan paled. "You're insane."

"Maybe, but I notice you're not denying it," Sam said angrily. "You know, I thought my dad was an asshole? At least I never had to worry about him trading me off so that his job would be easier."

"You don't understand! It wasn't like that!"

"Normally, I'd sit and listen to your reasons, but right now, my partner is stuck in Never-Neverland – or wherever," Sam said firmly. "So if you have any shred of human decency left – you know, that part of you that swims with guilt every day that you wake up and remember what you did to your own kid? – you're going to help me."

Brennan stared at him blankly for a second, but must have seen the resolve in Sam's eyes, because he nodded slowly.

"My grandmother…she told me all these stories when I was a kid. She told me how to summon them, to get favors from them – she left me this book, and I did the ceremony in my back office a few weeks ago. This…man…appeared and said he was a leprechaun."

Brennan cast a sideways glance, and Sam made a motion for him to continue.

"I asked him to just cure me – I've got the first stages of Parkinsons – but he said he would do even better. He'd make me more successful than I ever had been – that he'd help me save my business."
"In exchange for…?"

"A place to rest," Brennan said dully. "To take the fruit and fat of the land. I said yes – I figured he just meant…I didn't realize that he meant my firstborn. And not just mine – those other families' too." He put a hand over his eyes, a gesture of deep regret. "They're not stopping. They're not going to stop."

"Can't you reverse the spell?"

"Maybe – in the book. But it's in a safe in my shop and…they won't let me near it."

Sam frowned thoughtfully, and then met Brennan's guilty face. "Can you see them?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then. I'll cover you while you reverse the ritual."

"But I can't – !"

"Think about your son, Mr. Brennan," Sam said, using the same kind of 'everyone is counting on you' intensity that John Winchester had instilled in him from the age of three. "Think about all the people who've already lost loved ones – and who still will if you don't help me stop this."

"I-I don't even know if it'll help you," Brennan stuttered, looking about wildly as though expecting one of the other drunken patrons to rescue him.

"It'll be a start. I can handle it from there," Sam said. Something in his words must have sounded confident, because after a searching look and another deep gulp of beer, Brennan nodded and stood.

"Alright. Let's go."

They stopped at the car first, where Sam loaded himself up with a crossbow and as many silver and iron weapons as he could conceal on his smaller body. Brennan stared as he checked the safety on the crossbow.

"What the hell kind of reporter are you, lady?"

"The full-service kind," Sam replied, and gestured for the older man to lead the way.

They slipped into the shop through the back door. Sam looked around, frowning as he tried to see the faeries, although he knew he wouldn't be able to. It was rather like trying to see past a persistent blind spot. "Are they here?"

Brennan nodded to him, motioning with a finger to remain quiet, as the snuck through the back area toward the safe. Sam tried his best to keep watch, despite knowing he wouldn't be able to actually see anyone coming. He wondered if he’d at least be able to hear or sense it.

He heard the click of the lock as the safe opened, and glanced over to where Brennan was pulling out a thick, leather-bound book. Sending Sam a hopeful look, he flipped it opened a few pages. Sam wandered over as the older man began to read, his natural curiosity for old tomes getting the better of him.

"Leig seachad an ceangal sin, agus smål an solus sin, agus fuadaich an sídhe air ais gu'n àite-breith _ - _"

Brennan's words suddenly cut off in a wet gurgle as a sharp, wooden edge ripped through his chest.
The older man crumbled forward, and revealing his killer.

Sam gaped. "You!"

The sensation of many hands reaching out to Dean, sharp and grabby, filled his awareness. Out of reflex he tried to pull away from them, and when that didn't deter he swiped at them with his knife. Exclamations and noises of surprise burst out around him, but try as he might, he couldn't see what he was facing.

The bright light that had overtaken him blotted everything out with painful intensity, forcing him to keep his eyes shut. Even then, it shone through the backs of his closed eyelids, causing tears to form and spill over his lashes in reaction.

Something or some things continued to reach out for him, trying to restrain him, but he kept thrashing wildly out of their way. Someone uttered a command and the voices faded away, until only whispers and a sound like music – haunting and hypnotic – filled the air.

His vision cleared and he prepared himself for a face-to-face with something resembling either E.T. or Predator, only to realize with shocked dismay that it might be worse than that.

Hundreds of glowing balls of light fluttered overhead, twirling, sparking and laughing. Where he stood, he could see dozens of the creatures, some of which danced and caroused in the strange light while others surrounded him.

"Son of a bitch," he murmured, staring around the space that was most definitely not the cornfield. 'Crazy cat lady was right. They're fuckin' faeries…'

They were very angular humanoid creatures of all shapes and sizes, with pointed ears and teeth. All of them had bright eyes and bright hair; even their skin shone, glowing pearly green in the eerie illumination. He was getting a pretty close look at that, too, because most, if not all, of them were naked.

Those closest to him stared, their gazes laced with curiosity or disdain, either toward him or his still-raised weapons; several of them bled dark green from where he had nicked them with his knife. He gripped both tools tighter, sure that they were his only protection right now.

Forcing himself to focus, his eyes flicked around the place where he now found himself, looking for some clue as to where there might be a means of escape. Wherever he was, it was neither outside nor inside, and seemed to exist beyond natural day or night as well. It looked like the inner hollow of a tree, judging from the bark-like texture of the walls, but he was pretty sure there was no tree in existence big enough to hold what this one did.

Large sections of the bark walls were covered in tapestries of woven grass and flowers, while a reaching football field-sized expanse of floor stretched out beyond him. It was made of some sort of earthy, marble stone, but was both less and more grand. The reflection of the hundreds of glowing balls – more faeries, he told himself – shone in the smooth surface, and the air itself gleamed in response.

'No Exit sign, then,' he thought, tensing up in preparation for an attack. It was a mystery to him why he hadn't been swarmed yet.
"Calm yourself, boy," someone said, and Dean inexplicably shuddered in reaction. The voice was like the sound of the wind and the thrum of a bass and the purr of his baby's engine, all rolled into one amazing package. "There is no need for weapons here."

"Oh, I think there's a nee –" he began, turning to face the one who had spoken, only to have the ability to talk disappear.

In the middle of the hallway, there was a throne of black onyx; on it sat a woman that Dean could barely find words to describe. She wasn't even his usual type, yet he still felt himself going a little weak-kneed.

He told himself it was just because she, like the rest of the faeries, was naked.

Instinctively, he knew that this was a primal creature, a lot older than it looked. The woman was tall and willowy, with a perfect hour-glass shape and pale skin. Long dark hair fell in wild tangles down her back and over her full breasts. She was smiling at Dean in welcome, although from the mischievous quirk of her full lips it looked almost more like a suggestion. Her bright eyes were an intense blue that made him think immediately of Castiel, although he had never seen the angel look at him with that particular hunger before.

'Cas,' Dean reminded himself, his thoughts jarring as he came back to himself. He couldn't let himself become distracted right now, even if there was some really hot faerie chick giving him come-hither looks. He needed to get back from wherever the hell he was so that he could find Cas. 'Focus, Winchester.'

He looked away from the woman, trying to regain his composure, but she seemed determined not to let him.

"Dean," the woman whispered his name, and he couldn't help but look back at her, surprised that she knew his name and recognized who he was despite his new packaging. "Don't look so confused. The Fae are creatures of Nature…of Change. We know when something has been altered." The woman smiled wider and wandered toward him, her gaze holding his. The music seemed to grow louder. "You look tired, boy. Come, sit – eat."

She gestured beside her, and unexpectedly Dean was confronted by a richly decked table, with every kind of food he'd ever eaten in his life upon it. Fruits and vegetables grown almost to bursting point rested on intricate glass plates, succulent meat cuts of every kind glistening with gravy and sauce, sweet-smelling breads and – oh, hell - every pie imaginable had been laid out before him.

Even if he hadn't been before, Dean was suddenly famished.

"Uh…yeah, sure. Sounds good," he found himself saying and letting her lead him over to the table.

He frowned, inwardly. His response didn't seem right. For whatever reason, his instincts were screaming at him, but he couldn't for the life of him think why. It felt as though he was in a fog, unable to see beyond the woman and the table of food. The sensation was annoyingly familiar.

He found himself allowing faceless creatures to ease the weapons from his hands and then the woman was gently guiding him down into the chair that had appeared just as mysteriously. Someone hissed in the distance, and dimly his brain registered the sound of something dropping — the knife, he thought – but it was only a vague sense.

Dean was fully aware of the fact that he'd lost control over himself. Whether it was the strange music that continued to echo within the cavern, or the voice of the woman, he wasn't sure, but the feeling
itself was disconcertingly familiar.

Dimly, he remembered that the last time he had felt like this was in Bedford, Iowa, a year before.

'Siren,' he recalled, grimacing with effort as he tried to focus his thoughts. This hazy sensation was a lot like that had been, only he knew he hadn't been dosed with any mind-control spit or had anything like the angelic-fingers-of-mind-whammy placed on him.

So what the hell was going on?

The faerie woman took a place beside him, watching him with hungry intensity. She made a gesture to some of her attendants without looking away from him; the gaze was unnerving enough that Dean had to break it, or he might go mad. His eyes fell lower, zeroing in on her breasts in an ingrained habit only to find his attention momentarily captured by the tiny, red globule that hung from a cobweb-thin strand above her cleavage.

It reminded him of something…

Blood.

'But these things bleed green,' he thought. 'So who…?'

The skin on his knuckles stung and he then recalled splitting them open on that douchebag Rick's teeth. He blinked with effort and looked down, staring at the wound healing there. It shouldn't really have meant anything to him, but at the back of his mind he remembered…

Kali.

The Hindu goddess had been able to bind a person with their blood. Maybe he had ended up in a similar situation with this faerie chick.

"Dean," the woman murmured, and he was forced to look back into her eyes; her gaze was pleading. "Won't you stay with me? Time passes differently here…it's been centuries since I had a visitor. I'm so lonely."

The sadness there sounded real, and it was on the tip of his tongue to agree, but something kept getting in the way.

'Sam,' he reminded himself, focussing on the one thing that trumped everything else. 'Just got him back. And we have to get Cas and Adam. Can't stay. Family."

The woman appeared to sense his thoughts, because she smiled sympathetically.

"So much responsibility, Dean Winchester. Have you not done enough?" she reached over and stroke the left side of his face. It was an odd sensation, the rub between her cold fingers and his softer-than-usual cheeks, and a shiver of anticipation shot through his treacherous body. "Your loved ones will survive without you. Why should you be asked to descend back into the Pit again? You served your time."

Dean shook his head, the motion thick and heavy like he was immersed in a swamp. "Doesn't matter…family…"

The words somehow meant less than they usually did, and it was getting harder and harder to remember why. The smells from the table were becoming hard to bear, along with the woman's too pleasant touch.
She leaned in close to him, her lips hovering close to his left ear.

"Sam is safe, Dean – he'll discover what happened to your friend. Together they will find your youngest brother – none of them will begrudge you peace. You saved the world, after all. You deserve it," she whispered, bringing her hand down in a slow caress. She trailed it suggestively down his neck and collar bone, and Dean felt his eyes roll back a little in pleasure. "Come now – sit back, eat something. Stay with us. Stay with me."

She continued to trail her fingers downward, over his shoulder and his arm –

The pleasure abruptly turned to searing pain as she touched the shoulder that had once borne an angel's brand. A sharp, electric sting of agony flitted across his senses, as though she had poked an exposed nerve –

' – Dean – '

'Cas,' Dean thought dimly, his body reacting to the ache automatically. He shoved himself backward, knocking over some of the delicious looking food and drink. All around him, faeries expressed surprise at his sudden outburst, and even the woman looked alarmed when a goblet of some kind of liquid upended over her, drenching her down the front.

If she'd been a regular woman, the sight might have been tantalizing, but all Dean could register through the quickly ebbing pain, was that the little globule of blood had been washed away.

He shook his head, feeling his senses sharpen again. His mind rebooted itself, focussing on one thing: escape.

"Right…well, thanks for the invite, but I'm gonna have to pass," he said slowly, inching away from her with difficulty. "It's a real nice set-up you got down here – out here? In here? – Anyway. I've got to get going."

"Don't be silly," she purred, following him even as he backed away. She moved with all the grace of a cat. "You should eat something before you go."

Dean made a face. "Yeah, lady, I may not know much about Tinkerbelle, but one of the first things my old man told me was not to take food from strangers. And if you're not strange, I don't know what the hell is."

He began to edge away from the table, looking for his weapons. He cursed himself for allowing whatever magic was at work here to lull him into a sense of security. 'A rookie mistake Sam'll never let me here the end of. 'The day Dean was kidnapped by faeries and punked out'; I can see it now…'

"Come now, Dean, don't be silly –"

"Can it, Lady Godiva," Dean snapped, sensing more of the creatures beginning to surround him, cutting off all possibility of his running away. "Your Jedi mind tricks aren't working anymore, so if you don't want to be in a world of hurt, you'll point me to exit."

This was going to be messy, especially without any kind of weapon. He probably still had a flask of holy water in his jacket pocket, but he didn't think it was going to do anything about faeries.

The woman's eyes narrowed, and in an instant her body lost the alluring quality to it. Her skin seemed to harden, taking on the same texture of the walls, and her curves turned into harder edges.
"I'm not an angel, boy," she told him coldly. "I'm allowed to use coercion to fulfil this covenant."

"Yeah, well, I didn't spread my legs for the archangels, so don't hold your breath about me doing it for you."

"That's too bad," she sighed. "I would have made it worth your while." She shrugged, a gesture that didn't seem to fit her primal aura. "But pain is also an excellent motivator, I've learned."

Before he could even blink, the faerie woman had darted forward and clutched his shoulder tightly, fitting her grasp over the part of his deltoid where Cas's mark had been.

Against all logic, pain exploded across his synapses.

Sam was having a little trouble making his brain work past the disbelief.

"You're the leprechaun," he intoned incredulously, levelling his crossbow at the newcomer.

The man he'd known as Wayne Whitaker Jr. smiled coldly as he cleaned off the blade he'd used to impale Brennan. Gone was the fanatical gleam in his eyes that had marked him as a UFO chaser, and he was watching Sam with calculating gravity.

"Indeed I am," he simpered. He inclined his head a Brennan's crumpled body. "Sorry about the mess, but your friend here went back on his deal."

"Well, you weren't very clear with him on the terms," Sam replied stiffly.

The leprechaun chuckled. "Now, now – no lawyering from you. He knew there was a price."

"Which was?"

"Once we come, we come to stay. It's how we've been doing things for millennia."

"I doubt you've been using UFO cover stories for abducting people for millennia," Sam said, trying to put together the pieces. If this thing had been around for as long as it said, if was probably the 'guy' that Aggie had sent him and Dean to find. However, Dean's disappearance notwithstanding, the creature – or creatures, as there were probably many of them – was causing mayhem.

Which meant Sam had to find a way to stop it.

"Maybe not always, but in this day and age, where even reality can be faked? It works out great."

"Hate to tell you, but your cover's pretty much blown now," Sam pointed out, his mind racing to come up with the next part of his plan. The book Brennan had used to try to banish it was far enough away that if Sam tried to make a break for it, he'd probably end up on the business end of the leprechaun's blade.

"Blown? To whom?" the leprechaun chortled. "Brennan's dead and your brother's cooling his heels back on the ranch." Off Sam's startled expression, he continued impishly, "Oh, yes, Sam, we know all about your particular situation. Nice disguises, by the way. Pagan handiwork, I take it?"

"How did you – ?"
"I knew there was something a little off about you two when you got here," Whitaker said. "You're both marked by something beyond this world, and that's before taking into account our friend Aggie's particular signature. Dean's a bit more obvious – it rolls off him in waves. But you?" Whitaker shook his head in mock affection. "You, I had to concentrate on. I thought it was just proximity to your brother, but that wasn't it."

"What are you talking about?"

The leprechaun laughed again. "We faeries folk are all about the energy. And the human soul gives off a certain perfume – one that changes based on where it's been. And judging from your particular bouquet? You've done some time." He shrugged. "Of course, I can't tell where or how long – someone's gone and covered it up. Probably for your own good."

Sam tightened his grip on the trigger of the bow.

He had had a suspicion there was a reason he couldn't remember his brief stint in Hell, but he had expected it to be his mind repressing the memory to protect him. Apparently whatever had brought him up had done it purposefully. It was yet another point in the 'Castiel column', because the angel knew what it had been like for Dean after he came back from Hell; it would be just his style to try to save Sam the pain. Or at least to save Dean from having to see Sam's pain.

"Now," Whitaker said, businesslike, "let's talk shop. Hunters don't really investigate UFO flaps – not since that whole Roswell thing, anyway, and let me tell you: someone did some seriously excellent PR for us on that one!" He grinned reminiscently, before continuing. "You wouldn't be here if someone didn't send you, and judging by the stench it was the Phrygian. We haven't heard a peep out of her for almost four thousand years, so you must be in the market for a big favor."

Sam did, but he had his priorities. "I want Dean back from wherever you took him."

The leprechaun smirked. "I doubt that's why you drove out to this little hick town, though. Let's talk about big brother later."

Sam pursed his lips to keep from replying angrily. Alienating the asshole leprechaun right now was probably not a good plan. He needed his help – and even if he didn't, he still wasn't quite sure how he was going to kill the thing if it decided not to be helpful.

"We heard you knew a way into Hell," Sam said at last, knowing that the faster he revealed why they had come to Elwood, the sooner he might be able to convince the leprechaun to return his brother to him. He refused to consider the idea that he wouldn't be able to.

"Which one?"

"What do you mean, 'which one'?"

"Smart boy like you should know there's more than one hell realm out there, boy," Whitaker chided. "Are we talking Norse, Buddhist, Abrahamic…?"

"The last one."

"And why do you need to get to that hell? There's not exactly a waiting list for folk who want to take a cruise in that direction," the leprechaun remarked. "So you're either looking for something…or someone."

"Our brother. Adam. He's down there."
"Well, that's rather anticlimactic," Whitaker snorted. "That's easy work – hardly something befitting my people. Go find one of your crossroads demons."

"Not an option. We were told you could do this," Sam said firmly, not wanting to go into detail about the many reasons a crossroads deal was a bad idea.

"And you were told correct. If I was so inclined and not completely bored by a task so routine, I could get him out for you. For a price, of course."

The matter of fact way he said threw Sam for a second. "How? He's locked in a box with the Devil."

Interest flicked in Whitaker's eyes, before he reminded him coyly, "Your devil, not mine."

"Maybe so, but I'm still finding it hard to believe that a faerie can do what angels can't."

"Angels," Whitaker scoffed. "Please. There's a reason you had to go to a pagan god to get your little body transplant, boy. What my kind does is real magic. Got a way of getting in back doors. And we'd be glad to help – but as I said, for a price. No such thing as a free lunch, and all that."

"And what's your price?" Sam asked.

"Leave town," the leprechaun said. "Right now. Just up and go and forget you ever came here – let us keep doing our thing and never come looking for us again. Pretend faeries are nothing more than stories in cute little Disney movies. You do that, we'll get Adam back for you."

"So basically you want carte-blanche to keep abducting people," Sam frowned.

"Oh, don't make it sound so terrible. The firstborns we take don't suffer – how could they? They get to be immortal and party in our realm for all time. Not a bad deal for them – especially the folks around here. Not many ever leave this dunghill. They'll end up poor and miserable in their middle age. We give 'em something better."

Sam shifted indecisively, and Whitaker took a step forward. He held out a hand.

"Well, Sam? What do you say?"

Sam narrowed his eyes at the leprechaun. "I'm still waiting for you to bring Dean back."

"He's already one of ours," Whitaker dismissed with a cold smile. "Meeting the boss and everything as we speak. He's part of the ones we've already taken, Sam. And like I said, it's not like he's suffering. Wouldn't you want your brother to be at peace?"

Sam tensed up, because he wanted nothing more but peace for Dean. He wanted his brother to never again have to deal with some great big scheme to destroy the world. He wanted him happy and safe and to never have to wake up to another day of screwed up reality. But he also knew that no deal was ever as good as it sounded. Even if that lesson hadn't been firmly burned into his own soul, he knew that Dean would find a way back from wherever he was right now and beat the shit out of him for agreeing.

It wasn't just about Dean, either. If he agreed to the leprechaun's offer, many other families would continue to be rent apart by the faeries presence. Along with finding the thing that had killed their mother, hadn't the whole point of his and Dean's upbringing been about making sure no one else ever went through what they had? Agreeing to the deal right now would completely invalidate everything that they had suffered through and fought for.
Losing Jess and Dad, Dean going to Hell, losing Adam and Cas –

There really was no other answer for Sam to give.

"I don't think you understand," Sam replied and fit his finger into the trigger of the crossbow. "You're bringing him back."

"Sorry, boy, but he's part of the price. Otherwise it wouldn't be a sacrifice, would it?"

"Guess I'll have to change your mind," Sam said, finally pulling the trigger on the crossbow. The bolt whizzed through the air and caught Whitaker in the right shoulder.

The leprechaun jerked in surprise.

"Silver! Painful," he spat, as smoke began to rise from the wound. Sam raised the crossbow again, fitting another bolt as he watched the leprechaun grab at the thing impaling him. With a quick jerk, Whitaker broke off the shaft and tossed it away, rounding on Sam. "Not a deal breaker, though."

Sam fired again.

This time he missed, and the leprechaun cloaked himself, disappearing from Sam's view. Tossing the crossbow aside to give himself more mobility, Sam unsheathed one of the silver knives he carried. Even if it wasn't going to stop the son of a bitch, it would still hurt him at least.

As he listened for the leprechaun, he began to inch towards the book. It seemed like the best option right now –

The air beside him moved, much the same way it did when an angel was appearing in the general vicinity only without the telltale flap of wings. Sam whirled around, jabbing towards where he thought the creature's torso would be. A vice-like grip stopped his blade, and although he couldn't see it, he could smell the leprechaun's breath on his face.

"So much for hunter reflexes," the leprechaun hissed in his ear. "That was a bad mistake, Sam. Let me show you why."

Sam felt an invisible hand on his head, and grasping, sharp fingertips dig through his hair and into the side of his face.

He lurched as images assaulted him from every direction, blotting out the real world. Invisible flames licked at his skin while a searing cold filled him up from the inside, the contrast creating a world of agony.

He couldn't hold back his scream.

It was like acid had been poured into him, filling up every empty space that had once been held together by an angel's grace. Prodding, clawing fingernails inched their way farther and farther within him, tearing him apart from the soul outward.

Dean jerked, trying to pull himself out of the faerie's grasp, but she held on with a determined grip. It was as though her palm was welded to his shoulder. The longer she touched his skin, the more pain he was in. It was almost like being on the rack, only not quite as bloody.
His senses blurred together and his vision swam with dark spots. He was going to pass out soon, and there was nothing he could do to stop it – or to stop those winged fucks from taking advantage of him in some way.

'Dean Winchester, Saved to World, Molested to Death by Faeries,' he thought through his exhaustion. But try as he might, he couldn't move.

He could taste blood in his mouth from where he was biting down to keep from screaming, and he could hear his heartbeat, thrumming a steady, relaxed beat.

Wait.

'Relaxed?'

He tried to tune out the scorching pain, focusing on the heartbeat. He could feel his own – inarguably racing in reaction to the agony the faerie's searching essence was instilling in him – but he could also hear that other rhythm.

Slow and peaceful, and somehow the most comforting sound that Dean had ever heard in his life.

He didn't know what it was or who it belonged to, but he grasped onto that feeling, holding tight. If his stay in Hell had taught him anything, it was that the only way to survive was to latch on to the least damaging pain he could and ride it out.

As he surrendered himself to that one, constant sound, he felt a jarring sensation, like a wall coming down.

The invisible force that was rending him open from the inside out appeared to hit somewhere they couldn't go. The woman let out a hiss of surprise and discomfort, jumping back. As Dean came back to himself, he saw that her palm was smoking where it had once rested on his shoulder.

"What's this?" she snarled in disbelief. "That should be gone!"

Confusion twisted within him, but Dean knew that if he didn't act fast, she would have time to recover herself. Whatever compulsion had paralyzed him before was gone, and although there was still remnants of the phantom pain from whatever the faerie bitch had done to him, his thoughts were clear again.

'Kinda wish I'd asked the crazy cat lady what kills these bastards,' he thought as he backed away from the woman and looked for some kind of weapon. He had no idea how he was going to get away from them or how to get back to the real world. 'Well, when in doubt, go for the old standbys.'

Those old standbys being silver and decapitation; he was fresh out of the former, what with his weapons having been commandeered, but he might be able to pull off the latter.

He moved quickly, seizing the nearest dishes from the table and shattered them against the edge. The shards in his hand were small, but sharp – not the most ideal weapon, but he had once beheaded a vampire with a box cutter. He hoped this wouldn't be any different.

And then they were on him – coming from many different directions, shrieking and hissing and laughing as they attacked him, and the woman disappeared into the myriad of many bodies. Dean lashed out automatically, trying to fight off the barrage of faeries.

It was harder than usual to fight off a hoard of assailants; he decided to blame that on his new body rather than the numbers, just to pander to his pride. Every time he landed a blow on one or slashed
through an outstretched limb, another creature took its place.

Dean couldn't think, couldn't worry if his body was about to give out. He ducked and dodged, executing sloppy yet forceful moves that made his opponents yell in anger and frustration. Not pain, though. It seemed like there was nothing here that could hurt them, and yet Dean could feel himself bleeding as nails like talons dug into his flesh.

He managed to get through the throng of bodies, only to find himself in a dead-end.

His glass weapons were knocked from his hands and something shoved him up against the mossy wall of the hallway.

An unearthly calm settled over the area, and Dean continued to struggle against the faceless faerie holding him back. The crowd cleared and the faerie woman was coming toward him again, all slink and seduction, but with a definite air of pissed-off anger.

One of his hands was being held close enough to the pocket of his jacket that he could dig it inside, wondering if he might not have salt or maybe grab the holy water he knew he had. It wasn't much, but he'd at least get one last move in before he inevitably died – or worse. Because there were things worse than death.

His fingers closed around a rectangular metal shape, and Dean's eyes widened. His lighter.

He might be able to make a distraction and make a run for it, if only he could…

"Why are you struggling, Dean?" the woman asked him, as though she was really curious to know the answer. "You know how this is going to end. And as admirable as your bravery is, it won't do you any good."

"Makes me feel better," he grunted, finally managing to get his lighter out. He tried to angle his hands toward the wall, figuring if it went up in smoke the creature holding onto him might let go –

He flicked the lighter to life.

"What are you – ?" the fat faerie asked, shifting as he felt Dean move. The lighter caught against the moss, and Dean could smell burning – and then the faerie let out a shriek and released him.

Dean moved away, surprised that that had worked – and then felt his jaw drop.

The fat faerie must have touched the fire, because he was burning, literally. Flames raced up his skin and across his body, encompassing him until he disappeared into a shrieking wisp of smoke. The effect was not unlike salting and burning a spirit's body.

The other faeries let out shrieks of dismay and agony, and Dean glanced down at his lighter as he registered this new information.

'Faeries are flammable. Good to know.'

Even the faerie woman had stopped and was staring at him with wide eyes, obviously having not expected this development.

"Here's the deal," Dean said, gripping the lighter threateningly. "You're going to let me back to the real world. Or I'm going to torch this place so badly not even clapping is going to bring it back, hear me?"
The woman's eyes narrowed. "You think we can't stop you before you try?"

"I'm thinking I can take out enough of you before you do. And sweetheart, you're the first one I'm going for. Cutting off the head of the snake and all."

Her expression remained fixed, but he could see a glimmer of wariness in her eyes.

"I thought you wanted our help, Dean? Is that not why you came here? To try to save your brother? Did you think you wouldn't have to pay a price for that?"

Dean paused for a moment, letting that sink in. "What do you mean?"

"It's the way it had always been, Dean Winchester. You are the Given Sacrifice," the woman said. "Agdistis sent you here because she knew what we could do – and she knew what you were willing to give. If you want us to bring Adam up from his cage, the price is you. I did not lie when I said Sam would find a way to return Adam. I just neglected to mention that it was your sacrifice which would allow him to do so."

There was a hollow feeling in the pit of Dean's stomach. He'd known all along that catch would be something like this. And he knew that he was inclined to make this sacrifice, too. Except…

"And Cas? Can you find him?"

"We do not meddle in the affairs of angels," the woman said stiffly. "And even if we did, the angel that rescued you from that hell is no more. Surely you feel that? His grace is gone."

"No," Dean insisted. He thought about the strange, calm heart-beat he had heard and the way the woman had recoiled. "He's still alive. I know it. Somewhere, he's alive."

"Even if he were, why should it matter? He is not part of the agreement we are offering."

"Then I'm not taking it," Dean growled. "It's bringing Adam up and finding Cas, or it's nothing."

"Then I suppose it's nothing," the woman retorted. "The innocent boy will continue to rot in the Pit. And you may keep that on your conscience. There's the way out." She pointed at a doorway, made up of stone and vine.

"What the hell makes me so important to you freaks, anyhow?"

The woman snorted. "Are you joking? Dean Winchester, Vessel of the Jealous God's Sword? Do you realize just how much bargaining power there is in that, even to us fair folk?"

"Hate to break it to you, but Michael's on the bench. He won't be coming off it any time soon."

"Not in your lifetime, maybe. But the end of all things will come eventually," the woman said. "And not just the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse. This planet – the earth around us – will shudder and die, and with it all of us. Everything." A look of extreme sadness flickered on her face. "Think of watching your brother die, Dean. And magnify that by billions. And that is what we will experience when the end comes."

"And what exactly am I supposed to do about that? I'll be dead and gone."

"Only if you leave," she told him beseechingly. "If you remain here, you will be immortal. You'll be at peace, and by dint of your sacrifice, so will your loved ones. They will live their lives and then pass to the next world as they are meant to. Isn't that what you want?"
Dean hesitated, for a moment unsure. He glanced from the door to the woman, and then asked. "Would you have to collect now?"

She cocked her head to one side. "What do you mean?"

"Say I said yes – would I have to stay here now or would I get a period of grace?"

The woman smirked. "We are not Crossroads Demons, boy. If you make the sacrifice, you do so immediately. But the results would be immediate too. We would pull Adam from Hell right away."

"But you couldn't find Cas."

"No. He is gone, and I can't even sense where."

"Then I'm going to have to say 'no'," Dean said heavily, and headed toward the stone doorway. "We'll find another way."

"Know that you've shed blood in the realm of faeries, Dean Winchester," he heard the woman's voice echo as he headed for the door. "Even as we send you back, this is not the last time you will see us. You're marked."

"Get in line behind the demons, angels and hunters already on my ass," Dean muttered to himself.

*The pain was unlike anything Sam had ever experience – the kind of agony that couldn't be understood without experiencing it firsthand. The fire was as sharp as a knife, slicing across flayed nerves and veins, scraping and sliding against his skin, brutal and loving at the same time –* 

Lucifer was still within him, but he could also see the bastard's face, the same face he had seen before he said 'yes'. He smiled beatifically at Sam, and another wave of pain rolled over him.

"You have no one to blame but yourself, Sammy," the Devil told him with a smile that was anything but kind. "You could have stopped all of this – but you're so selfish. Your entire family's so selfish."

He chuckled. "Good thing we have some time to cure you of that, huh?"

And Sam was somewhere long past pain and screaming, his throat raw like it was lined with broken glass, and he could taste blood and bile and maybe even brain matter from the torture that Lucifer was putting him through. He would shred him and then build him back up again, and only to tear him apart cell by cell.

*It went on for hours…days…years…*

Sam wasn't the only one there. He was aware of Michael, both the towering pyre of fire and the creature wearing his brother's face. Adam was only alone when the archangels decided that Sam's torture wasn't enough – that he wasn't being punished enough by being eviscerated and flayed by his own fingers.

*At those times, they forced Adam to remain still as Sam took him apart.*

*He could taste the blood, warm and wet and rich, just the same way the demon blood had been on his tongue, but with a different aftertaste. Perhaps the taste of an archangel's power lingered in it. Sam was sick and his stomach heaved in response, in disgust and in hunger that wasn't his.*
'Sam, please...' Michael made Adam beg, and God help him, Sam tried.

He tried to fight the archangel's influence, tried to summon up some of that strength that he had found when the Devil was crushing Dean's face in in that damned graveyard. And sometimes he even managed it.

Ten minutes.

Five minutes.

Two minutes.

It was getting harder and harder to fight the Devil, and Sam was getting more and more weary. He clung to those moments where he wasn't being torn apart by the one who shared his body, when he wasn't ripping into Adam, but they were so few and far between.

There was a reason for this. There had to be a reason, but he was starting to forget.

It had been years –

The leprechaun's grip on him faltered, and Sam could distantly hear the familiar trill of his blackberry. "Oh-Ho! So that's where you were. And you got out, but baby brother didn't. Well, you must feel extraordinary about that."

Sam let out a wordless yell and shoved the leprechaun away from him, panting harshly. The Hell memories continued to come at him, and he could feel tears inching down his cheeks.

Adam's face remained in his mind, and he felt the urge to vomit. He had been freed and Adam had been left behind. He had been there at least ten years – but by now, Adam would be the only one there. The only one for Lucifer and Michael to torture.

The phone continued to ring.

Sam dug into his coat, not to answer it, but to find another weapon. He knew he had another knife in his pocket, but his thoughts were so scattered right now, he couldn't remember which pocket. He cursed mentally as his fingers brushed the spare salt rounds he always kept there, but then his wits kicked in again.

His eyes darted to the book across the room, and he knew he could send the leprechaun back if he could get to the book. Then he would find Dean, because there was no way he was losing anymore family, faeries or not.

"Come on, lad, you've already gotten in your best shot," Whitaker told him with mocking sympathy, following Sam's gaze. "Why not just cut your losses and get out of here with your life intact?"

"Maybe you're right," Sam panted, disliking the raw quality to his voice. Reliving his memories had obviously been more vocal than he realized. He fingered the salt-round in one pocket and then finally found his knife. "So do me a favor, and count this."

He hauled out his chosen weapons and slit the round open with his knife, spilling salt all across the floor.

The leprechaun's face fell, twisting with horror. "Oh, no."

He was already going to his knees to count the grains of salt as Sam walked over him, bone weary.
"Why the hell didn't I do that earlier?"

He grabbed the book and turned it around, squinting at the unfamiliar script as the sounds of the faerie's counting filled the watch shop.

"One…two…ass…"

It took Sam a few minutes to find the right passage – he had very little experience with any of the Gaelic languages, although he knew enough of the basics to at least have a passable pronunciation. Not for the first time was he glad that Bobby had drilled some rudimentary language skills into him and Dean.

" – air ais gu'n àite-breith –"

The leprechaun seethed, but couldn't do anything, "Damn it."

" – cum sabhailt aar naoidhein gun am breith, agus cum dìinte an geata uamhasach seo!"

There was a blast of white light, and when it cleared, Sam was the only one left in the work shop, except for Brennan's corpse.

He inhaled a shaky breath, momentarily unsure of what to do, before the phone began to ring again.

He dug into the pocket of his jeans, expecting to see Bobby's number flash before him. It would be a welcome sight, because then they could figure out how they were supposed to get Dean back now that Sam had just closed the door to Faerieland.

The number, however, was unfamiliar.

"Hello?" Sam rasped.

"Sammy?"

Relief and disbelief washed over him at the sound of Dean's voice – even though it was the female one he had only just gotten used to, it still filled him with a sense of comfort. "Dean?"

"Yeah, it's me – Listen Sam, it's not UFO's, it's –"

"Faeries, I know –"

"How do you know?"

"Because I just faced off with a leprechaun, that's how," Sam retorted. "I managed to find a spell to close the doors on the place but – Dean, I thought you were stuck there, how did you…how did you get back?"

There was a pause on the other side. "They let me go."

"They…what?"

"Long story. I just…there was this deal they wanted me to take –" For a second, the bottom dropped out of Sam's stomach. He waited for Dean to tell him he had made yet another sacrifice for their family, " – but I couldn't. Not this time. I wasn't willing, so they let me go."

Sam swallowed, his knees suddenly feeling weak in the aftermath of the night's revelations. "Just…just like that?"
"Yeah, well, the usual threats…'you haven't seen the last of me', 'a pox be on both your houses'," Dean was trying to sound offhand and cheerful, but Sam could sense that he wasn't exactly relieved at the outcome. "No big."

"Not that I'm not relieved," Sam said after a moment. "But why didn't you take it?"

There was a pause, and then a heavy sigh.

"Terms weren't good enough," Dean told him, honesty fuelling his words.

Sam gritted his teeth. "So if they'd been good enough…"

"Think you know the answer to that, Sammy."

"Damn it, Dean, are you serious?"

"It doesn't matter," Dean told him. "The point is, this angle didn't work. We'll try another one."

Sam decided to let it go, for now. They had more pressing issues to worry about. "Well, we'd better do it fast. We have to find a way to help Adam."

"Way to state the obvious – "

"No, you don't get it," Sam interrupted. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. "That…the leprechaun. Before I managed to shut the doors on the faeries, he…he made me remember. I remember Hell, Dean."

There was silence on the other end of the phone, and then an exhaled curse.

"I was there longer than a day," Sam continued, knowing that every word was probably like a searing iron on his brother's already overburdened conscience. "It felt like…years. A decade, maybe."

"I think the closer you get to the Pit, the more time passes," Dean theorized, his voice carefully neutral. "Shit. We're definitely going to have to find Cas, and soon, if we're going to make any headway."

"But Dean, we have no idea –"

"Cas is still alive." The tone of voice dared Sam to argue with him, and he didn't take the challenge.

"How do you know?"

"I…I just know, okay?"

"…Okay."

"So bring that piece of shit car of yours and come get me so we can get the hell out of here," Dean ordered. "If these faerie fuckers can find a backdoor into Hell, I'm willing to bet there are others who can. And that they can find us our missing angel." There was a pause, and then he added, more determined than before. "We're going to get them back, Sam. Both of them."
"What do you want me to say, boy? Sometimes things just go sideways," Bobby Singer grumbled into the phone. "You should know that better than anyone."

He rolled his eyes at the angry response on the other end, too used to the Winchester brand of dealing with frustration to take much of it to heart. The only thing different in this case was that the spew of vitriol being sent his way was not usually spoken in a woman's lighter tones.

Although Bobby had known exactly what kind of help Agdistis would be able to give the boys, he was still surprised that they had taken her up on her offer – and without knowing the entire story, either. But then, the Phrygian goddess had always known how to spin an argument. It was part of the reason he had ended up saving her life all those years ago…

He blinked rapidly, for a moment lost in memories while Dean's annoyed tirade washed over him. It seemed to be the usual complaints mixed in with what he and Sam were planning on doing next, and so he interrupted before the poor kid could work himself up to an actual rage.

"You done yet?" he demanded, adjusting his hold on cordless phone. "'Cause if you are, and you're headed down in that general direction anyway, I've got someone who might be able to help –” A brief pause, "– Yes, he's human this time."

After relating the information to the boys in an offhand sort of code, Bobby hung up.
Automatically, he traipsed to the back window in his kitchen and glanced outside. He half-expected to see a group of discontent hunters hanging out beyond the property line, waiting for the Winchesters to return or for Bobby to give them up. They'd likely be loitering on his porch if Bobby hadn't already had to shoot one dumb idiot that tried to get fresh on his land. Since then, the rest of them kept their distance, but he could sense that they were there.

It was lucky they were deterred with something as simple as a shotgun, a man's right to his land and Bobby's own good name, because he knew there were others who didn't care for such boundaries. Since finding out about the latest madness to do with the boys, he'd had to fortify the entire main floor of the house to discourage other visitors. Sigils and several Keys of Solomon were painted over the entryways and by the windows, and he'd stocked up on a decade's worth of salt and holy water thanks to a quick phone call to Sherriff Mills.

'Woman's a force,' he thought with gruff admiration.

His gaze shifted to the Impala, which was bent and misshapen beneath an old tarp. Luckily the car didn't seem as badly destroyed as it had been when it had been run off the highway by an eighteen wheeler, but Bobby knew there would be quite a bit of work needed before she was running again. Dean would want to do it himself, he knew, but judging by the pile of trouble the boys were in, Bobby wasn't sure if they would be getting back to her any time soon.

He was just contemplating the merits of at least starting on the minor problems when there was a sudden explosion of sound.

The entire house abruptly shook so violently that Bobby was thrown to the ground. A balloon of dust and debris flew into the kitchen from the front hallway, forcing him to shield his face for a moment. Once the world settled itself, Bobby crept to his feet, grabbing a knife and his spare hunting rifle from where it rested beneath the bench in the kitchen.

Whatever he was expecting to see, it wasn't the front grill of a semi taking up space where is front door used to be.

"Bobby," a familiar female voice cooed from behind him, and he whirled around to point his gun at the dark-haired, round-faced young woman. She looked different from the last time he had seen her – hair hanging in greasy ranks and skin marred by bruises and dirt. But her eyes were still the cold, hateful black of a demon's. "How's the family?"

She waved a hand and both his weapons went flying in opposite directions.

"Meg," he grunted. He felt rage boil up within him at the sight of the creature responsible for Ellen and Jo Harvelle's deaths.

"In the flesh, baby – well, sort of," she beamed. "Gotta say, old man, I'm surprised you remember – the last time I saw you, you put a beauty of a maggot hole in your belly. Shame it didn't take." She wandered over lazily and patted the front end of the truck, which had begun to smoke under its hood. "Sorry about having to make an entrance, but you're so good at putting those pesky traps down, I just had to make my own door. Hope I didn't mess up your bachelor hunter feng-shui, but I did hear from a reliable source that Mack trucks just get it done."

"Dean was right. You do like to hear yourself talk."

"That actually brings me to why I'm here," she told him, adopting a mock-serious expression. "I know how close you are to our boys. I figure by the fan club you have surrounding your place twenty-four seven, you probably know where they are." Of Bobby's surreptitious glance toward the
main road, she giggled. "Oh, don't worry, none of them are going to be coming to check on you any time soon, they've got their hands full right now. It's just you and me, old man."

"Lucky me," Bobby growled. "You know I ain't gonna tell you squat, right? So your lightshow was for nothing."

"Wouldn't say that. It was fun," Meg said, sauntering up to him. In a move he didn't see, her hand shot forward and she grabbed him by the throat. Any pretence of lightheartedness was abruptly gone. "Listen up, meatsack. You're going to tell me where Sammy and Dean-o are, or I'm going to get creative and turn this place into a Jackson Pollack – starring your entrails."

"What? Foreplay's over already?" Bobby choked out. "Don't you usually like to poke at your food?"

Meg narrowed her eyes.

"You really want to test me, Bobby?" she hissed. "Cause I'm sure your boy told you all about Alistair. Maybe he also told you that I was teacher's pet for a lot longer than he was. I can make this last months if I have to. Or you could save yourself the pain, tell me what I want to know, and I'll kill you really quick. Either way you're dying. And if everything I've heard along the grapevine is right, I'll be seeing you downstairs where we can start all over again. If you don't piss me off, maybe I'll even go easy on you during the second round."

Bobby ignored the spike of fear that shot through his body, and forced himself to remain calm. He might not be able to withstand thirty years of torture the way Dean had, but the least he could do was keep quiet long enough to buy the boys some time. Maybe he'd even die first.

"Don't think you will," he managed weakly. "Way I hear, there's a new king of the playground down there. Somethin' tell me you're not it. So do your worst."

Meg let out a pleased chuckle and threw Bobby across the room. He landed painfully on top of an end table full of books, which splintered beneath his weight.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd say that," Meg purred, clapping her hands together in anticipation. She bent down as she came toward him, reaching for the knife he had dropped earlier. "Any preference on where we start? I do love audience participation…"

"You can start by kindly buggering off," a smooth, accented voice broke in.

Suddenly, Meg was gone and Bobby found himself able to move again. A shatter of glass and the crumble of broken drywall drew his attention, and he stared over at the gaping hole in the wall that had once been the window looking into his backyard.

Someone was standing in front of it, the bright light from outside obscuring the figure beyond the few rudimentary features Bobby could make out – tall, male and fair-haired. Beyond him, Bobby could just make out Meg, struggling to her feet.

"Do us a favor and skitter back into the slime infested pit you crawled out of," the newcomer ordered in a bored tone. "Or you could try to come back in here. I haven't smote a demon in weeks, I'm beginning to get jittery."

"This isn't over," Meg's voice snapped faintly. "I'll be back."

"Please, darling, that line was old when the Styrian Oak first used it, and you don't have even half of his charming personality."
There was another pause, and then the newcomer turned around to face Bobby. He moved back into the shadows of the house, and the hunter could now make out the chiseled features and laugh-lines around the man's eyes, which belied the cool detachment in his gaze.

"Why did you let her go?" Bobby barked, the question meant to buy him time to find a weapon. He hauled himself painfully off the floor.

"Much as I'd love to have a demon bonfire and roast some marshmallows right about now, I'm not exactly in the position to do so," the stranger said. "And on that note, you need to leave here sooner rather than later."

"Who the hell are you to make with the orders?" Bobby growled. "Demon?"

"Quite the opposite, in fact," the guy replied in the kind of haughty tone that Bobby's working-class background took an instant dislike to. Something rippled in the dust, and for a moment Bobby imagined he could see two gigantic shadows in the form of wings spread across the walls of his living room. "Try the other direction."

Well, now the detached look in his eyes made sense. "You're an angel."

"Balthazar," the guy said brusquely. "I fought beside Castiel. We were part of the same garrison."

"Right," Bobby raised an eyebrow. "Well, if you ran her off 'cause you're fixin' to interrogate me for the wing brigade, I'll tell you what I told her --"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, old man. If that's what I wanted, you'd have been up enjoying Heaven's hospitality the past few weeks," the angel snorted. "I've been fighting for the Rebel Alliance since before your tall, gangling not-son pulled the martyr act to end all martyr acts."

Bobby blinked. "So...you mean, you're not working for Raphael?"

"Power shifts in Heaven never come easily," Balthazar shrugged. "In effect, humans didn't invent politics. Raphael's currently leading a rather bloody purge of the ranks – anyone who might think differently from him is being hunted up and sent to seek Revelation. Those who continue to refuse..."

Balthazar shrugged in a way that made it clear exactly what happened to them.

"So you're telling me there are more of you?"

"Castiel was not the only angel who believed the Apocalypse shouldn't have been allowed to happen – of course no one bothered to bring the issue up with Michael. Big brother was a bit of an arse, and if you didn't agree with him – well, let's just say Rafe had to get his ideas from someone."

"How come this is the first I'm hearin' of this? We coulda used extra firepower when the End of the World was happening!"

"And be cut off from the Host the same way Cassy was? Not likely," Balthazar snorted "Most of us have been pretending to be dead the past few weeks."

"How does an angel play dead? Don't y'all have some kind of giant hive-mind or somethin'?" Bobby demanded.

"Funny thing about angels – in case you haven't noticed, we're easy to fool," Balthazar told him seriously. "Comes from millennia of thinking in terms of black and white. Basically, if we see
evidence that one of our own has shuffled off, we don't really look beyond that – after all, why the blazes would an angel want to leave the Host? Unless it was to fall...or fall, if you get my meaning. It's how Gabriel did it."

"Not too sentimental, are you?" Bobby asked gruffly. After a moment, he asked, "That mean you could tell if Castiel were...?"

"I haven't been able to sense his grace anywhere for almost two mortal weeks now," Balthazar confessed, a frustrated wrinkle appearing in his forehead. "It's either no longer in existence – or wherever it is, it's cloaked expertly."

Bobby went quiet, surprised at the amount of grief he felt at that revelation. He may not have been as close to Castiel as Dean and Sam had been, but the rumpled angel had grown on him. Not least of all because of his single-minded determination to keep the two people who mattered most to Bobby safe.

Rather than dwell on how he was going to tell Dean what the angel had said, he covered up his momentary lapse with a question. "So what are you doing here now? Not that I'm not thankful you stepped in."

"Cassy had a great respect for Daddy's creation – specifically the Winchesters and you," Balthazar shrugged. "He asked me to keep a look out for you lot if anything should happen to him. Appealed to my better nature, as it were – I must have suffered some form of temporary insanity, because I said yes. So here I am – seeing as how I can't find the other two pests, I've been watching out for you."

"Well, thanks and all, but I don't need no angelic nanny. You can go back to playin' dead."

"Would if I could, darling, but unfortunately for you, my word happens to be one of the only things about me that's good," Balthazar grinned. "Besides, I've been helping you out more than you know before today. Some of your hunter friends love those computers you humans rely on so much. Do you have any idea how hard it is to disrupt an electrical signal through a house that's been warded to high heaven?"

Bobby suddenly remembered something, and started for the door. "The other hunters – Meg said – !"

"I'm afraid I can't let you go check in on them," Balthazar said, reaching for him. "Your walls have been breached, and if demons can now enter your home, soon the angels will as well. I'm surprised they haven't cornered you yet. We've got to mosey, I'm afraid."

And before Bobby could protest, he felt two fingers on his forehead and everything went dark.

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6x03 The Escapist

Chapter Summary

The brothers speak to someone who might be able to help them get to Adam, and later Dean and Sam are reunited with a changed Castiel. Afterward, they confront a fallen Castiel, and Dean deals with those pesky little things called "feelings".

Three

Hollett Motor Lodge
Jersey City, New Jersey
Friday 28 May 2010

"Damn it, Dean! Would you cover those up?!!"

Sam froze on his way out of the bathroom, clapping his hands over his eyes with the same force as he might have if an angel was about to go supernova in front of him. He tried desperately to purge the image of shapely breasts and narrow hips from his mind by telling himself over and over that they belonged to his brother.

"Take a chill-pill, Sammy, I forgot," Dean's voice said from several feet away, his tone laced with irritation.

Sam could hear him moving around, and then the sound of fabric being pulled taught over skin. Peeking out cautiously with one eye, he saw that Dean was at least wearing a bra now.

Sam glared. "You're always 'forgetting'. You totally do it on purpose."

"Right, because I want my little brother ogling my tits," Dean deadpanned, and then made a face. "Jesus, that sounds so freakin' wrong."

"Exactly!" Sam agreed vehemently. "So cover up!"
"Hey, give me a break – living as a dude all my life don't make me a modest person," Dean shot back as he pulled on a long sleeved shirt. "And let's not pretend you're all innocent in this – we both know how much time you spend in the shower lately. I haven't had any hot water in a week."

"It's – it's not like that!" Sam objected defensively, even though he knew his protests were probably futile. "It takes longer to wash all this hair – and people would start giving us funny looks if I smelled like a guy, okay?"

"And that's why I know you were always meant to be a girl," Dean rolled his eyes and slipped his .45 and the demon killing knife into loose-fitting jeans. 'I'm gonna go check out. Meet you by the Plastiar in ten, 'sis'."

The motel door closed behind him, while Sam grumbled out an annoyed, "Dick" and began to check around the room to make sure they hadn't left any traces of themselves behind.

It was going on a week since they had woken up to their transformed bodies, and coping with the change was turning out to be a lot harder than Sam had thought it would be.

Once he had made a grudging peace with what had happened to them, Sam had expected certain differences – especially when it came to the physical. Although the brothers were still relatively strong for women their height and build, there was a significant difference to how they had been before. Sam was sure he had the same proportional muscle mass as he had had before the change, but he was over half a foot shorter now. He didn't relish the idea of going toe-to-toe with an angry vampire in this body.

Since prying the information about Dean's near assault back in Elwood, Sam had been reading up on a few different martial arts styles geared towards female fighters. He was particularly interested in the aspects of KravMaga and Aikido which seemed more defensive in nature and less reliant on the brute force the brothers had been building up since Dad started putting them through his own brand of Marine training as kids.

'Of course, convincing Dean when I finally get around to it is going to be a party,' Sam thought, taking a wet towel to mop up the salt lines he had laid down the night before. 'Anything to do with our spontaneous genderswap is guaranteed to get his hackles up.'

Privately, Sam understood. Their lives had been monumentally screwed up in so many different ways since childhood that Dean naturally clung to the few constants: his bond with Sam, the Impala and hunting were some of the first to come to mind. But on a more basic level, Dean – and even Sam – had always been able to rely on their bodies to do exactly what was expected.

Suddenly their strength was curtailed and even their behaviour was being affected. Sam had noticed in the past week that he didn't have the same endurance in some areas. Whereas before going an entire day without food was just something to be waited out, now Sam found himself becoming snappish and angry if he didn't eat something every three hours. And as much as his brother needled him for being a wuss, Dean was even worse.

On top of the bad mood that resulted from craving food at inopportune times, Dean's bad humour was magnified by the need for frequent stops along the way, usually to find a bathroom. Apparently the change had shrunk their bladders, which was, in and of itself, awkward as hell. Apparently television didn't lie about women liking to carry on conversations in the washroom, whether it was a truck stop in Iowa or in a mall.

Although, granted, Dean's expression of horror at some of the things women did talk about was kind of comical.
But it wasn't just the physical changes. There were emotional differences as well. Sam had noticed that Dean's already short temper had become more volatile, as though he was unable to tamp down what he was feeling the way he usually did. Sam himself was having problems keeping his feelings in check. All his life he had been expected to keep things bottled up, either by Dad telling him to 'man up' or Dean teasing him about being a 'sissy'. He'd gotten better at it over the years – maybe not to the same militant emotional repression that Dean tried for, but enough that his feelings didn't show on his face.

Suddenly, something which had been a minor annoyance in the past seemed insurmountably difficult.

It wasn't all bad, he was forced to admit. Sam found he was better able to focus on more than one thing at a time; he had always been mentally flexible, but he felt like the change had given him some kind of different dimension of thinking. Aggie hadn't lied when she said that she would change the way his brain operated. He found himself thinking about things from different angles or in more abstract ways. It was weirdly fascinating.

Of course, the flipside to that was that Sam felt like he could never "turn off" his brain. Whereas before, his thoughts of guilt and resentment had eventually lulled him into fitful sleep, now he couldn't escape the constant machinations of his mind.

'Which now include Hell, apparently,' Sam thought, making a face.

In addition to Sam and Dean's newfound 'girl trouble', there was the aftermath of their run-in with the faeries to contend with. Beyond Sam's confession to Dean that he now remembered Hell – and exactly what he and Adam had experienced – the brothers hadn't spoken about it. Part of Sam was glad for that, as he didn't particularly want to relive those memories more than he had to, but the other part wished for some kind of reassurance.

Dean had been to Hell. If anyone could understand what that was like, it was him.

But Dean had been more closed-lipped than usual since they left Elwood. He refused to go into details about why he had managed to escape the faerie realm. Sam had even tried to get the story out of him by jokingly asking if Dean had "serviced Oberon, King of the Faeries", but Dean remained steadfast in his silence. It made Sam sure that something had happened there that Dean knew he wasn't going to like if he found out.

"Dude, when has keeping secrets ever worked out? For either of us?" he had tried to argue during a quick stop at a gas station in Akron.

"It's not a secret, Sammy, I just don't want to talk about it," Dean retorted. "It doesn't have anything to do with us right now anyway. We've got people to find."

And that right there was the crux of it. Dean's determination to find Castiel had doubled since the run in with the faeries. He'd even raised the possibility of finding a witch who could scry for him or create a locator spell of some sort. Considering Dean's hatred for witches, the whole situation was troubling. For the first time, Sam was starting to wonder exactly what the nature of Dean and Castiel's relationship had been.

He'd always known there was a dimension to their friendship that he would never understand – Castiel had personally hauled his brother out of Hell, after all – but the rest of the relationship made perfect sense to Sam. Dean had never had a friend in his life, and Castiel's appearance on the scene had been unexpected yet welcome.
Somewhere along the line, Castiel had joined Sam and Bobby in the category of people Dean cared about. It was a good thing, because it sort of weaned Dean away from directing all of his affection and protectiveness toward Sam. But there was still this nagging suspicion that Sam had been nursing since Dean told him he knew Castiel was alive. He had said it with the same adamant certainty he had always maintained when they were searching the country for Dad, like if it wasn't true he might just break.

There was a suspicion trying to work itself out in his head, but Sam wasn't sure if he was ready to sit down and actually think it through.

He shook his head, hoping to derail those thoughts before he started to get too involved in it. 'Maybe Dean's right. This girl-brain is doing weird things to me. I'm never this interested in Dean's social life.…or lack thereof.'

He left the motel room and crossed the mostly empty parking lot to where Dean was leaning against the car with a long-suffering expression. He had his arms crossed angrily over his chest and was scowling.

At Sam's raised eyebrow, he growled, "If one more person asks me if I'm cold, I'm gonna full-on Hulk out."

Sam couldn't help grinning. "You could just wear a hoodie in the mornings."

"Do I look like a little emo bitch?" Sam opened his mouth and Dean waringly shoved a finger in his direction. "Don't."

Sam shrugged and heaved himself into the passenger seat.

Dean had been raring to go all morning, intent on tearing Aggie a new one over practically giving them to the faeries. They had been trying to reach her by phone since Elwood, but apparently she wasn't listed and Bobby hadn't provided a number.

Sam was wary of the whole thing. He had read up on Agdistis – the androgynous Phrygian goddess that even Greek and Roman gods had feared due to her wild and uncontrolled nature. Considering her specific brand of magic, he didn't really want to piss her off or give her reason to keep them in their new bodies. Not to mention, she was the only pagan god he'd ever met who hadn't tried to kill or eat them.

Or, well, all of them.

When you were being hunted by the combined forces of Heaven, Hell and hunters, it didn't pay to alienate potential allies.

Instead of pointing this out to Dean, who was less than logical on his best day, Sam had made a case for checking up on Bobby's latest tip before going after Aggie. At least the guy might give them enough of a lead to distract Dean.

The drive from their motel to NYU should have taken them ten minutes, but there was an accident just after the Holland Tunnel that had them snarled in traffic for at least forty-five. During that time, Dean gravitated between swearing up a storm and trying to contact Bobby, who wasn't answering his phone for some reason.

"You shouldn't be on your cellphone while you're driving," Sam pointed out the third time that Dean hung up in frustration.
Dean shot him a dirty look. "Yes, mother."

"Just saying – besides, Bobby's probably busy. Seeing as how he's still trying to get his soul back and all."

Dean shifted uncomfortably, and Sam could sympathize.

Neither of them mentioned the fact that if they hadn't been looking for a potentially dead angel and trying to free the last of their family from Hell, they would be hunkered down at Bobby's place looking for a way to find his soul.

Dean coughed, trying to cover up that awkward, guilty moment. "So who is this guy we're going to see, anyway?"

"Braddock Yong – Professor of Ancient Languages," Sam read the information off of the browser on his phone. He had looked it up the day before, but kept the data stored because Dean had the memory retention of a goldfish unless it was something he was interest in. "He mostly teaches Latin and Ancient Greek, but he also runs a few courses about ancient mythologies. It says here, he focuses on monomythology."

"Which means what, for those of us who don't have a degree in 'Nerd'?" Dean deadpanned, and then before Sam could reply, suddenly yelled, "Christ, move it! He's letting you go, moron!" He glowered over at Sam. "Would it have killed them to have built this damn thing wider?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Right, because obviously when they built this tunnel, they should have been thinking about your busy schedule…"

"It's all I'm sayin'…"

"Hey, I told you the last time we were here that you should avoid the tunnels at all costs –"

"Well, excuse me for thinking we might luck out for once," Dean snapped, pounding the steering wheel.

"Anyway," Sam trailed off, returning his attention to his phone. "Monomythology is a theme in literature. It has to do with the hero's journey."

Dean snorted. "What, like Batman?"

"Well…" Sam trailed off, wondering if he should go into the many ways in which the study of monomythology actually could apply to Batman. He decided against it, knowing Dean's patience was already being tested by the traffic. "Sort of. There was this guy in the late 1940's, Joseph Campbell –"

" – any relation to us?"

"At this point? I wouldn't be surprised," Sam mused. "Anyhow, he wrote this book about how every major story from around the world follows a specific pattern. It basically argued that every hero-story has certain stages or structures that it shares with every other hero story across the world."

Dean sent him a bemused look. "Which has what to do with us trying to jailbreak Hell?"

"Well, I'm not the expert, but a lot of hero myths have to do with the protagonist travelling to the underworld," Sam said, frowning in thought. "I figure that's the angle this Yong guy would be working. I was actually thinking of sitting down with a few of the more famous examples of stories
about the underworld, in case there are any clues – but it’d take a lot of time. There are at least thirty I can think of off the top of my head. Hopefully this guy will be able to give me a clue about where to start."

"Well, that’s something at least," Dean grunted after a second. "I still think we should take a look at the Horsemen’s rings again. We know for sure that they open the Cage."

"Yeah, but they also have the side effect of letting out Lucifer and Michael and starting everything up again," Sam reminded him. "And Michael might just be enough of a dick to use Adam as leverage to get you to say ‘yes’ this time around."

"Yeah, screw that," Dean muttered, his fingers gripping the steering wheel a little tighter.

The Charger crawled slowly out of the tunnel, and at the first burst of light as they emerged, Sam had to blink a few times for his eyes to adjust. The sun had risen higher in the time that they had been underground.

The lane beside them was moving faster, and Dean inched into it, following the now steadily moving traffic into the close, congested area of the city. It didn’t have the same claustrophobic quality of the downtown core, but it was still crowded enough that they knew they had entered urban New York City.

‘The Apocalypse has come and gone, and I still never got around to seeing much of this city,’ Sam thought regretfully.

He’d never gotten to explore any of the other places he’d travelled while he’d been on the road, either. Despite having seen all the continental US states before the age of twelve, he’d never been given the opportunity to go sightseeing or enjoy anything that made those states famous. At least, not until that terrible year before Dean’s deal had come due; he and Dean had made a painstaking effort to see at least some of the wonders of the country, but all Sam remembered from that trip was how his every waking moment had been filled with trying to keep Dean from dying.

'It’d be nice to one day actually take a real vacation,’ he thought as Dean took the turn off towards East 84th Street. ‘Always wanted to go to Hawaii…’

Hell, even Alaska might be interesting, or Canada, if it didn’t involve passports and forging documents. He’d always heard that the people up north were decent folk, and –

‘– Sam…please…help – ’

*He could see Adam on his knees, skin shining with blood and eyes gouged out, lips cracked and bleeding as he pleaded, while Lucifer whispered soothing words in his ear and made him raise the bone-hewn knife above his brother –*

Sam shuddered, inhaling sharply as he tried to fight off the barrage of memories. In the reflection of the passenger window, he saw Dean glance over to him in concern, his female face a lot more expressive than he usually was.

Thankfully, he didn’t ask if Sam was alright. The question had long since become nothing but rhetorical.

'No point in fantasizing about what will never be,’ Sam told himself forcefully, trying to get his thoughts back on track. He had no right to it, after everything he had done; and while Adam was still downstairs, suffering the torture of two frustrated archangels, he was even less deserving of any kind of peace.
Besides, getting invested in a future he wasn't even sure he was going to survive to see was stupid. After all, they were trying to break into Hell. Making plans beyond that was counterproductive.

The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World was located separately from the other faculty buildings of New York University; it was a nondescript five story building that Dean would have mistaken for an apartment complex if Sam hadn't pointed it out to them. Thin trees lined the sidewalks outside, their leafless branches brushing against the façade in a strangely depressing manner.

'Reasons why people don't pursue higher education,' Dean thought to himself as he and Sam pushed through the arched doors of the entrance. 'I've seen morgues with more life than this place…'

The interior was not much better in terms of personality. A spiral staircase stretched upward, supported by a wrought-iron railing, and the hardwood floor had been so painstakingly polished that even Dean felt somewhat guilty walking on it. Along the walls, containers and displays with ancient looking pottery and sculptures lined the area.

Sam glanced at them with interest, but thankfully didn't linger behind to study them. Dean sensed that his resolve was more severely tested when they passed the institute's library on the way up. The room was large and wood-panelled, with doorways reaching high above them to meet the ceiling. Leather upholstered furniture and glass end-tables took up space in a few corners of the room, while other wooden tables were occupied by students and teachers alike. But it was the books that had his brother hesitating before they continued on their way – uncountable volumes, likely in their first editions, leather-bound and musty-smelling, taking up space in bookshelves that had actually been built into the walls of the room.

"Down, boy," Dean teased at the longing interest in Sam's eyes. Despite the gentle malice in his tone, he was glad that Sam's nerdiness had been unaffected by his stay in Hell. "We're here for a reason, remember?"

Dean had gotten Sam to check the university contact page on his phone earlier that morning, and they had set up an appointment with the professor through the department secretary. She had given them his office number and directions to get there, and Dean was fully expecting Braddock Yong to be a stodgy old British dude with a monocle and a Stalin moustache.

What Dean hadn't expected was to meet a guy about his age, of slight build and with distinctly Asian features despite his dark blue eyes. His hair had the peroxide hue of someone that had fallen into a vat of bleach, and he had it slicked and gelled upwards like that douche that married Posh Spice. If Dean had been his normal self, he would have had at least three inches on the guy, but as was, he felt dwarfed. Yong had a permanent grin etched into his features and wore an honest to god sweater vest and bow tie.

His workspace was another surprise, looking nothing like Dean's concept of what a professor's office should look like. He had expected a desk with piles of dusty old tomes and stacks of papers marked up in red pen. There were some papers, of course, and a computer – but that was where the teacher-vibe ended.

A collection of Hotwheels were parked atop the computer monitor, the most prominent being a miniature model of a golden 2003 Nissan Fairlady 350Z, while a broken iPod and a figurine of Blanka from Street Fighter were perched beside the works George R. R. Martin. A tan toque and a
handheld copy of *Dragon's Lair* were stuffed into a corner next to a bag of chips. Postcards from various locations around the world were pinned to the walls.

"Erica and Jane, right?" the guy said, thrusting his hand out for them to shake. Dean almost wanted to refuse based on the overt friendliness of the guy, which reminded him too much of the Carrigans from Ypsilanti, Michigan. At Sam's significant stare, he bit the bullet and forced a smile to his face. Yong raised an eyebrow as he released his hand. "Wow, you have an amazing grip. Rock-climbing?"

"Grave digging.," Dean replied bluntly, earning an annoyed groan from Sam.

"Hunh," Yong remarked, giving them the same onceover they had been getting for a week now. Except the way he did it, there was clearly no interest in them besides the polite kind. "You two aren't the usual type that Bobby sends my way."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I was expecting baseball hats, Metallica shirts and a lot of flannel," Yong said with a warm grin. "Not the Gilmore Girls."

Dean didn't know what Yong was talking about, but considering the bodily wince from Sam beside him, Dean figured he'd somehow been insulted.

"Well, you're not exactly Professor Plum, either," Dean pointed out nonchalantly.

"Just because I study ancient history doesn't mean I like to look like it," Yong said good-naturedly. "Besides, you should see me on Steampunk Saturdays." At Dean's clueless expression, he cleared his throat and went on. "So, what can I do for you today? Bobby didn't give me the specifics."

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, and Dean nodded at Sam. Probably best if his younger brother did the explaining, he was better with people.

"You specialize in monomythology, right?" Sam began carefully. "Do you have any insight into heroic journeys to the underworld?"

"Ah, *katabasis*," Yong nodded.

"What-a-whata?" Dean asked immediately, earning yet another expression of exasperation from his brother.

"Katabasis is a Greek word describing a type of descent – usually to do with moving downhill, but in terms of literature, is taken to allude to a trip to the underworld," Yong explained to Dean in what he recognized as the 'teacher voice'. "Descent into the underworld is a theme common in most mythologies – in Sumerian mythology, Inanna passed through the seven gates of the Underworld for the sake of her lover – the same holds true for Orpheus and Psyche in Greek mythology. The Greek heroes, Herakles, Odysseus and Aeneas all made journeys to the underworld. It's not just Antiquity, either – trips to the land of the dead occur in New World mythology as well, such as the story of the Mayan Hero Twins."

"So there are many different hells," Sam suggested.

'Which fits right into what he said that asshole leprechaun told him,' Dean thought to himself.

"Yes, and no," Yong said. "All of this is speculation, of course, but my theory is that the Underworld – or rather, the Otherworld, which would be a more accurate term – is one huge singular dimension,
but with different divisions within it. Kind of like a museum with many different wings – all are connected in some way, but are specific to their purpose."

"So, one place could be the Greek Hades, but another wing could be the Norse Hel?" Sam mused.

"Exactly," Yong nodded.

"So, in theory, you could travel to one hell by going through another, or going around it or something?" Dean asked. "How exactly would you do that?"

Yong studied Dean, his smile fading slightly.

"What exactly is your interest? Considering you're Bobby's friends, I'm going to assume you're more aware of the…metaphysical side of life. But most of the others he's sent my way weren't so much interested in other realms so much as the creatures that come from how to kill them."

The brothers looked at each other again, and Dean nodded incrementally.

Sam took a breath, and then finally said, "We need to find a way into Hell."

"Hell," Yong repeated, glancing from Sam to Dean. "You mean…?"

"Fire-and-brimstone-eternal-suffering-Hell," Dean said resignedly, echoing Lisa's words from two weeks before.

"That's a Christian concept, not really my speciality," Yong said, offering them an uncomfortable smile. His entire easy-going demeanor shifted and he looked away from them. "You should go speak to Professor Fleming over at Medieval and Renaissance Studies. I can set you up with an appointment with him – Arch owes me a favor, anyway –"

"But most religious and cultural concepts from the Middle Ages couldn't have emerged without classical foundations, right?" Sam pressed before Yong could reach for his phone. "Like, Dante's Inferno couldn't have been written without extensive study of ancient mythological interpretations of life after death, right?"

"True, but I get the sense you're looking for a roadmap into Hell, and that's definitely not my area," Yong replied neutrally. "Which is why I suggest Fleming. He's one of those conspiracy theorists – ahem, I mean, hard-core Dante enthusiasts – who believes the Divine Comedy can be used as a kind of instruction book to travel to Hell."

"I take it you disagree," Dean commented.

"Considering no one's ever come back and called the media about their little pilgrimage, I'm going to say it's a bunch of bull," Yong said firmly. "I mean, I've made my career in studying myths about the underworld, but let's be frank. There's no proof that such a thing exists, or if there is a way there, and even if there was, no one would come back from that."

His tone became more strained as it went along, and Sam and Dean exchanged knowing glances. Yong was bitter about something, and he was also lying.

"You sound pretty sure about that," Sam said lightly. "You're rather passionate about something that's supposedly not your area of expertise."

"Also kind of defensive," Dean continued, stepping forward and trying to seem intimidating despite his smaller stature. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you sound a little disappointed that Dante's so-
"Called roadmap doesn't work."

"Which makes me wonder, why were you trying to get to Hell, Professor?" Sam finished, crossing his arms.

Yong's friendly smile faded, and a hard look appeared in his eyes. Dean suddenly realized that the cheery, good-natured professor act was just that – an act. "Because I watched my mother being torn apart by Hellhounds when I was ten. Except I didn't know that's what it was until eight years ago, when my father discovered a way to get her back."

"Where is he now?" Sam asked, sounding breathless.

"Probably still there," Yong said stiffly. "I went to see him after he told me about his discovery. I walked into his house just as the portal was closing."

"Wait, portal?" Dean repeated, memories of the gaping black abyss at Stull coming to the forefront of his mind. His heart beat faster at the possibility that they had stumbled upon their first real lead in weeks. "He actually managed to open a portal? How?"

Yong narrowed his eyes at the brothers. "I have no idea. Why the interest? Bobby didn't say…"

"That's 'cause it's none of your –" Dean began, but Sam cut him off with a clipped, "Our brother's stuck down there."

The professor's eyes softened incrementally. "He make a deal?"

"No, he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time," Sam told him, clenching his fists. "We tried to save him, but we were too late."

Sam's tone was wracked with guilt, and Yong paused to study him. He must have seen the haunted gleam in Sam's eyes, because he relaxed back to the way he had been before they broached the topic of Hell.

"How long has he been down there?" Yong asked, weary.

"Two weeks."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Yong sighed, sliding into his chair and peering up at them. He suddenly looked a lot older and a lot more tired than he had seemed in the beginning of their interview. "I figure the longer you're down there, the less likely you are to come back. Right now, I'd say your chances are between slim to none – erring on the side of none. Even if you could make it to Hell, there's no coming back from that. Otherwise, my father would have done it. He was a stubborn son of a bitch, but you don't get out of Hell. That's why it's Hell."

"And that'd be where you're wrong, buddy," Dean spoke up, growing tired of this guy's jaded sounding voice. "We know for a fact it is possible."

"Oh, really?" Yong raised an eyebrow. "You going to tell me you know someone who's been the Hell and back? So to speak?"

Dean leaned forward, meeting and holding the professor's gaze. He didn't say anything, but something of the animal that he had been down in Hell must have shown through, because Yong blanched.

"Bullshit," he murmured, although his tone was uncertain.
"Ever seen the movie *Hellraiser*?" Dean inquired rhetorically.

Yong's eyes widened, and he shook his head in disbelief. "If you've been there, why do you need my help?"

"'Cause the last time I was there, I was dead – and neither of us got back here on our own, either," Dean replied coldly. "We were pulled out."

"'Pulled out'? By what?"

"It doesn't matter – that option's off the table, so we're looking for a different one," Dean said tightly. "And if what you say is true, your old man found a way to Hell without having to die first – which means he probably knew a way back before he left."

They were all silent at the implications of why Yong's father had yet to return.

"Even if I wanted to give you the information, it wouldn't help you," Yong said after a long while. "As near as I can tell, the whole thing only works under specific circumstances. I've spent eight years trying to interpret my father's research and replicate his results, but I just don't have the resources. No human does, I think."

"Maybe you're interpreting things wrong?" Sam offered. "If your father's writing is as cryptic as some of the stuff our father wrote down..."

"It's not that," Yong sighed. "There are a lot of things he mentioned in his notes that I was never able to track down – I could never tell if he was being literal or metaphorical," Yong sighed. "He talked about gaining the "protection of death" and finding a guide who knew the area. He also talked about a key, or maybe the key, to open up an entrance to Hell."

Dean blinked. "What, are you saying it's kind of like a Ninth Gate deal?"

"Maybe, but without the hot book-dealer and the immolation," Yong answered.

"You hope," Sam added.

Yong made a gesture of assent before continuing. "He also mentioned needing a strong...I don't know, battery or supernatural jumpstart, to make that key work. I assume that's a spell of some sort, but it would mean tracking down some very powerful witches. And I don't know about you, but I like to avoid them at all costs."

"You and me both," Dean agreed. "But if that's the only way this thing works, you're going to have to suck it up."

Yong looked at him for a long time, his brow furrowed as though he was trying to figure Dean out. Then, as though making a conclusive decision, he nodded. "I'll tell you what. If you girls can manage to get a spell that opens up a hellgate, then I'll share the specifics of my father's research with you."

"Really? You're going to go the deal-route?" Dean asked, incredulous and obviously pissed at being called 'girl'.

"If you've really done what you say you've done, then it shouldn't be a problem – and you'll be able to help me find a way to get my father back. Think of it as a means of establishing trust so we can work together," Yong said, and then his grin abruptly returned. "Or you could consider it to be part of your own heroic journey. 'The Road of Trials'."
He laughed to himself, obviously having made one of those jokes only academic people got. Sam probably would have laughed too, but he was looking at Yong with an expression of annoyance.

"You remind me of a Trickster we once knew," Sam said darkly. "It didn't turn out very well for him."

"And that's why I'm not getting my hands dirty in this," Yong said. "I want my father back, make no mistake – but I can't help him if I'm dead, which is what would happen if I tried to convince a witch to open a gate to hell for me." He held out his hand to them again. "So what do you say?"

"I say this sounds a little too much like a deal," Dean pointed out.

"Oh," Yong said, and made a gesture to show them to wait. Quickly, he undid the buttons of his shirt collar, but before Dean could object to the sudden striptease, he caught sight of a design on his skin: a pristinely drawn anti-possession tattoo. "See? Not a demon." He began to button his collar again. "I got the idea from this book series…it's completely unrealistic, but there's actually some pretty useful information in it."

"Let me guess," Sam sighed, weary. "Supernatural?"

"You know it?" Yong asked eagerly.

The conversation went downhill from there, and it was all Sam could to usher Dean out before he gave into his temptation to punch the guy.

"Oh, yeah, right, we're big damn heroes," Dean deadpanned as they stalked out of the building and dodged the traffic heading down the one way street. "I tortured millions of souls in Hell and you spread your legs for the Devil."

"I'm more concerned with the fact that this guy thinks we're going to just go out and find a witch willing to help us," Sam said in frustration as Dean's phone began to ring. "Barring the whole 'evil' thing, it takes long enough to even confirm if a coven of witches is getting up to trouble, let alone track them down."

"I'm thinking Poindexter needs to get out in the field more often," Dean said darkly, digging into his pocket for the phone and pressing it to his ear. "Hello?"

"…" There was defeated sounding exhalation on the other end of the phone. Before Dean could repeat himself, a jarringly familiar voice rasped, "Who am I speaking to?"

Dean froze, his entire body locking up. "Cas?"

Sam stopped walking as well, head jerked to the side as he stared at Dean in shock.

On the other end of the phone, there was a sharp intake of breath, and then the voice growled warily, "How do you know my name? Who is this? Where is Dean?"

With every question, Dean detected a growing note of anxiety.

"Cas, whoa, slow down – it's me," Dean assured, wincing as he remembered that his girl's voice was significantly different than Cas was used to. Still, there was ridiculous sense of relief that rose within him at the sound of the angel's voice – at least until he next spoke.

"I don't know who you are or why you are answering to this number – just connect me to Dean Winchester immediately," Cas ordered. Even over the phone line, Dean could hear his friend's
breathing increase –

Since when did angels breathe?

"Dude, are you okay?" Dean demanded. "Fuck, Cas, where are you – ?"

"Enough with your questions! Where is Dean?" Cas snapped, sounding more frazzled than Dean had ever heard him.

"It's me, you moron, just trust me and tell me where you –" Dean's frustrated outburst petered out as he heard the sudden sound of a struggle on the other end, a clicking sound and a static snarl that suggested the phone was being moved around. "Cas?"

He could hear voices on the other end.

" – Mr. Novak, you're not supposed to be here –"

" – Escort him back to his room –"

" – Unhand me, I must reach Dean– !"

"Cas!" Dean cried out, trying to get the angel back on the phone. "Castiel!"

"What's going on?" Sam asked, but Dean shook his head 'no' as he listened to the commotion across the line, which sounded like a physical struggle. Someone yelped in the distance.

" – someone, get a sedative – !"

"CAS!" Dean yelled, but there was no answer between more sounds of struggle – and then the dial tone that told him he had been hung up on.

Without waiting, Dean hit the redial and jammed the phone up to his ear, ignoring the painful pressure of metal and plastic digging into his face. An automated female voice came on the line, the words making Dean's stomach twist into knots.

"Sinai-Grace Hospital. If you know the extension of the person or department you are trying to reach, enter it now. Otherwise, please hold or press zero."

Dean glanced up at Sam as he waited on the line. "Where's Sinai-Grace Hospital?"

Sam's Blackberry was already out and his thumbs flew over the keyboard. A second later, his jaw tightened and he offered Dean a grim look. "Detroit."

Dean ignored the chill that crept up his spine at the name, and nodded. "Better gas up the car."

"Mr. Novak?" the receptionist repeated, her eyes scanning across her screen and her fingers flying. "Give me a moment."

Dean tried not to let his impatience show, offering her what he hoped was a tired yet encouraging smile. "Sure."

Out of habit, he gave her a once-over; she was petite, redhead and freckled, greatly resembling one
of the nurses from *Dr. Sexy, M.D.*.

Under normal circumstances he would be asking her what time she got off work and planning to ditch Sam very soon afterward. As it was, however, his preoccupation with finding Cas was overshadowing his usual impulses.

That, and the fact that he was still in a chick's body. He'd discovered the hard way that he was more likely to get an uncomfortable look for his attempts at flirtation these days than a phone number.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could tell that Sam was watching him with that same expression of calculation and sympathy that he had been wearing since Dean got Cas's phone call. By now, it had passed beyond mildly annoying, and if Dean hadn't been resolutely pretending to ignore it, he would have smacked Sam upside the head.

The phone call had rattled him. He had spent two weeks thinking Cas was trapped in some kind of alternate dimension or rotting in the proverbial gutter somewhere.

In the moment that he had recognized the voice on the other end of the line, Dean had felt the same light, swooping sensation of gladness that he had experienced two weeks before when Sam inexplicably appeared alive and topside. That gladness had faded quickly, though, replaced with a gnawing ache of worry.

Exactly *why* was Cas in a hospital in Detroit?

"Maybe he just drained his batteries doing whatever he did?" Sam had suggested while they drove across state-lines. His voice was carefully controlled, like he wasn't supremely uncomfortable returning to the city where he had said 'yes' to the Devil.

"Maybe," Dean had granted, although his gut and memories of Raphael's snide insinuations had told him that wasn't the whole story.

He had surreptitiously pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal, thinking for the first time in his life that he was glad to not be driving the Impala. Awesome as his baby was, she was a gas guzzler, and she would have slowed the journey in terms of pit stops and the need to make money for fuel. Not too many of the minor highway stations accepted credit cards, and Sam and Dean were rather broke at the moment.

"You're sure it was him, right?" Sam had then asked for the millionth time in three hours, and Dean had shot him his most exasperated glare.

"Yes, damn it!"

"Because it could be a trap."

"Who else do we know that has my cell number?" Dean had reminded him, also for the millionth time. "Besides, he's the only person I know that can sound that annoyed with me that's not you or Bobby."

Sam had made a face and gone quiet for a while. At the point when Dean had thought he'd gone to sleep, he suddenly spoke up, "You know, it's not like we're wanted fugitives anymore. Not the way we look now. It would be a lot quicker if we hopped a plane."

Dean had tried not to notice how his brother's voice sounded like he was trying to talk down a jumper.
It was a measure of how off his game he was that he had actually considered the proposition for half a second, before his wits caught up with him.

"Not a good idea," he had argued, pretending that his crippling fear of flying had nothing to do with that decision. "We might set off Heaven's radar if we're up there. Kind of seems like their domain, don't you think?"

"I guess," Sam had agreed, although he had obviously seen through Dean's deflection.

"And I doubt they'd let us carry hex bags on board with us, anyway," Dean had continued, more to himself than to Sam. "Plus, I hear lots of airports have x-ray chambers now. Anyone notices the angel tats on our ribs, we'd probably end up on some medical show."

"Okay," Sam had said in a deliberate voice, obviously humoring him. After another pause, he had asked, "Want me to drive?"

"Are you kidding?" Dean had shot back, regaining some of his composure. "I want to get there this year, Granny Winchester."

"You're the one who actually was named for our grandmother," Sam reminded him.

"Shut up."

That had been last they had really spoken. Dean had spent the rest of the drive covering up his contemplations with the local classic rock offerings, while Sam busied himself with setting up two new false identities for them and casting Dean those annoying, calculating glances.

Which he was still doing, Dean realized. He glared at Sam, sending him as strong a 'knock it off' warning as he could manage without actually speaking.

"Oh, here it is. Mr. James Novak," the girl at the desk said, interrupting Sam's answering bitchface. She frowned up at them. "According to the note on his file, he's under strict observation for the time being. No one but his family is allowed to see him, and then only with the permission of his attending physician."

"What? Why?" Dean demanded, frustration at yet another obstacle making him practically bark.

"We're family," Sam interrupted him before Dean could full-on harangue the poor girl further. "He's our brother."

There was no lie in his voice, and even as a woman Sam could turn on the intense, puppy eyes. If possible, the look had gotten more effective.

"Oh, well, let's see what I can do," the girl said, offering Sam a sympathetic look and Dean a glare. Her eyes scanned the screen again as she reached for a nearby folder. "Here's a form you need to fill out to get a visitor's pass, and I'll need ID from both of you – oh. Does your brother have health insurance? It doesn't say in his file."

"Yeah, here," Dean said, yanking out Erica Campbell's license and health card. Even as he practically tossed it at her, he silently thanked a rather absent god that Sam had had the foresight to forge insurance cards for them the week before.

Although the receptionist made a face at Dean's impatience, she didn't even blink at the different names on the insurance and IDs; obviously she assumed that he was married or something. As Sam handed over his own license, she passed over a clipboard and an attached pen. A little more
pointedly than before, she told them, "If you could just head over to our waiting area and fill that out? I'll notify the attending you're here and he'll decide if Mr. Novak is up for visitors today."

"He'll decide…?" Dean trailed off in disbelief.

"Thanks," Sam interjected, offering a polite smile as he took the visitor's form and nudged Dean to follow him over to the uncomfortable looking chairs. Under his breath, he murmured, "Dude, relax, she's just doing her job."

"Yeah, well, last time I checked hospitals aren't supposed to be Gitmo. We should just be able to walk in," Dean growled, throwing himself into one of the chairs, while Sam scanned the form.

"Father's name, mother's name – good thing we actually do know this stuff," Sam murmured thoughtfully.

Since meeting the angel after he had pulled Dean out of Hell, the brothers had had ample time to find out more about the original owner of Castiel's vessel, both from occasional information Cas would reveal in a rather offhand way, and then later when Jimmy regained temporary control of his body. Not long after, when the brothers had been hunting separately, Dean had spent some time with Cas and filled his free time in learning all about the short and boring life of one James Novak, on the off chance that they ever had to rescue the poor bastard if Cas abandoned ship again.

He had told Sam everything he had dug up, but he had never actually figured the information would come in handy again.

'Which goes to show, I really need to stop tempting the universe,' he thought as he fidgeted, impatiently staking out the hospital.

He had yet to have a hospital experience that didn't suck; the last few times had been less than stellar. Just sitting in the creepily clean environment brought back memories of choking on phlegm and bile as they battled Pestilence, of feeling a tube down his throat following Alistair kicking his ass, of holding Dad's limp hand after the doctors called time of death, of being told that his heart was giving out after being electrocuted by the Rawhead –

'Yeah, all in all, hospitals are not my favorite place ever,' Dean decided grimly, scrubbing his hand down his face. His stomach felt like it was filled with moths.

He dug out his phone, checked the time anxiously, and then began to idly roll through the list of contacts for want of something to do. His thumb hovered over Bobby's name, and for a moment he considered trying to reach him again. They hadn't heard from the older hunter in three days, but he had said something about a rugarou in Dayton before giving them Yong's information, which meant he might be out of contact for a bit. Still, Dean knew that Bobby was just as interested in finding Cas as they were.

He was just about to make the call, when the receptionist came over with two bright yellow cards attached to lanyards. Apparently Dean hadn't noticed Sam finish filling at the form and bring it over to her.

"Here are your passes," she said, handing them over. Dean took his and hastily shoved his phone away when she gave him a dirty look. "Make sure they're visible on you at all times. I've paged Mr. Novak's attending and he should be here in a few minutes. Visiting hours usually end at eight o'clock, but he might decide your brother can only handle a little company at a time. I would request that you don't make a big production about it if he asks you to leave early."
"Of course not," Sam said before Dean could tell her exactly where to take her requests. "Thanks so much for your help."

"It's not a problem," the girl beamed, and then returned to her desk.

"No, the problem is that we're even here," Dean grumbled. "I hate hospitals." He looked around again, scanning for the doctor whose face he didn't know, and then commented in a would-be-conversational tone, "I wonder if Tessa's around."

"You know, it's kind of sad that you're on first name basis with a Reaper."

"Not my fault you were raised in a barn and never thought to ask the name of yours," Dean retorted with would-be calm.

"I haven't been dead nearly as many times as you have."

Dean was about to respond with something snarky about asshole archangels and time loops not counting, when he felt the familiar sensation of being watched. It was an awareness he had cultivated in retaliation for Cas's propensity to show up unannounced, but at the moment he couldn't detect the same intensity in the feeling as there would have been if it was an angel watching him. Glancing up, he saw that there was a taller, blond man in a lab coat watching him and Sam. From the way he was leaning in toward the receptionist and talking with her, Dean took that to mean Cas's attending physician had shown up.

"Show time," he murmured to Sam, and they both made their way over.

"Are you Jimmy's doctor?" Dean asked when they were within a few feet of the man.

"Yes, I'm the attending on Mr. Novak's case," the man said, remnants of an Australian accent still present in his voice. His tone was carefully polite, like he was used to relatives cornering him for news of their ailing family members. "I'm Dr. Spencer. You're his…sisters?"

"Yes," Sam confirmed, at the same time that Dean demanded, "Is he okay?"

"Frankly, he's a medical miracle," the doctor said bluntly. "Before I was assigned his case, I'm told he was found clinically dead. He was actually brought to the morgue upon arrival here."

"What?" Dean interrupted, trying not to allow any panic into his tone.

"We can thank a very confused forensic pathologist for even realizing he was alive," Dr. Spencer explained. "He was just about to perform the autopsy when he made the discovery. Apparently your brother was in a deep coma and not dead."

"That's good, right?" Sam asked tightly. "There wasn't any brain damage, or…?"

"He was unconscious and suffering from severe dehydration and malnourishment when he was brought up here," the doctor said, flipping through the same form the brothers had filled out. Sam and Dean exchanged knowing glances; the last thing either of them had seen Cas eat was a platter of raw ground beef four months earlier. "Until yesterday, he was in a pretty much vegetative state."

"Vegetative?" Dean hissed.

"Completely unresponsive. Other than opening and closing his eyes during REM cycles, he didn't make any voluntary movements. He reacted to certain stimuli tests, but otherwise didn't respond. We were actually sure that his brain was completely damaged. We really didn't believe he was going to
recover cognitive function."

Dean made a strangled noise in his throat, and Sam interjected. "But he woke up."

"Yesterday morning," Dr. Spencer confirmed. "It was like a miracle." He looked up from the form. "You list your primary physician as a Dr. Cara Roberts at St. Francis Hardin?"

"Yeah, she's a friend of the family. She's usually really busy with other cases, but she always makes time to see us," Sam lied smoothly. "She's taken care of us really well in the past."

Despite the serious situation, Dean snorted, and made a herculean effort not to add, 'She sure took care of you alright."

Sam shot him a glare, but thankfully the doctor didn't notice it as he continued, "I've heard of her. She has an excellent reputation in medical circles. You're lucky to know her. And your brother is lucky to be under her care."

"Speaking of Jimmy, when can we see him?" Dean asked, unable to tamp down the impatience in his voice.

Dr. Spencer raised a placating hand, still eyeing them suspiciously. "Just as soon as we clarify something; neither of you is listed as Mr. Novak's emergency medical contact. We have an Amelia Novak?"

"Yeah, that's his wife," Dean said, and then added, "Our sister-in-law."

"We've been trying to get in touch with her for two weeks now," Dr. Spencer continued, frowning in what Dean could recognize as frustration at an unnecessary complication with a job. "She's nowhere to be found."

"Uh, yeah, well…Amelia took off," Sam said awkwardly. "From what Jimmy told us, she just couldn't accept his…eccentric behaviour anymore. She left him and took their daughter, Claire, with her. Since then, Jimmy's been a little more…off."

"'Off'?" Dr. Spencer repeated, frowning.

"We thought Amelia could handle it," Sam continued, lowering his voice some. "You know, Jimmy's…condition."

"You mean his schizophrenia," the doctor said, sounding mildly disgruntled.

"Yeah, that," Dean nodded, keeping his face carefully blank. It was always easier to go along with other people's assumptions than making up a story. "He didn't like to talk about it."

"He hasn't been awake very long, but from what we've observed, your brother displays an undifferentiated form of the disorder. Our consultations with the psych department suggest that his condition is compounded by a multi-layered delusion," Dr. Spencer remarked. "How serious was the disorder the last time you saw him?"

"He was fine," Dean said stiffly. "He was talking about going home and starting over."

"Then something must have happened to trigger an episode or a relapse, because when he woke up here yesterday, he was deeply entrenched in a paranoid delusion," the doctor told them. "Angels and demons appear to feature heavily in his mind, and when he isn't sedated, he often talks about the end of the world and the Devil."
"Sedated," Dean repeated, gritting his teeth.

"Did he call himself Castiel?" Sam wanted to know.

"Yes," Dr. Spencer said. "I take it that's a persistent theme in his delusions, then?"

"Yeah, he thinks he's the Angel of Thursday," Dean said, forcing what he hoped to be a weary smile. "Or he'll talk about trying to find God, or skirmishing with demons."

"Our father was really religious, and Jimmy was always kind of impressionable," Sam offered. "I guess it broke him when Amelia left last year. Since then, he kind of disappears for weeks at a time. We never know where he is until he calls us, and by the time we try to find him he's usually moved on."

Thankfully, Sam's halting lie sounded more like a woman who was uncomfortable talking about her personal business with a stranger. Dr. Spencer nodded, thoughtfully. "That makes a little more sense, at least. But it also brings me to my next question – how did you find out that he was here?"

"I got a phone call from him yesterday," Dean growled, remembering with annoyance the sound of a struggle on the other end. "Or at least, an attempted call. Someone wrestled him away from the phone before we could have a chat. Good thing I have caller ID."

Dr. Spencer shifted uncomfortably. "I apologize if that caused you any trouble. When it became apparent that Jimmy wasn't completely lucid, we made the decision to put him under strict observation for at least twenty-four hours. That means no phone calls, as they might upset him. Also, there is the other complication in his case…"

"Which is?" Dean prompted.

"Your brother was found on the rooftop of the Renaissance Center two weeks ago," Dr. Spencer told them, looking expectantly at Sam and Dean as though they could tell him why. "The police are very curious about how a man in your brother's rather weakened condition could get up onto a roof where all the exits were locked down tight. Apparently the security footage was too scrambled to give them much of a clue."

"The Renaissance Center?" Sam repeated. "Isn't that one of the tallest buildings around here?"

"Yes. The incident made the local news," Dr. Spencer remarked, with a catch in his voice like he was judging them for not coming to get Cas quicker. Dean dearly wanted to take a swing at the dude.

"We live in Iowa," Sam lied. "We never would have made the connection between some guy on a roof and Jimmy. Since he started doing his walkabouts, we've just been hoping we weren't going to get a call that he was dead. Now that we know he's not, we can maybe talk him into getting some help."

"I think the time for talk is past," the doctor said severely. "At this point, I would look into a permanent placement in a psychiatric facility. At least until his condition improves."

"Yeah, fine, can we talk about that later?" Dean broke in, finally losing his patience. "We just drove ten hours to get here and all you've done is tell us there's something wrong with him – which we know. Could we see him now, to make sure he's okay?"

Dr. Spencer offered him a searching look, and then nodded. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry, but please understand we need to know as much as possible about him before we can help." He gestured for
them to follow him to the elevator. As the doors closed and he pressed the button for the third floor, he continued, "I should warn you, though, he likely won't be able to say much. He's been sedated."

"What?" Dean demanded. "Why the hell did you go and do that?"

"He had another one of his episodes this morning," Dr. Spencer said stiffly. "One of the nurses was injured trying to restrain him."

"Is she okay?" Sam asked, while Dean privately thought it served her right for trying to restrain Cas like he was actually a crazy person.

'Unless whatever happened to him actually made him crazy,' he added to himself, shuddering at the possibility. Although unlikely, the prospect worried him. What were the odds that they would find Cas and he would be perfectly alright?

"She sustained a mild concussion, but is otherwise fine," Dr. Spencer was saying. "Your brother, on the other hand, has been moved out of recovery and into the psych ward for observation."

Dean clenched his fists, remembering the treatment that he and Sam had been subjected to during their brief stay at the mental hospital in Ketchum. If Cas really had been placed in the psych ward, every time he opened his mouth he was going to be treated like some med student's science project, which the angel – or whatever he was now – definitely did not deserve.

Whichever way Dean looked at it, somehow Cas had given him back Sam, and he owed him big for that. Even if he was a little pissed off at how Cas had gone about it. Still, even as they got closer and closer to meeting back up with Cas, Dean couldn't help noticing the pit in his stomach. Part of it was caused by the complete confusion over what the hell he was going to say to the guy that had basically given him everything. Again.

The other part was very conscious of that gnawing feeling of emptiness where Cas's grace used to be. It amazed him that he had never noticed it before, but now that it was gone he felt like he was running on half a tank of gas.

It was something he would definitely be bringing up with Cas once they were out of the hospital, he decided as they left the elevator. They began to walk down a corridor that still had traces of the scent of blood and urine despite the attempts of disinfectant to cover them, and Dean realized that Sam and the doctor were still talking.

"...the police have been trying to communicate with him since we told them he woke up, but he continues to voice his delusions whenever anyone is around. They're trying to get him on a trespassing charge, at most intent to commit larceny."

"But considering the way his mind is obviously affected, why would he have to worry about that?" Sam asked. "There's precedent for an insanity plea in this case."

Dr. Spencer raised an eyebrow. "Are you a lawyer, Ms. Novak?"

"Uh, I was pre-law at Stanford. But, you know..." Sam made a vague gesture. "Family issues got in the way."

Dean sent him a sharp look that Sam didn't see.

"Be that as it may, there's still the question of how he got on that roof, which might put a hitch in that kind of defense," Dr. Spencer continued. "Here we are."
They stopped at a room at the end of the hall, which Dean was glad to see was within a short walking distance of at least two exits, not counting the windows.

As he looked into the room where Cas was lying, Dean had a sudden terrible flashback to the feeble, broken man that had fallen asleep in the back of the Impala the last time they had been to Detroit. His clothes were folded away nearby, and without that ridiculous trench coat of his, he seemed a lot smaller. There were dark circles under his eyes and his lips were cracked and dry. His skin was pale and wavy, and above the starchy hospital blankets, Cas's arms were bruised in places where Dean supposed IV lines had been attached during his temporary coma.

'He's human,' Dean confirmed to himself in one terrifying moment of clarity.

"Does he really need to be tied down like that?" Sam asked from beside Dean, a strained note in his voice that told Dean his brother had realized exactly the same thing about their friend.

"It's for his own good," Dr. Spencer answered. "We don't want him to accidentally hurt himself, or someone else." He gestured for them to follow him, and they crowded into the small room. Cas didn't even acknowledge their presence, content with staring intently out of the window.

Dr. Spencer adopted a casual, comforting voice. "Good afternoon, Jimmy, how are you doing today?"

There was no response from the figure on the bed, though Dean wasn't sure if this was caused by the drugs in his system or general disinterest with the question.

"You have some visitors," Dr. Spencer tried again, nodding for Sam and Dean to get closer. "Your sisters have come to see you."

This got a reaction at least, but not a very comforting one. Castiel glanced over at them, and murmured in a slightly slurred voice. "I have never seen either of these women before in my life. And neither has Jimmy."

Under normal circumstances, the response would have prompted Dean to curse Cas out for blowing their cover, however it made his chest warm to realize it was definitely his friend lying there. At Dr. Spencer's raised eyebrow, however, Dean schooled his face into an approximation of rueful acceptance, and said, "He does that sometimes. Forgets what's real and what isn't. He sometimes forgets he's not really up playing sheriff in Heaven, if you know what I mean?"

Cas's brow furrowed incrementally, and Dean thought he detected a question in the blue eyes that continued to watch him. Good. Maybe they would actually be able to pull this thing off.

"Hey, Doc, you think you can give us a minute alone with him? It's just, he never really opened up too much to strangers," Sam said quietly, his voice filled with well-meaning emotion.

"Sure. I'll be down the hall if you need me – I need to let the police know that you're here. They're likely going to have some questions for you."

"Why would they want to talk to us?" Dean asked curtly, even though years of pretending to be some form of officer of the law knew the answer to that. "We don't know why he was taking a snooze on top of a building. We weren't even in town when this happened."

"But they will want a more detailed background on your brother for their report. I'll be able to give them his relevant medical history now that I've spoken to you, but they're going to need something else."
"Right," Dean said, pretending his was mulling that over.

Satisfied that they understood, Dr. Spencer left the room.

As soon as the doctor was out of earshot, Dean turned to Cas. The angel's – former angel's, probably – entire body was tense, or at least as tense as anyone who had been pumped full muscle relaxants could be. His eyes were completely narrowed as he stared them down, and Dean felt a twinge of dismay at the realization that Cas didn't recognize him at all. It was the first time the angel – former angel – had ever looked at him with any measure of distrust.

He was surprised by how much that hurt, but forced himself to work past it.

"Okay, buddy, first off – relax, we're not demons," Dean started in an appeasing tone, tugging down the hem of his t-shirt to show off the anti-possession tattoo that Aggie's genderswitch had thankfully left intact. After a pause, Sam did the same. "I know we don't look it, and I ain't gonna lie – these bodies, seriously messed up situation – but it's me and Sam." Something sparked in Cas, and his eyes flitted to Sam and then back with the barest glimmer of curiosity. "Yeah, Sam's back. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Again, Cas said nothing but stared at Dean as though he was trying to figure out a completely complex puzzle. It was close enough to his usual inquisitive gaze that Dean's heart warmed a little more. Drugs or not, it was definitely still Cas in there.

He slunk forward and considered the restraints holding Cas to the hard hospital mattress, while Sam acted as look-out by the door. It was a good thing that Castiel hadn't been assigned a roommate, or their work would be more of a challenge.

Dean sensed Sam leaving the room for a second, and started first on the ties holding down Cas's legs. As he finished with the second one, Sam ducked back in and tossed Dean a bundle of scrubs. "Have him put those on. They'll blend in better than the trench."

"Jesus Christ, Cas, you look like shit," Dean remarked quietly as he worked at unbuckling the fetters. "What the hell did you do?"

Cas looked away without answering, and Dean opened his mouth to ask again, but Sam interrupted him.

"Dude, could you leave the questions until after we get him out of here?" he demanded, glancing surreptitiously around the hallway outside. "We're not going to have much time to pull this off – I'm surprised the doctor actually left us alone with him at all."

"One of the very few perks of these bodies, I guess," Dean said, offering a bitter smile. It was a double standard, he knew, but the fact of the matter was that doctors and police weren't likely to suspect two young women worried about their brother of being anything other than that.

Sam cast a last glance around the hallway, obviously cataloguing potential exits, and then nodded at Dean. "How much time do you need?"

"Fifteen minutes – ten if things go sideways."

"Don't they always?"

"Shut up."

Sam snorted and disappeared again, and Dean heard his brother's footsteps disappear down the hall,
smirking at the sound of the familiar gait that even spontaneous body switching couldn't change. Sam still walked like a Sasquatch.

He turned back to his task. "Just gimme a sec, Cas, we're going to get you out of here. Sam's just gone to bring the car rou – ghgh!"

As Dean undid the final strap on Cas's arms, the angel suddenly vaulted off of the bed and shoved Dean back, practically throwing him against the wall opposite the bed. His head cracked painfully back, hitting part of the window frame, while Cas's hands suddenly encircled his throat.

Severely weakened or not, Cas's grip was still impressive.

"Cas!" Dean gasped, clutching at the hands choking him and trying to draw air into his lungs. "Calm…down…!"

"You may not be a demon, but you are not Dean Winchester," Cas breathed into Dean's ear, wrath clinging from every syllable despite his impaired speech. "I built his body up from the bones of the earth. I know every vein and ligament – you are not him."

"Stupid…son of a…bitch!" Dean wheezed, his heart speeding response to the sudden possibility of death by strangulation. His sense of self-preservation warred with the knowledge that if he made any noise he would attract the medical staff. "Not…gonna hurt you…here to bust you…out…!"

"That is impossible, as no one knew my whereabouts," Cas growled. "In fact, I should be dead. There's only one being who would have cause to know my location, and Dean is not that person. You work for a demon."

"Then how…would I have known…that stuff…about Heaven?"

"Demons have been known to use both mortal associates and listening spells in the past. The one I speak of could have relayed our past conversations to anyone," Cas intoned coldly, looking Dean up and down. "Obviously the choice in assassin was the wrong one."

"Assass…?" Dean trailed off, beginning to see spots in front of his eyes. Of course it was just his luck that the one time it would have been nice for Cas to be able to pull his angelic thought-reading mojo, the guy didn't have it. "Cas…!"

"You will likely pass out soon. If there is anything regarding your employer you wish to share with me, now would be the time."

'Shit, shit, shit!'

Dean tried to ignore his lungs screaming for oxygen as he cast his mind back to a point in the past where he and Cas had been completely alone, where there would have been no chance for a listening spell. There weren't very many, and most of them occurred within the confines of the Impala due to the angel's tendency to show up unannounced in the backseat. And considering how Crowley had once hid an enchanted coin in the car to get his perverted rocks off on private Winchester conversations, chances were that Cas wouldn't be impressed with that.

As he began to feel light headed, he suddenly remembered something.

"Dun…evehesh," he managed to rasp, wincing at the jumbled, garbled syllables.

"What?" Cas questioned, frowning slightly and tilting his head to one side. Thankfully, he loosened his grip somewhat.
"'Don't ever change,'" Dean bit out, sucking down what little extra air that he could. "'s'what I said…
to you after…Zachariah…pulled a…Back to the Future…moment." With every word, the grip on
his throat lessened incrementally. "Come on, man…you were with me when the…shit went down.
You, me, Bobby…"

Cas was now staring straight into his Dean's eyes, expression searching. It was disconcerting that
even as a human, the stare was penetrating. Jimmy hadn't even looked at Dean like that, and that was
how Dean knew Jimmy was long gone from the body holding him pressed against a hospital wall.

"You molotoved the friggen archangel Michael, remember?" he continued hurriedly, relieved to find
Cas was loosening his hold even more. "Called him 'assbutt'? Which, seriously, Cas, been meaning
to ask you about that. Is that another one that's funnier in Enochian? 'Cause you've seriously got to
work on your trash-talking…"

Several emotions flickered across Cas's face, ranging from disbelief, suspicion, hope and – finally –
recognition. He completely removed his hand.

"Dean," he said, still sounding unsure.

"'S'what I've been telling you," Dean said, trying to grin but not quite managing. "Shit, for a guy
that's been drugged, you've still got strength. I guess that's the adrenalin kicking in, huh?"

"I apologize," Cas said, looking forlorn. It was strange to see actual emotions on the angel's – ex-
angel's – face. "I did not know…this experience has been disorienting."

"And whose fault is that?" Dean grumbled, rubbing his throat. Cas looked away guiltily, and Dean
sighed. "Whatever. We'll deal with that later. Right now, you need to get out of the hospital dress so
we can get out of here."

He tossed Cas the bundle of neatly folded clothes.

Cas stared at the scrubs in trepidation, as though he didn't know what to do with them, and Dean
groaned to himself. Probably Cas had never actually had to worry about changing clothes. In the
days leading up to the Apocalypse, he'd pretty much lived in the same slacks and trenchcoat that he
had met Dean with in Pontiac, Illinois.

'Well, now isn't the time to figure out just how much Cas remembers about being human,' Dean
thought, and made an impatient gesture for Cas to shrug out of his hospital clothes.

He helped Cas strip down with businesslike quickness and practically yanked the scrubs on, trying
not to notice that the scar from when Cas carved a banishing sigil into his abdomen in Van Nuys was
still there.

Cas broke the silence as Dean helped him into Jimmy Novak's shoes, which he covered with the
surgical shoe covers. "And Sam is really…?"

"What, you really couldn't tell that was Sam?" Dean asked lightly as he shoved the clothes that once
belonged to Jimmy Novak under Dad's jacket; the leather was bulky enough over his female body
that no one would notice the extra bulge. "'Cause he doesn't look any different from before. Maybe
longer hair, you know?" At Cas's confused frown, he added, "Joke, Cas."

"It is good to see that your ability to make obscure jests that I do not understand has not changed,"
Cas said stiffly, and Dean couldn't help grin back at him at that.

"I'll second that. Now come on. Head to your right and two doors down you'll see a sign for a
stairwell. You're going to pretend to be showing me how to get somewhere."

"Why?"

"Because you're the one dressed like a nurse, dude. People will think you work here."

Cas nodded once, to show that he understood, and started out the door. He wobbled a little unsteadily on his feet, but Dean figured no one would notice if they kept to the stairwell. He wasn't sure if there was security surveillance in the hospital corridors, but in his experience there was usually something.

They made it down the hallway without incident and into the stairwell without notice. Still dazed, Cas tripped a few times going down the stairs, and Dean had to grab hold of him. Apparently his adrenalin rush had long since worn off.

"This new form of yours is disconcerting," Cas remarked the third time this happened, scrutinizing Dean in his usual intense way. Despite having been on the receiving end of the stare countless times, Dean had the absurd impulse to blush. "You are much shorter now."

Dean blinked. "That's what sticks out to you?"

"I am not used to looking down at you."

"Yeah, well, it's temporary. Don't get used to it," Dean groused as they left the stairwell and ended up in the main hallway entrance. Dean cursed, having expected to end up on the other side of the hospital, away from the reception area where he and Sam had been waiting.

At the opposite end of the hall, he noticed two men at the reception area; a tall man with dark hair and eyes that were sharp even in the distance, and a shorter, olive-skinned man with a determined set to his jaw. They were dressed in worn yet professional suits and carried themselves stiffly, as though expecting an attack.

Immediately, Dean's mind jumped to 'cops', and as though they could hear his thoughts, they looked up in his and Cas's direction. Dean's eyes locked with the taller one, and he knew in that instant that they'd run out of time.

"Why doesn't it ever go smooth?" Dean muttered, nudging Cas back down the hall. "C'mon, we've gotta move."

"Hey! Stop right there!" one of the cops shouted, but Dean was already ushering Cas back the way they had come, toward the emergency exit that the hospital signs told him were somewhere.

Hospital staff and visitors ducked aside as Dean dragged Cas through the halls, hoping against hope that Cas wasn't going to fall over. He could hear the shouts from the cops and they had to duck one guy dressed as an orderly who tried to tackle him as they went.

They burst out of the emergency exit to where the ambulances usually waited, and Dean was more than relieved to see a familiar piece of black plastic on wheels pull up in front of them.

The driver's window was rolled down, and Sam ordered, "Get in!"

Dean hauled open the back door and shoved Cas in, before vaulting in as well. He hadn't even managed to get the door closed before Sam was tearing off, the wheels squealing angrily as he did so.
"You good?" he asked Cas, who nodded blearily. It seemed like he was trying to interpret just how his lot had changed within the last quarter of an hour. Dean clapped him on the shoulder and climbed over the console into the passenger seat. Once there, he glanced into the passenger side mirror.

"Damn. That wasn't as close as usual, but it was still pretty close. Good thing you stowed the license plate before picking us up, I think those cops got pretty close to us."

"We'll need to stop and put them back soon," Sam remarked as he pulled onto the highway, "but we should be out of the city before our pictures hit the local news."

"Good riddance. If I ever come back here, it'll be too soon."

"Agreed," Sam said, and then grimaced. "If we're lucky, no one will make the connection between us-us and girl-us breaking Jimmy Novak out of a hospital."

"Not unless they ever met Cas," Dean granted. He glanced back at Cas, who looked somewhat more diminished sitting in the back of the Charger in scrubs than he had in the hospital. "Even if they had, everyone thinks you're dead, right?"

"Presumably. I have no idea why I am not."

"Well, we're glad you're not," Sam said, trying to meet Cas's eyes through the rear-view mirror. "Kind of hard to say 'thanks' to a dead angel."

"I am no longer an angel," Castiel murmured neutrally.

"Yeah, we figured that out," Dean deadpanned, and sent a glare over at Cas. "Dude, what the hell were you thinking? I mean, don't get me wrong, jumping for joy that Sam is back – but I never asked you to do that. I would have found a way to get him out without you losing your grace or whatever it was you did."

Sam made a disgruntled noise and a wrinkle appeared in Cas's face. "How did you even know?"

"That's a long story that needs a shit-ton of alcohol," Dean replied, turning around in his seat. Off Sam's sudden opening of his mouth, he continued, "And don't start with me on the liver thing, Sam. Surgeon Barbie and Igor said it would grow back and it probably has by now."

"I was going to say getting a former angel drunk when he's just been in a coma for two weeks probably isn't the best idea," Sam retorted.

"Are you kidding? Best idea ever," he grinned back at Cas, suddenly feeling like their problems had diminished by a huge degree. "You're with me on this one, right, Cas?"

But Cas was staring out the window of the Charger, apparently lost in thought. Dean frowned, opened his mouth to figure out what was wrong, but for the umpteenth time today, Sam cut him off.

"Dude, give him a break. He didn't wake up 'til yesterday. He's probably trying to deal with that."

Dean made a face. "I guess…"

"So do something useful and call Bobby with the good news. I don't want to watch you sulk for the next few hours."

"Then don't. Keep your eyes on the road, bitch," Dean retorted, but he brought his phone out and started dialing the old hunter's number.
He couldn't help that his grin resurfaced as he did so.

At the moment, at least, everything was going right.

It was two o'clock in the morning before they finally pulled off the road near St. Charles, Minnesota. In an effort to get as far from the law and Detroit as possible, they had driven the rest of the day, stopping only once for food despite the gnawing in Sam's stomach. Different metabolism or not, he and Dean wanted to be far from Sinai Grace as they could manage in one go.

Castiel hadn't seemed to mind, but whether that was because he wasn't quite able to notice his own hunger yet or because he was still working the drugs out of his system, Sam wasn't sure. The former angel had complained of cold within the first few miles of the drive. Now, though, he was now wrapped up not only in Jimmy Novak's trench coat but also the heaviest of Sam's hoodies which Dean had dutifully dug out of the trunk.

Sam supposed that when you had spent your entire existence as some kind of holy column of celestial light and power, it took a while to get used to being stuck in a body that sometimes needed help to retain warmth.

There hadn't been much of a chance to question Castiel about it before the former angel passed out in the backseat, and so the only sound in the Charger was the steady rush of heat from the vents. Dean hadn't even made a move to turn on the radio. Although Sam could tell his brother was in a better mood since busting Castiel out of the hospital, he also knew that Dean was restless. He kept sending furtive glances at the ex-angel in the backseat.

Sam understood to an extent. He might not have been as anxious about Castiel as Dean, but he was just as interested in hearing the full story of what had happened; particularly the part relating to how Sam had been brought back to earth, while Adam was still down in the Pit with two pissed off archangels.

He hoped there was at least a good reason for it and that it hadn't just been angelic oversight. Castiel may have understood humans a little better since his last brief stint, but he had spent millennia as an angelic strategist. To him, perhaps Adam was just collateral damage, whereas Sam was seen as an inalienable part of Dean.

It was a true, albeit not particularly comforting notion, and Sam really hoped that wasn't the case; but at least he could understand that logic.

'It still sucks, though,' he thought as they pulled into the tree-lined parking lot of the White Valley Motel, which advertised 24-hour check in. The rest stop was on the way to Sioux Falls, their current destination; that decision had been made when they realized Bobby was still not picking up their calls. Although Sam knew it was entirely possible that the older hunter was just ignoring their efforts at communication to protect them, his own gut instincts made him agree readily with Dean's suggestion to check in.

'And guilt,' he reminded himself. Whatever their problems, Bobby's soul was still compromised. Now that they had Castiel, maybe they would be able to come up with a plan to get that soul back.

'Not that a depowered angel is much use against the self-proclaimed King of Hell, but he might have some ideas.'

Dean had wanted to drive all the way through the night until they reached the salvage yard, but Sam
had enough presence of mind to argue against that idea.

"There're probably hunters watching the roads in and out of Sioux Falls," he had argued. "I bet they've got eyes on state highways, too. I doubt they'd care if we were just passing through, but two women and a scruffy looking guy show up to Bobby's place? Anyone who's heard anything about us or Cas would at least check into it."

Dean had mulled it over, and then nodded reluctantly. "Okay. We'll stop for the night and plan our next move in the morning."

Sam knew the easy acceptance was more for Castiel's benefit than for theirs, but he didn't mind that. As far as he was concerned, now that Castiel was human, the guy deserved to sleep on a mattress that didn't have manacles or the consistency of concrete.

While Dean waited in the car with Castiel, Sam headed to office to see to their lodgings.

"Two queens," he said out of habit to the balding, overweight guy manning the front desk, and then amended, "Actually, if you have three doubles, that'd be better."

The guy shrugged, not bothering with any of the idle chit-chat daytime staff would have tried. Sam paid with J. Jett's credit card and then headed back to the car, indicating to Dean to pass the first half-dozen, single storey structures and park at the far end of the circular lot.

Upon following his brother and Castiel into the room, Sam was relieved to see that the motel's conditions were a lot better than the last few dives he and Dean had stayed in; the wallpaper was white and sparsely decorated with fifties-style motorcycle prints, and it lacked the stale, cigarette-sodden scent he had come to associate with motel rooms. A small television and mini-fridge were piled on top of a cheap bureau, and in the corner of the room there was a round faux-wood table and chairs.

Dean helped Castiel toward one of the beds, gingerly lowering him down like he was made of glass. The ex-angel actually seemed to sag a little as Dean pulled away from him to reach for his duffel bag, and Sam winced in sympathy at the sight. Castiel still looked somewhat shell-shocked.

Dean tossed Sam a tin of salt to line the window and door ledges. While Sam worked, he heard the snikt sound of Dean's switchblade and the accompanying sharp scent of blood that suggested Dean was getting ready to paint some protective sigils. Not for the first time, Sam wished there was a better way of shielding themselves than opening a vein or three. He also hoped they would be far away from the motel by the next day, because explaining to the owner why the walls were covered in blood was not how he wanted to spend his morning.

"You should not be doing that," Castiel spoke up, the familiar gravelly tone making Sam jump in surprise when it broke the silence. "Whether the Apocalypse is over or not, your blood is too valuable. Let me –"

"Not gonna happen," Dean cut him off. While Sam started outlining a Devil's Trap beneath the windows and door in chalk, Dean's reflection in the television was pointing a bloodied finger at the former angel. "Your real boy body is probably so out of whack right now, you'd end up knocking yourself out for another two weeks if you lost any more blood."

Sam glanced up, noting how Castiel seemed torn between arguing the point and glowering at Dean; in the end, his lingering exhaustion made the decision for him, because he simply inclined his head and bit out a slightly sullen, "Check for listening spells."
The directive was perfunctory at best; ever since Sam found out about Crowley's special coins he had scoured whatever small surface where such a thing could conceivably be hidden. They humored Castiel, either way.

As soon as they were satisfied that the room was as secure as a random highway motel could be, Sam sat himself back onto one of the other unoccupied beds and allowed some of the tension he had been holding since New York City drain out of him. Rolling his shoulder, he peered at Castiel, trying to figure out how best to approach the situation in a direct, yet still sympathetic manner.

Dean, as usual, had no such scruples.

"Okay, man, before we do anything else, you've got to clue us in on some stuff," he declared, grabbing one of the chairs and swinging it around to straddle it. "Starting with what the hell you did. 'Cause we were under the impression that the Cage was a forever kind of thing. But seeing as Sam's...here...I'm gonna go out on a limb and say someone's been holding back intel."

"Not that I'm not grateful," Sam reiterated hastily, earning an annoyed yet apologetic glance from Dean and a thoughtful frown from Castiel, "but I think we're all long past accepting anything at face-value."

"Meaning: is whatever you did going to come back to bite us in the ass?" Dean pressed, ignoring Sam's unimpressed glare.

Sam was used to Dean being a jerk when he was worried about something or someone; he had lived it every day of his first nineteen years of life, and then when they reunited it had just picked right back up again. To someone not used to that reaction, he might come off as unnecessarily harsh – to an angel who had very little experience with human emotion, it might seem like a personal attack. Close relationship or not, from the brief flicker of hurt that flashed across Castiel's face, he was taking it personal. Gone was the expression of angelic aloofness, and Sam had a feeling they probably wouldn't be seeing it as much in the future.

"Not that I am aware of," Castiel answered stiffly, wrapping his coat tighter around himself. It was so odd on top of Sam's bulky hoody, a huge contrast from the way they were used to seeing him. "If Sam is here, it means the exchange worked. The only –"

"'Exchange'?"Dean repeated, eyes narrowed in suspicion. His voice had that unnatural calmness too it that Sam knew he was coming to a conclusion he didn't like. "So, you did make a deal."

"Not in the traditional sense, but yes."

"If there was a crossroads demon involved, I'm gonna say that's pretty traditional."

"Crossroads demons are bound by sacred law to fulfill their deals to the letter," Castiel replied, stiff defensiveness in his tone.

"And let me guess – your grace was the collateral," Dean bit out, becoming redder and redder with anger.

Sam was tempted to step in before his brother had some kind of aneurysm, but Castiel seemed to have recovered from his discomfiture with Dean's mood, and he met Dean's furious gaze head-on, his chin jutted out slightly.

"It was the only way," the former angel asserted neutrally. "Had there been another option, I would gladly have taken it."
"No one asked you – do you realize how - ?" Dean was standing now, apparently incapable of forming a coherent sentence.

This time, Sam took the opportunity to cut him off, drawing Castiel's attention. "I thought there wasn't an option to begin with."

"I did not know about it before," Castiel told him quietly, almost apologetic. "It was not until I was resurrected at Stull and my grace transformed that I discovered that there was a…loophole."

"What loophole?" Sam prompted.

Castiel looked away, a wrinkle in his brow and perplexed curve in his mouth that suggested he wasn't sure how to put his words. When Dean made an impatient noise and Sam elbowed him, Castiel finally nodded to himself and spoke.

"As angry as my Father was with Lucifer when he rebelled, He was not without hope of reconciliation," Castiel began to explain. "Even as He created the Cage, He hoped it would only be temporary. The Seals He ordained were never the actual way He wanted it to be opened."

"Are you saying all of Heaven and Hell got together to sneak in the Apocalypse through the back door?" Dean demanded.

"Yes. They did not know that the way into Lucifer's Cage was so much simpler – or rather, the majority of them didn't. Those that knew would never have pursued that avenue," he sighed, and offered yet another contrite face. "Had I known at the time, I would have told you. Even if it was more impossible than Sam's plan to entrap Lucifer."

"But you managed to do it, in the end," Sam pointed out, shivering at the mention of his time with the Devil.

"Only after I was…upgraded," Castiel said, hesitating on the final word like he wasn't sure it was the right one.

"Which brings us back to my first question – what did you do?" Dean ground out.

"The way to open the Cage is with the grace of an archangel," Castiel said. "If an archangel voluntarily gave up their grace, it would become a key."

Dean made a strangled noise of understanding, and Sam considered this before exhaling a curse.

"That…makes sense, sort of. I can't see Michael or Raphael ever ponying up their grace to let their brother out of Hell. Even Gabriel never gave up his when he was down here, right?"

"No," Castiel agreed, a shadow passing over his face at the mention of Gabriel. Whether they had known each other or not, it still sucked to lose a brother. Adam's fate played on Sam's mind every moment of every day, especially since his memories of Hell returned. It must be a hundred times worse if you had never felt grief before the way Castiel was now. "Not only would they be discouraged by their resentment of Lucifer, but sacrificing one's grace is the equivalent of a death sentence."

"Isn't it the same as Falling?" Sam wanted to know.

"Not exactly. If I had Fallen, I would have expelled my grace from me and with it my memories and self. I would have forgotten everything for the promise of a mortal life."
"So you're saying…?"

"I would have lived out a human life and then ceased to exist. Many of the Fallen believe it to be a worthy sacrifice, but for the most powerful of our brethren, it would have been too much to bear."

He trailed off with a shrug, while both Sam and Dean took a moment to process this information. Before Sam was able to move past both the disbelief that there had been another way to open the Cage and the amazement that Castiel had actually done something so huge for him, Dean was on his feet and glaring down at the angel.

"Are you telling me you could have died?" Dean demanded, eyes flashing.

"I should have," Castiel agreed. "It continues to perplex me as to why I did not cease to be the minute my grace was transformed."

"That's… that's not the point!" Dean spluttered, pacing back and forth in an angry circle. "It was my responsibility to find a way, man, not yours! You could have offed yourself without it working – and then I'd have to deal with Sam being in a hole and – and you being dead."

Dean's words were harsh and critical, and even Sam winced in sympathy because it almost sounded as though he was calling Castiel out for doing the one thing he had desperately wanted anyhow but had never voiced. Clearly Castiel was better versed in Dean than he was in human behaviour, though, because after a second of perplexed staring, a glimmer of comprehension flickered through his eyes.

"Ah," he said, nodding to himself. "I understand now. You are angry because you were worried, and because you are a Winchester, you are lashing out at me to cover up that anxiety. I will bear you no ill for this."

Sam couldn't help the snort of amusement, both at Castiel's words and at the interesting shade of red his brother was turning. He couldn't help adding fuel to that fire, remarking, "Yeah, Dean, you don't have the monopoly on self-sacrifice. Family trait, remember? And at this point, I think it might be contagious."

"What did I say about you and Cas not getting to play together anymore?" Dean snapped accusingly. "There's no teaming up, graceless angel or not."

"If I may ask," Castiel interrupted, clearly not bothered by Dean's hissy fit, "how is it you both knew I was without my grace in the first place?"

"You mean other than the fact you were in a psych ward and didn't smite the crap out of the doctors keeping you there?" Sam asked. He nodded over at his brother. "Dean can tell you that."

"Tell me what?" Castiel asked, attempting to meet Dean's gaze.

Still fuming, Dean continued to glower for a full ten seconds before grunting in annoyance and shrugging out of his jacket and over-shirt, before pushing up the sleeve of his t-shirt up over his shoulder.

"Notice anything missing?" he grumbled, the tone the petulant one Sam recognized as Dean's 'you may got me beat there, but I don't have to like it' tone. "The last two times you died that didn't happen. What's so special about this – hey! What are you doing?!"

Dean's growling complaint turned into a strange kind of yelp as Castiel suddenly moved, getting up off the bed and surging forward faster than his lethargy might have suggested him capable of. He
was right up into Dean's personal space, and before Dean could jerk away, he had rested his hand against the spot where his handprint had once rested.

To Sam's surprise, Dean didn't begin to swear or berate Castiel about violating his personal bubble the way he usually would; instead, he went quiet, his entire body completely tense and watchful, as though he was surprised but not threatened. As Sam and Dean watched, Castiel closed his eyes and concentrated, eyebrows knit together.

There was a long minute of uncomfortable silence, before the former angel shook his head and opened his eyes. "It is no use. Whatever shred of sensitivity I once had is completely gone."

"So you don't know why it's missing?" Sam prompted, because apparently Dean was too busy staring at the place where Castiel was holding his arm like he was desperately trying to understand something.

"In an ordinary case, I would say it had healed – the physical mark would have done that anyhow, in time," Castiel mused. "The spiritual mark…It is rare for an angel's grace to touch the soul of a human that is not their vessel. That mark would have endured. Possibly indefinitely."

"And you can't tell if it's still there," Sam realized.

Castiel nodded shortly. "The place where my grace touched Dean's soul in Hell created a permanent spiritual…brand. One which any being with a shred of psychic ability would pick up, even in your new forms." His voice became tight. "Had I retained even a spark of my grace I would have been able to see it. Unfortunately, I no longer possess even that."

Sam's expression of sympathy was cut off by Dean, who finally coughed uncomfortably. "Uh, Cas? The hand?"

Castiel's fingers were still wrapped gently but firmly around Dean's deltoid. Sam would have laughed at the uncomfortable expression on Dean's face if the situation hadn't been so serious.

The former angel blinked, as if remembering himself, and with an odd reluctance, let go of Dean. He took a small step backward, examining his fingers. The distance didn't seem to be enough for Dean, who casually widened it further by leaning back against the cheap wallpaper.

"Moving on – whatever happened, Dean knew there was something wrong with you before we even knew you were gone," Sam explained. "If what you said was true, how did you survive? Because, I'm here, so obviously whatever you did worked. So – not that I want you dead or anything – but how are you still…you know?"

"I have some theories, each as unlikely as the last."

"Aggie said she thought your grace and Dean's soul bonded," Sam suggested, ignoring the stink-eye Dean gave him, whether at the mention of Aggie or a notion as ridiculous sounding as a grace-soul bond.

"Aggie?"

"Oh. Right, we never…she's the pagan goddess that made us look like this," Sam said, gesturing to his and Dean's feminine forms. Dean was scowling again.

"You never did explain how it is you came by these new bodies," Castiel pulled a face. He actually looked at Dean like he was insulted or something. "I assume there was some necessity behind it?"
"Well, let's see – demons still hate us, there are hunters pissed off because of the Apocalypse we accidentally started, and your ninja turtle brother is a dick," Dean listed brusquely.

"My…?"

"Raphael," Sam added helpfully.

Castiel looked slightly alarmed. "He is free?"

"Yup. And mad as hell that we stopped the Apocalypse. He wants to restart the damn thing," Dean grumbled.

"And you were AWOL at the time, so we couldn't…the short version of the story is that we needed to disappear without actually disappearing," Sam finished. "Bobby called in a favor and here we are. Sort of."

"And this…pagan…suggested a soul bond?" Castiel inquired.

"Yeah, she kind of implied that when your grace touched Dean's soul, they were kind of, uh, coloured by one another," Sam agreed, ignoring Dean's eye twitching at all the soul-talk. "Like, you had a piece of Dean's soul in your grace and he had a piece of your grace in his soul."

"That is a possibility. And it would have been an infinitesimal piece, as I never paid it any attention," Castiel mused. "That might explain how I survived. It is possible that when my grace left this body, the part of Dean's soul which had become part of it was left behind. It may have acted as a kernel for my own soul to develop."

This theory was met with awkward silence.

"Huh. Strong soul," Sam commented in a would-be offhand way.

"Dean's soul is one of the brightest I have ever seen," Castiel agreed.

"Dean is standing right here and wishes you two would stop gossiping about my damn soul," Dean grumped. "So that's your other survival theory?"

"It is possible that when my grace faded the first time, I became so human that a soul of my own was born," Castiel answered. He paused, considered, and then added, "I believe the reality is likely a little bit of both. My own fledgling soul was too weak to animate this body. When my grace was transformed into the key – and when the part of it which had bonded to Dean's ripped through me – I suppose it was enough of a shock to reanimate this body."

It was another explanation that elicited a tense silence, and Sam couldn't help but be slightly amazed by it. Dean, in contrast, seemed more than freaked out. He adopted the look that Sam usually interpreted as his 'too much damn information' face, and exhaled wearily. "So, who was on the receiving end of this deal of yours, anyway?"

Castiel shook his head. "It is not relevant."

"The fuck it's not!"

"If the deal had not achieved the desired effects, I might agree with you – however, as that is not the case, there is no reason for you to seek out the demon I dealt with. It will not change matters."

"Well, if it's not going to change anything, just give us the name –"
"It's Crowley."

Both Dean and Castiel faced Sam; the latter's face was carefully blank, but the more Sam thought about it, the more sense it made. "He's King of the Crossroads deal, right? Cas wouldn't go to any small-fry demon to begin with, and anyone higher than Crowley would be more likely to gank him than deal with him." Dean looked ready to explode again, so Sam hurriedly finished his thought. "Besides, if what Crowley said about there being demons in Hell that didn't want Lucifer out, he'd need some kind of…firepower to keep himself above the rest of them."

Not the best thing to say.

"You trusted Crowley?" Dean demanded, rounding on Castiel again.

"It was the only option."

Dean gave the impression of wanting to reply, but noticed Sam's expression and made an obvious change in tactics.

"Fucking great!" he complained. "Not only does that son of a bitch have Bobby's soul, now he's running around with archangel grace. Awesome. Add that to the ever-growing list of shit we need to find."

"No," Castiel said, his tone sharp. He was eyeballing Dean with an expression of such ferocious intensity that even Dean paused. "My grace is forfeit – despite the fact that I somehow survived separation from it, I will not allow you to seek out Crowley for it."

"Why the hell not?"

"For the same reason you refused to let Sam save you when you made your deal for his life," Castiel answered tonelessly.

"He's afraid it would invalidate the deal," Sam realized, quiet.

Logic like that, even Dean couldn't argue with, although from the furious way his jaw snapped closed and his eyes narrowed, Sam knew that given time, his brother would try to find a way to do just that. It was moments like this that he was sure that if Dean had had a normal upbringing, it would have been him that decided to go into law, not Sam.

Deciding that it was best to distract him from whatever argument he was coming up with right now, Sam decided to change the subject.

Sam interjected quietly, "Questions aside – are you doing okay? I'm sure this is a huge adjustment for you."

"I am…fine," Castiel answered evasively. Sam and Dean exchanged unconvinced glances.

"You're anything but 'fine'," Sam told him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Months ago. Raw ground beef," Castiel answered without hesitation. "It is not something I wish to re-experience."

"Uh, no, generally we like our meat cooked," Sam said with a wince. "They didn't feed you at the hospital?"

"The sustenance I was provided with in the hospital did not agree with this body's digestive system,"
Castiel replied matter-of-factly. "Besides, I do not consider that to be the current problem. If I am recalling the signs correctly, I believe I need to relieve myself."

The revelation was such a stark difference from the last hour's tone and so bluntly put in such a Castiel kind of way that Sam couldn't help letting out a startled guffaw. Even Dean's lip twitched like he wanted to crack a smile.

Instead, he asked in a gruffly petulant voice, "Sure you can handle that on your own?"

"I am not incompetent, Dean, I still retain a few of Jimmy's memories," Castiel replied as he headed toward the ensuite bathroom; Sam couldn't help grinning at the audible annoyance in his answer.

This time, Dean did smile.

"Okay, fine, but if you have trouble, we can always find you a Cheerio to aim at," Dean called after him. "It's how we taught Sammy."

"Dean!" Sam protested, feeling heat flood his cheeks as the bathroom door shut. "Could you be a bit more mature about this? The guy's been human for less than two weeks. Maybe give him time to adjust before you start mocking him and telling him stuff no one needs to know?"

"Sam, I've been forced into a chick's body for a week and a half – no one gave me any compassion," Dean retorted, unimpressed. "Share the misery, I say."

"Right, because you're all about the sharing," Sam rolled his eyes, and then studied his brother. Dean was glaring at the door through which Castiel had disappeared, obviously not yet satisfied with the way the conversation was going.

Sam sighed inwardly, knowing they weren't going to get any further tonight if Dean kept interrupting Castiel to berate him about his latest martyr stunt. It had occurred to him a few times since rescuing Castiel that there was something lurking unsaid between the two of them, more than their usual unresolved issues. Whatever it was, Sam was too tired to play therapist for the two most emotionally stunted people he had ever met.

"I'm going to head out for a bit," Sam said, already starting for the door. "Saw a 24-hour diner down the road, and I'm starving."

"You're going out now?" Dean demanded, leaving off his glaring contest with the cheap motel door to raise an eyebrow at Sam. "That's convenient."

Sam ignored him. "I know it's hard, but can you try not to be an asshole to the guy that busted me out of Hell? It's not exactly the best way to say 'thank you'."

Dean's eyes widened incrementally in a manner akin to panic. "You don't think I'm pissed at him for bringing you back?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "No, I don't. But I also know that you're giving him the same raking over the coals that you'd be giving me if I had pulled what he did. Which is fine. I get it. You were worried and possibly experienced feelings, but it's over now. We have bigger things to worry about, like trying to save Adam. So while I'm out, resolve your shit with Cas, so we can get started on that. Because seriously, dude, reliving what happened to me and Adam down there is not getting any easier the longer this takes."

Dean's jaw clenched at the reminder about Adam, and while Sam felt a little guilty at using their suffering younger brother as a cue to get Dean's mind back in the game, he also knew it was the best
tactic.

He gave a jerky nod.

"We'll talk options when I get back," Sam finished and headed through the doorway.

"You'd better bring back some pie," he heard Dean grumble as the door fell shut.

'Shoulda made sure he had a pair of brass knuckles or pepper spray on him,' Dean thought a few minutes later, thinking about how Sam's less than intimidating current form might incite some unwanted attention. The highway community they had pulled into didn't seem like it would be very troublesome, but you could never tell. Even when Dean and Sam were in their true bodies, there was always the possibility of some stupid hick starting trouble.

The automatic surge of over-protectiveness that always emerged when it came to Sam flitted away, and Dean felt his stomach – already knotted up with anger and frustration – clench up again in discomfort. For whatever reason, he was now supremely conscious of the fact that without his brother around, he and Cas were going to be alone together. It would be the first time since the angel bailed on him during the drive home from Stull, and Dean remembered that last conversation all too well.

"God gives you a brand new, shiny set of wings and suddenly you're his bitch again."

Not exactly his finest moment, and he could only use grief over Sam as justification for so long. By the time he had pulled into Lisa's driveway, he had come to the conclusion that he had been unnecessarily hard on Cas – especially in light of everything the angel had done to him since rebelling against Heaven. After Sam's return and the realization of Cas's involvement in it, that modicum of regret over a few harsh words had blossomed into full-blown guilt.

'Like I need any more of that in my life,' Dean thought sourly.

He dearly wanted to blame the new girl-brain for the fact he'd been thinking about the latest conundrum nonstop, but he was pretty sure that even if he had been in his own bones, he would have felt guilty about inadvertently goading Cas into pulling so dangerous a stunt. This wasn't like the few hours before Lucifer rose when he had been mad enough and desperate enough to try to convince Cas to do the right thing; it was him bitching about his own problems and Cas putting his own life on the line to make it better.

Once again, Dean found himself contemplating just how to say 'thank you' for something that should never have worked but which he was grateful for all the same.

As Cas returned from the bathroom, ruffled and unimpressed with yet another new requirement that being human forced upon him, Dean was still struggling to come up with the words.

Cas, unaware of Dean's dilemma, cast a sweeping glance around the room and then asked, "Where is Sam?"

"He went to get food. I thought he had a huge appetite when he was a Sasquatch. It's been even worse since he actually became a girl," Dean said with a shrug. "It's a metabolism thing."

"I suppose that is understandable," Cas said calmly, as though it was an everyday occurrence to talk
about someone's spontaneous genderswitch.

Dean snorted. "You're taking this whole us-being-turned-into-chicks thing really well."

"I am an angel – or, I was," Cas told him earnestly, naked pain flitting across his face too quickly for him to be able to hide it. Rather than remark on it, Dean waited for him to continue. "As a spiritual being, I was always more aware of the metaphysical state of my Father's creatures before I knew their physical forms. I may now be mortal, but it seems that proclivity remains." He attempted to smile at Dean. "You are you, regardless of the body you wear. If I had not been so disoriented when you came to rescue me, I would have noticed it sooner."

Dean shifted uncomfortably, finding a very odd element of comfort in that statement. When he peeked up, Cas was watching him with his usual look of intense scrutiny.

"I got something on my face?" Dean groused.

"You made a promise to Sam," Cas told him seriously. "I could not let you undermine your word and put yourself in danger yet again."

Apparently Cas wasn't as unaware of Dean's thoughts as he had imagined.

"Underm – how did you – ?"

"He told me of it, before he went to Lucifer. He asked me to watch out for you and make sure you kept your promise. I knew you wouldn't be able to, because I know you and I know how much Sam means to you."

Dean clenched his fists, knowing that Cas was right and resenting the hell out of it all the while.

"Fine, I wouldn't have been able to do it," he grunted, glaring at Cas. "But that doesn't mean you should have pulled that shit without even knowing if it was going to work."

Cas blinked. "I may not be well-versed in irony as of yet, but considering how you have lived your life…"

"We are so not talking about me right now," Dean snapped. "Weren't you Mr. Angelic Strategist up there? Exactly what part of handing over your grace to Crowley on the off chance that he could get Sam out of Hell was strategic?"

"There was no other way that I knew of," Cas replied.

"Nuh-uh – I call bullshit on that one, Cas," Dean shot back. "There's always another way. And that way includes friggen' talking to people before you go off and do something nuts without even knowing if it's going to work."

Cas tilted his head to one side, eyes searching. "You are displeased not because of what I did, then… but because I did not come to you with the plan?"

"Yes – no – ugh, this is so messed up," Dean groaned, scrubbing a hand down his face and then pointing at Cas. "Let's get one thing straight – I'm real glad you got Sam back. After all the crap Sam and I put you through last year…Just, thanks, okay?" He didn't allow Cas to protest about being under Heaven's orders at the time, because as far as he was concerned, those other winged dicks had had zilch to do with his resurrection. "But Sam's my responsibility – and if you knew a way to get him out, you shoulda told me. We could have figured it out together and maybe your grace would still be…you know, your grace."
Cas was still watching him with that uncanny amount of understanding that usually no one but Sam ever managed. Dean forced himself to remain still under that gaze and ignore the return of the butterflies in his stomach.

Finally, Cas nodded slowly. "I apologize if I made you worry. Given your history, I did not think you would care how it was accomplished, so long as Sam was safe."

And yeah, that right there hurt; the fact that Cas thought he was so low on the list of Dean's priorities after everything they had been through was a misconception Dean intended to rectify once and for all. "Dude – first of all, there's no worrying going on. Stop making me sound like someone's mother. Second of all, you're an idiot."

Cas looked like he was about to protest.

"No, listen – next to Sam and Bobby, you are the closest thing I have to family. You're like a brother to me. In fact – and I feel crummy saying this, but it doesn't make it less true – you're more family to me than Adam is right now. So damn right I'm going to wig out when you do something as stupid as dealing with the same douchebag crossroads demon that already screwed us over at least twice."

Cas's eyes widened, and Dean was treated to the unfamiliar sight of color flooding his cheeks. "I…Thank you, Dean. I…did not know…"

"Yeah, well, don't go spreading that shit around," Dean muttered, crossing his arms and looking away. "I've got a reputation to maintain."

"I will endeavor to keep it to myself," Cas promised solemnly.

There was a beat.

"I assume you and Sam are planning to go after Adam." It wasn't a question, and Dean had a moment's appreciation of the fact that Cas, at least, understood the mysterious workings of the Winchester mind.

"Well, yeah, considering you didn't happen to bring him back up too," Dean allowed. And okay, he sounded a little bit like he was bitching, but he'd never been good at segueing into subtle questions. Along with the gene for ridiculous floppy hair, that particular talent went to Sam.

"I tried, but Crowley would have none of it," Cas said ruefully. "It was either Sam or Adam. Given the circumstance, I believed you would be more concerned with Sam's return than Adam's."

Dean shifted uncomfortably at that, because Cas was right. "So you're not going to talk us out of it?"

"I did warn Crowley that you would be less than pleased at the turn of events," Cas answered. "I know better than most exactly what lengths you will go to for your family." He tilted his head again, a question in his eyes. "I understand that I am of little use to you now without my grace, but if you are amenable…"

He trailed off, unasked question hanging between them.

"You still know a shit ton more than Sam and I do about the mysteries of the universe," Dean stated immediately. He smirked. "What, didja think we were just going to toss you on the sidelines?"

This time, Cas was the one to crack a small smile and Dean felt warmth in his stomach. It had been too long since he had seen Cas with one of those, and it surprised him just how much comfort he drew from it. It occurred to him right then that if certain circumstances had been different, Cas might
have ended up dead and he would never get the chance to see that particular expression again.

That thought bothered him more than it should have, Dean realized as Cas strode forward hesitantly and thrust his hand out in front of him. He raised an eyebrow. "Uh…Cas?"

"This is the appropriate gesture, is it not?" Cas asked uncertainly, his hand wavering slightly as doubt crossed his eyes.

"Uh, yeah, no, that's right," Dean rambled, for some reason feeling awkward and stupid placing his hand within Cas's. He intended to shake it in a quick, businesslike gesture, but as Cas's hand tightened around his, he paused. Cas, too, stared down at their joined hands, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Cas's hand – which had once belonged to a guy who sold ad time to AM radio – was soft and possessed of a surprisingly strong grip. It was a stark contrast to Dean's work-roughened one, which even Aggie's transformative powers hadn't softened.

The entire gesture itself felt wrong, somehow; almost inadequate. The fact that he thought so was even more wrong, as it was usually Sam who dealt with the touchy-feely crap and had a tendency to emote uncontrollably.

As though bidden by his thoughts, Sam – who had both the best and worst timing in history – barged back into the room without knocking.

"Dean, we've got to – whoa, am I interrupting something?" he asked, stopping in his tracks and eying Dean and Cas's still clasped hands.

"No, we're good," Dean said, pulling away abruptly and backing up a few more feet. Cas did the same, slowly sitting back onto the bed he had claimed before. Dean cleared his throat, shot Sam a 'don't say a word' glare and asked, "What's up?"

Sam gave himself the minutest of headshakes and then said, "I was barely out of the parking lot when I got the call. Bobby's in trouble."

"What? Why?" Dean demanded, awkwardness forgotten as worry surged up to take its place. "How do you know?"

"I just got a phone call from Jody Mills."

"Who?"

"The sheriff in Sioux Falls? The one whose son I…the one whose son rose from the dead?"

"Why's she calling you?"

"I guess Bobby gave her our number in case something happened. She's been in contact with him since Death visited. Apparently, Bobby hasn't been answering her phone calls and when she went over there, his place was destroyed," Sam explained grimly. "Huge Mack truck destroyed the whole front wall. She's been keeping people off the property, but no sign of him anywhere."

"He must truly trust this woman to compromise your location," Cas remarked idly, once again back in stoic-angel mode.

"Shit," Dean growled. He glanced around the room. "Well, it's a good thing we didn't really unpack anything. Let's head out."
He started back toward the window, ready to erase the salt-line, when Cas spoke again. "Exactly what is it you can do about his disappearance at this juncture?"

"We can do our damnedest to find out what happened to him," Dean retorted darkly.

"It's not safe for you to do so at this time, if what you said about Raphael and your other pursuers is true."

"Screw that, Cas, he's family – he could be dead! And I'm betting it would be our fault."

"It is unlikely that he is dead," Cas reasoned. "Any enemies of yours would have wanted to leave a message if that were the case. Most likely, he would have been taken either to be tortured for information –"

" – thanks for that, Cas –"

" – in which case he would be kept alive as long as possible," Cas finished. "But it might be another explanation."

"Like?"

"Angels."

"That's not good either."

"It depends on the angel. There was one which I spoke to before the events of Stull who might have taken my sudden disappearance as a reason to… check in… on Bobby."

"Well who was it? We can summon his ass down here and find out!"

"No. I am not sure that is the case, and on the off chance I am wrong I will not jeopardize what you have sacrificed to disappear just to gain information," Cas maintained. "It is best to stay as far from angelic attention as possible. Spend your efforts trying to free Adam."

Sam's head jerked up, questioningly. "Is there even a way to do that?"

"Once I would have said no, but considering the things I have seen you both accomplish, I believe there must be," Cas answered. When he next spoke, he was addressing Dean. "I understand that it goes against every bit of your resolve to leave Bobby right now, but going after him right now would be a mistake."

"What the hell do you suggest we do? Sit around with our thumbs up our asses?!” Cas cocked his head to one side, deliberating his own thumb, and Dean rolled his eyes. "Figure of speech, Cas."

"Ah, I see," he said, although he clearly didn't. He glanced back at Dean, and then at Sam. "I assume you have the materials for a summoning spell?"

"Yeah, of course," Sam said.

"Then I require those," Cas said decisively. "As well as your absence. I will discern Bobby's whereabouts, while you both concern yourselves with Adam."

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Side One of the Not Exactly Ovid Soundtrack:

1. Rooster - Alice in Chains
2. No Quarter - Led Zeppelin
3. Crazy Train - Ozzy Osbourne
4. Keep Yourself Alive - Queen
5. Every Grain of Sand - Bob Dylan
6. Aiplanes II - B.o.B featuring Hayley Williams and Eminem
7. The Look - Roxette
8. Space Oddity - David Bowie
9. Rivendell - Rush
10. Soul Stripper - AC/DC
11. The Logical Song - Supertramp
12. Kickstart My Heart - Mötley Crüe
13. Like A Stone - Audioslave
15. Here I Go Again - Whitesnake
Reeling from his Fall, Castiel contacts a brother...

Castiel felt –

Castiel felt.

It was disconcerting at best, and almost terrifying at worst. Before, any sensation that ze—he – had taken notice of had been coloured through grace, separated and muted by that impermeable barrier of an angel's true self. Now, though, he experienced everything with the most personal intensity imaginable.

He had already decided that he truly disliked the sensation of being cold; when he had been near mortal the first time, enough of his grace had remained that he hadn't noticed it. He had been too weak to heal himself or stave off hunger, but there had always been that muted thrum in the background, the last vestiges of zir – his self that had kept him warm.

Wrapped in several layers of Jimmy Novak's and Sam's clothing, along with one of the blankets from the motel bed, he was still having trouble staving off the chill. Along with undergoing hunger and exhaustion, the latter of which was returning despite spending half a day asleep in the back of Dean's car, the cold was becoming one of his least favorite experiences.

Sam had tried to assure him it wouldn't last, although there had been an unsure note in his tone; Castiel supposed it came from the fact there had never been a fallen angel who could remember what their grace felt like.

His current shivering was only one of the reasons he was so anxious to return to the Winchesters; their room was much warmer and more comforting than the one he sat in now. Dean had picked the lock to get in while Sam had brought the summoning materials. The blinds were drawn tightly shut and the furniture had been moved out of the way for him to carry out the summoning ritual.

Convincing the Winchesters to allow him to do this alone had been nearly impossible; frustratingly
so. It was only when he finally managed to convince Sam that by reaching out to his brother he would be able to reopen some of his former channels of information that Sam began to agree with him. Having Sam arguing on his side meant that Dean's acquiescence soon followed, but it had taken so much time that Castiel could have completed the spell and finished with it by the time they ceased deliberating.

It seemed that along with certain physical sensations, more emotional ones were beginning to manifest in him as well, impatience being the forerunner.

Once the room was set up, Sam had dragged Dean off, supposedly to find sustenance. Castiel was glad for this, as it would take the brothers out of the general area. Although the sigils he had carved into their ribs would hide them from any angel, even if it were pressed up against their motel room door, Castiel did not wish to take more chances than necessary.

He knew that Dean would have the most trouble with this plan, not liking to receive information second hand, but Castiel trusted Sam to keep his brother tempered; setting down a circle of holy oil that Castiel only had to ignite in event of trouble also helped. Castiel doubted he would need to make of use of it, but as long as it gave Dean some measure of comfort, he would go through the motions.

The ritual itself was familiar as breathing was to a human, but as he finished adding the final ingredient and began to chant, Castiel had to force himself to relax. There was a possibility, given what the Winchesters had said about Raphael's machinations, that Balthazar was no longer…

He shook his head, not allowing himself to think it.

Denial, another human affectation.

Uttering the final syllable, Castiel pressed his eyes closed; he doubted his brother would manifest without his vessel, but Balthazar's sense of humour was somehow quite similar to how Uriel's had been. And Castiel was weakened enough without having his eyeballs burnt from their sockets.

The flimsy room shuddered and creaked, and the glass within the unlit light fixtures burst; he heard cracks appearing in the walls and windows of the room.

"If you're going to be all cowering and pathetic, you might have first considered questioning the wisdom in summoning a…" the familiar, unimpressed drawl suddenly trails off, softening. "Oh, good Lord."

When Castiel did open his eyes, he realized immediately the overwhelming disorientation that came with facing an angel, in a way he hadn't even felt that afternoon at Stull. Instinctively, as he stared at his brother's vessel's face, he knew that despite Dean's initial doubts and suspicions during their first meeting, there was no way the man couldn't have known exactly what Castiel had been. There was just something so other about angels when looking at them through human eyes, that it left no doubt.

Balthazar's vessel was a human male in his late forties, tall and broad-shouldered and clad completely in black. His light hair seemed rumpled, and his clear blue eyes stared at Castiel in what he supposed was disbelief. Without his grace, he could not reach out and instinctively know his brother's thoughts; he needed to rely on all-too-inadequate human senses to do so.

"Brother, what have you done?" Balthazar asked, his vessel's expression carefully blank, but his words dripping with disapproval or perhaps grief.

"I have done what I had to," Castiel told him earnestly.

Balthazar stared at him in uncomprehending silence, before looking around, his face drawn. "Where
is he? I'm going to kill the bastard."

It took a moment for Castiel to realize Balthazar was talking about Dean. Although they had never met before, the Winchesters were known by the entire Host and Castiel had told Balthazar much about his charge. "Balthazar –"

"That he would ask this of you is more than blasphemous!" Balthazar snapped, his expression not unlike the one Dean had been wearing most of the night. "And let me tell you, Cassy, I've gotten rather familiar with that particular spectrum in the past few weeks."

"He asked me nothing. I made the choice," Castiel replied, a firm edge of warning in his words. He would not let anyone harm Dean. "In exchange for Sam's soul, I gave what I could. I do not regret it."

Balthazar was almost gaping at him, jarred from his anger by that particular piece of information. "How is that even possible?"

It took less time to explain how he had secured Sam's soul from the cage to Balthazar than it had taken with Crowley or the Winchesters. Part of the reason was because they spoke in Enochian, which was a more economic language than most of the human tongues Castiel had spoken. He was glad that that, at least, remained with him.

Still, Castiel was vague on certain specifics. While the Winchesters would heed his request to not go after the de facto King of Hell for the time being, Balthazar would not. If Balthazar believed it was for Castiel's own good, he would pursue whatever avenue he could to bring about a desired result.

"…which brings me to the reason I summoned you," Castiel finished quietly. "They are worried for their adopted father. He has not been returning their calls."

"I expected you did not want me to take any chances," Balthazar hedged, clearly still unimpressed with his discovery. "But to answer your unasked question, yes, he's safe and sound and has been swearing delightful backwater blue streaks at me whenever I pop in to move him to a new location – which, might I add, is rather inconvenient given the circumstances."

Castiel let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.

"Now that that's out of the way, let me ask you a question," Balthazar drawled. His expression changed to something more serious, but his tone remained almost elaborately casual. "What the ever loving fuck were you thinking?"

Castiel frowned; the harsh human vernacular was unusual for his usually aloof brother, a sign of stress and something else. Still, he answered him as confidently as he could. "I have already told you –"

"Yes, yes, helping out a friend and all that human tripe," his brother made a deliberate, dismissive gesture. "But did you stop to think what might happen without you upstairs to speak for your little monkey friends?" He paced back and forth, the gesture so human that Castiel wondered exactly how close Balthazar had come to following in his footsteps. "You've made a serious tactical error, brother. Now that you're down here living it up with mudfish, there's no one to even considering saying 'boo' to Raphael. Big brother's been slaughtering anyone he finds that disagrees with him."

"I had heard," Castiel allows. "Raphael would have done this whether I retained my grace or not. And I believed it to be of supreme importance to reunite the Winchesters. Why else would our Father have brought me back again? To lead a civil war in Heaven? Or to set something in motion to protect
his most prized creation?"

Balthazar sighed, clearly unhappy with the implications. "I'm tickled that you have some sort of longterm idea of how things are going to go, but in the short term I believe we're what the humans like to call 'screwed'."

"Do not devalue your contributions, Balthazar. I have faith that you can hold the line."

"I've been trying – but I'm at my wits end on morale, Cassy – I was never meant to be a general," Balthazar confided, and Castiel felt a twinge of guilt. He decided he didn't like that emotion at all. It was true that Balthazar's expertise had always been in areas of subterfuge, not strategy.

"Are there no others you have to help you?"

"Rachel, Hester and Inias have expressed unease at Raphael's new world vision, but you know as well as I do that they are soldiers, not leaders."

"I was a soldier for just as long as all of you. Perhaps it is time you look into yourself and find the strength to lead."

"Not everyone has a conveniently rakish mortal in their back-pocket to teach them how to be insubordinate to the Host," Balthazar deadpanned. "Much as you don't want to hear it, brother, our forces need your help. If you would just tell me the name of the demon that holds your grace –"

"No," Castiel cut him off. "As much as I wish to help rectify the turmoil of Heaven, I made a choice. If I were to go back on it now, Sam would be sent back to Hell. I will not return him to a fate he was never meant for in the first place."

"But that's just it, isn't it?" Balthazar probed. "His destiny was either to be destroyed or walk around with Lucifer inside him for eternity. You've already thrown a wrench into the grand plan – what if this is Father's way of putting things back on course?"

"If you truly believed that, you would not be hiding from Raphael," Castiel replied without hesitation.

Balthazar was silent a long moment, contemplating this, and then nodding. "Very well. If you've washed your hands clean of us, we'll need a leader that believes Father wants us to have free-will. And one who is sympathetic to the hairless apes."

"Despite your ostensible disdain for them, I know you have taken to some aspects of humanity rather well," Castiel pointed out.

"Yes, but as we've established, I'm no leader – and I wasn't the one who rebelled against the Host over a few crocodile tears from my charge," Balthazar reminded him. "This should have been your job before you flushed it all way."

"There has to be someone else," Castiel replied. "And there must be a way to do it. There is always a way."

Dean's words warmed him even as they rolled off his tongue.

"While that's adorably upbeat, kindly remember that we've spent eons making sure that everything goes according to Father's plans. This is rather new territory and we're not all lovingly supported by our brutish human lovers."
"Dean is not my lover."

"So you say… and my rather squeamish stomach hopes for your sake that's true. It's a rather foolish thing, to fall for a mortal," Balthazar tells him seriously. "And I'm not talking about the rip-your-grace-out kind of 'fall', either. Remember how cocked up that bit with the Nephilim went?"

"I do not know what you are talking about," Castiel says, bewildered. "My decision may have been influenced by Dean, however in the end it was the right thing to do. Dean and Sam are my friends."

Balthazar rolled his eyes. "I'll be sure to ask you if you still believe that a few months from now when the humanity's sunk in a bit better. That is, of course, if any of us are still alive."

"You should have faith."

"Says the bloke who cashed in his angel chips to ride out the end of days with the most faithless mudmonkey of them all," Balthazar sighed. "What's it like, anyhow?"

"What's what like?"

"Being human?"

"It's… quiet," Castiel said after a moment's deliberation, focussing on the one immediate change to his existence. He could no longer hear the songs of the Heaven. He looked down at his many layers and then back to his brother. "And… cold, at the moment."

"I had wondered why you were doing an impression of a caterpillar," Balthazar said dryly, before his vessel's expression turned to an approximation of concern. "Castiel, are you sure –"

"I have an idea," Castiel interrupted, not wanting to have a repeat of the discussion. "But before we attempt it, there is someone you need to find."

"It's not another flannel-wearing hunter, is it?" Balthazar asked, allowing the change of subject. "Because I must say, my patience with the last one you sent me after is growing dim."

"No. But they will likely be hidden from angels. If you manage to bypass those protective measures, you must relay this message."

Castiel quickly spoke the words and then fleshed out the beginnings of his plan.

Balthazar's eyes went wide. "Is such a thing even possible?"

"I believe it is, however, it is difficult to retain the exact specifics," Castiel said, grimacing in what he realized must be frustration. "The longer I am human, the more of my prior knowledge seems to be slipping away. I do not know how much of it I will retain, either from my time as an archangel or before."

"Yes, well, those are the perks of the newly mortal. Felicitations." Balthazar sighed, his head cocking to one side. "I must be off. Your crotchety old human is complaining about something again. I swear, if he banishes me one more time, I'm sending him back in time to drown on the Titanic."

Castiel frowned. "Using that much power would draw Raphael's attention to you."

Balthazar rolled his eyes. "It's an exaggeration, Cassy. Honestly, now that you're human, look into learning some of the norms."

He disappeared, the familiar sound of wings beating across the planes of existence; before Castiel
could really remark on the absence, though, he reappeared. He strode forward and pressed a hand against Castiel's chest.

A searing, scraping pain radiated out from his chest, knocking the breath from his lungs and making his eyes tear as he gasped.

"I'm not going to pretend I didn't take a modicum of satisfaction in doing that," Balthazar told him as Castiel struggled to recover himself. "But consider that a parting gift in case Raphael finds me and tortures me for information on your whereabouts."

This time when he disappeared, he didn't return.

A huge 'thank you' goes out to those of you who have been reading along so far and who have taken the time to review, most especially: Anna, ashwingsmokefeather, Blasphemoos3, Busie, Crimson Vipera, Effective Immediately, elenathehun, Fallen Seraphim, girlnineteen, Isis the Sphinx, Jade Chase, jdluvva, justine82, kai, Kiyomisa, Leooooo, Lil Kitsune-chan, LonelyElf, Melacreature, mercurybard, Michele, netherlady, pinkskyline, PopsicleOfDeath, primarycolours123, romie, Shane, sonofafluffymuffin and xoxo.
Adopting a Fallen Angel isn't as simple as the Winchesters would like. Sam has some fun at Dean's expense and Cas isn't quite up to human standards yet. Cas gets a lesson in self defense and the lead suspect in the case ends up not being what the Winchesters expected. The Winchesters and Cas get caught in a less than ideal situation, as the culprit of their case turns out to be something Sam is infinitely familiar with.

**Four**

*White Valley Motel,*  
*St. Charles, Minnesota*  
*Sunday 30 May 2010*

"Have I mentioned how much I hate this idea?" Dean growled as they got back into the car and drove away from the local Biggerson's.

"Only a million times," Sam rolled his eyes, putting the paper bag down to rest by his feet. "Look, I know you're still pissed about being overruled, but Cas is right – we can't have any angels knowing where we are, even if they are friends with him."

"Yeah? And what's to say this guy really is on Cas's side? What if we get back there and there's no motel, just ground zero of an angel hissy fit?"

"You really think he would have suggested having an angel show up in the same county as us, let alone the same motel, if he thought there was any danger?" Sam replied. "Come on, Dean, he knows what he's doing."

"Guy's been in a coma for two weeks, it doesn't matter what he thinks he knows," Dean complained as he pulled onto the road leading to the motel. "Maybe after he's been on the road as long as we have, then he gets a say." There was a short silence, and Dean's gaze flitted to his brother. "He's
gonna need someone to show him to ropes on being human, you know."

'At least until I figure out how to get his damn wings back without hurting Sammy,' he thought as he waited for his brother's thoughts on the matter.

He didn't expect any kind of resistance to the idea. Sam had a pretty decent relationship with Cas despite their not-so-friendly beginnings, but Dean still felt a measure of comfort when his brother snorted and gave him the 'are-you-seriously-asking-me-this?' look that Dean himself had perfected over the past twenty years.

"The guy's a homeless ex-soldier that got abandoned by his deadbeat dad and has a tendency to make ridiculous sacrifices for the people he cares about," Sam deadpanned. "He's also one of the five people alive that don't think you're a complete waste of space. Of course he's coming with us. He's practically a Winchester already."

Dean rolled his eyes to cover up the feeling of gratitude toward his brother. "Bitch."

"Jerk."

Of course, given their luck, it wouldn't be that easy.

In the days following Cas's rescue from Sinai Grace, Dean learned that taking in a fallen angel was a task easier said than done. If he had thought that just showing his friend the tricks to being human would be enough, he was quickly proven wrong.

The first problem became apparent the morning after Cas's super-secret little angel powwow.

After meeting with whatever angel was protecting Bobby from the wrath of Heaven and Hell and assuring Sam and Dean that the older hunter was alright, Cas had conked out again. Dean wasn't sure if he was exhausted from the car trip or the exertion of the summoning; either way, Dean felt unaccountably pissed off at the angel. He angrily shrugged off Sam's attempts to help him lug Cas to the bed closest to the heater, and ignored the glances Sam was giving him which invited him to talk about it.

Their meal was a silent affair, the burgers settling uncomfortably in his stomach, and beyond a few half-hearted suggestions about what their next move should be, the brothers settled in their respective beds rather quickly.

Their slumber was interrupted barely an hour later, when Cas awoke, yelling and muttering in what could only be Enochian. Sam and Dean were up instantly, knives drawn, expecting an attack. Instead, they found Cas tangled in his blankets, thrashing around and drenched in sweat.

Fitful sleep was an occupational hazard of the job, and the brothers' custom usually demanded it be ignored. Still, Dean was on his feet and across the room before he was even aware of it, grasping Cas's shoulders and shaking him awake. "Cas – man, wake up."

Cas's body, which had been rigid before he got there, relaxed as soon as Dean put a hand on him. When Cas opened his eyes, Dean could see the rampant confusion, but even more importantly, he saw the terrified gleam behind that. It was the same look he himself saw in the mirror on many a night after his resurrection, pale and drawn in a badly lit mirrors.

"Dean," Cas murmured, and it was all at once a question and a form of reassurance.

Behind him, Dean could hear Sam moving around and then a light flicked on. Cas winced, ducking his eyes from the harsh brightness that even a dim hotel lamp emitted.
"Are you okay?" Sam asked, looming beside them.

"I…I appear to be," Cas managed, looking around as though to make sure the motel was not suddenly going to disappear on him. "I thought I was…but I couldn't possibly…"

He was still disoriented and not making sense, but from the way he looked at Dean with such naked relief, Dean knew what had happened.

"You had a nightmare," he stated, voice carefully level.

Cas looked appropriately appalled, though Dean suspected it had as much to do with the novelty of dreaming as with whatever his mortal mind had cooked up for him. Now that the initial exhaustion of becoming human had worn off, Cas's mind could make dreams. Given how many millions of years he had existed as some kind of wavelength of celestial intent, Dean could only imagine what kind of screwed up crap his mind was projecting for him. And where Castiel the angel might have stared emotionlessly down at such things, Cas the human now had a built in sense of preservation and fear.

Still, he managed to force his expression into an approximation of his usual blank stare and he finally said, "It seems probable."

"Whatever it seems, it's okay – none of that's real," Sam assured him. "It's just your mind coping with the stress of the last couple of days. It probably jumbled up a bunch of your thoughts and… memories…"

The way Sam trailed off made Dean sure his brother had just clued in to what memories Cas might be reliving.

"You'll get used to it," Dean said, not wanting to linger too long on what was turning into a moment. He realized that he was still grasping Cas by the shoulders, and pulled back as though burned. For a fraction of a second, Cas seemed to list forward, but he righted himself so quickly that Dean told himself he had imagined it. "The dreams will die down a bit eventually."

The way Cas looked at him, Dean could tell he didn't believe him, but he sat up straighter in his bed and resolutely pulled the motel comforter tighter around himself. "Then I will wait for them to subside."

"It's not…something that happens overnight," Sam attempted.

But Cas was not to be dissuaded. He refused to go back to sleep that night, instead sitting stiffly in the chair staring at the brothers like they were about to disappear on him.

Between the three of them, it looked like they were never going to have another quiet night of sleep again. Dean doubted he would ever stop having memories of Hell, and although Sam was stubbornly quiet about his own nighttime mental escapades in the Cage, Dean knew his brother better than that. And now with Cas jumping on insomnia bandwagon…

'This is gonna be harder than I thought,' was Dean's last thought as he eventually succumbed to sleep.

He awoke several hours later to the sounds of a Star Trek: The Next Generation rerun and Cas still sitting ramrod straight in his chair. Sam was nowhere to be found.

"Good morning, Dean," Cas said, not looking away from the screen. "Sam has gone to get coffee. He spoke to Sherriff Mills again this morning to assure her of Bobby's well-being."
"That's great," Dean yawned, stretching.

"He also wished for me to tell you that he asked after your vehicle, which remained out of harm's way during the attack on Bobby's home."

"Awesome," Dean said, actually meaning it. He noticed that Cas had finally looked up from the television and was regarding him thoughtfully.

Dean shivered, feeling naked suddenly despite wearing boxers and a t-shirt, and more aware than ever of the fact that he didn't have a bra on. Which was not a thought he had ever expected to cross his mind.

"Dude, the staring thing's creepy enough when I'm me, but word to the wise? You look at woman like that in public, she's gonna think you're a pervert."

"Look at her like what?"

"Like you're trying to see through her clothes to what's underneath," Dean said, fishing around for one of Sam's sweaters. "Women don't like knowing you're imagining them naked." He considered his words, and then shrugged, "Well, most of 'em don't."

"You are not a woman and I have no need to imagine you unclothed given that I –"

"Rebuilt my body from the bones up, yeah, yeah…"

"My observation was not meant to make you uncomfortable."

"Oh, yeah? Then what was it meant to do?"

"I was attempting to sense your soul," Cas confessed. "I may be mortal now, but even humans have some extra sensory perceptions. It was my hope that I might be able to cultivate some of my old abilities."

"Well, do me a favor and cultivate those abilities when I actually have pants on, okay? Gotta preserve my sense of modesty."

"I was not aware that you had modesty," Cas replied, his lip twitching.

Dean snorted. "Ha-ha, Jokey McJokerson. Hey, I've got an awesome idea – why don't you hop in the shower and get rid of the lingering smell of hospital? You reek."

Cas appeared bemused, but eventually he did take a tentative trip to the bathroom, while Dean set about getting dressed and packing up the room. Sam returned with three cups of caffeine and a newspaper that he had bought to make sure their kidnapping of Jimmy from the hospital hadn't made the front page.

Dean was just trying to drag a brush through the tangled mess of hair he had inherited when Cas finally re-emerged.

It had obviously been a long and arduous battle for him putting his theoretical knowledge of taking a shower into practice, but despite the shivering and disgruntled expression, he looked like he had managed well enough. Dean was thankful for whatever residual memories Cas had, because it saved him and Sam the awkward possibility of having to demonstrate basic hygiene.

Or worse, how to use a toilet.
Out of the corner of his eye, Dean watched Cas, his lower half clumsily wrapped in the motel's too small towel, reach for the nearly folded pile of Jimmy Novak's clothes. From where he sat checking his emails, Sam cleared his throat.

"Cas, you can't wear those," he said gently. "They're completely rank."

"I have nothing else," Cas replied, as though that should be obvious.

"Right, well, that's our first stop today, then," Sam said, closing his laptop in resignation. "Until then, I guess you can borrow some of our things – or at least Dean's. You guys are closer in size than me and you. Right Dean?" There was a pause. "Uh…Dean?"

"What?" Dean replied, not looking away from the former angel's too-thin body. It bothered him that in addition to the faint outline of his ribs and jut of his hips, he could still see traces of the banishing sigil he had noticed in the hospital. The thing should have healed over long ago, considering Cas's über-healing abilities.

Other than that lingering mark, Cas's skin remained untarnished, showing no sign of having been stabbed, shot or blown up in the recent past. The rest of his body was probably as unblemished as Dean's had been the day he crawled out of his grave.

It made Dean wince inwardly at the idea that just by becoming human, Cas was going to experience watching his body become more and more damaged.

"Dude."

Dean blinked and glanced up at his brother, who was watching him stare at Cas. Sam's eyebrows were raised in calculation, and it took Dean a second to realize he had been gazing at a half-naked man more than was appropriate as per men's locker room etiquette. His brain stuttered in an effort to come up with a deflection before Sam could make a comment, and his thoughts flitted back to Cas's otherwise clear chest.

"Tattoo," he grunted.

"Huh?"

"Cas. Needs a tattoo," he clarified with a casual shrug. "He's human now. He's wide open to demonic possession, which we definitely don't want. Remember how determined the demons were to get to Anna?"

"That's actually a good point," Sam allowed, and Dean tried not to bristle at the surprised note in his voice. "Charms are too temporary, and I doubt they'd be strong enough for a former angel. Guess that's two things we've got to do today."

Before they had a chance to do either of those two errands, though, they made yet another inopportune discovery about Cas's new mortality.

After hurrying out of the motel so as not to be questioned about the blood sigils on the walls, they headed up the highway and stopped at a diner for breakfast. It was there that they discovered Cas wasn't yet at a hundred percent functionality. It turned out that his ability to digest food was roughly like that of an anorexic or a person who had been starving to death for two years.

"It looks like re-feeding syndrome," Sam remarked, wincing as they listened to Cas heave his eggs and sausages up inside the bathroom stall of the highway diner. "I think he's gonna have to take it easy on certain foods for a bit. If we're not careful, he could go into shock."
"How long's a bit?"

"I don't know. It shouldn't be too long, but his digestive system isn't going to be back to Jimmy's standards overnight. The only reason he hasn't had any major problems in the past two weeks was because he was fed intravenously during his hospital stay."

The notion of re-feeding syndrome wasn't completely foreign to Dean; he knew his father must have mentioned something about it growing up. Either way, he let Sam take point, merely raising his eyebrows when his brother tried to tempt Cas with dry toast or bland cheeses over the course of the day.

They had to put off the tattoo for another day until Cas looked a little less like a walking corpse. As with the night before, Cas slept only when he was too exhausted to keep his eyes open, and then, fitfully.

The next afternoon, the brothers and Cas drove farther up the highway to Rochester, where it was agreed that Sam would run to a Wal-Mart and pick up some clothes based on Jimmy's measurements while Dean brought Cas to a local parlor to get inked.

"That way we can save a little time and get back on the road," Dean explained.

"You just don't want to go shopping," Sam rolled his eyes, swinging out of the car.

"And tear you away from your mother-hen routine? Never!" Dean shot back, pretending a scandalized tone.

He sent a glance at Cas through the rear-view mirror, where the former angel sat with his arms crossed and shoulders hunched, like he was trying to protect himself from attack. Dean knew it had more to do with the constant cold the angel felt in his new body than any real concern for danger.

'I used to belong to a much better club. And now I'm powerless. I'm hapless, I'm hopeless.'

The words had been echoing in his head since they busted Cas out of the hospital. More than once Dean looked at his friend wearing his hand-me-downs and felt nauseous at how much Cas resembled the future version of himself that Dean had met in a Croat-infested future.

Human or not, Dean had no intention of letting Cas rot away into that sad excuse for a human that he had seen in 2014. If he had anything to do with it, Cas would never even learn the words to *Sweet Leaf*. The other reason he insisted on Sam picking up Cas's new things was that Sam had girly tastes. The guy would probably try to dress Cas more respectably than typical hunter ware, so at least the visual reminder would be somewhat downplayed.

Dean must have been caught up staring again, because when he came back to himself Cas was eyeing him with his usual intense gaze. Trying to cover up yet another momentary lapse, he barked out, "Hey, get up front with me. I ain't a chauffeur and you're no Miss Daisy."

Which garnered a puzzled look, but at least Cas did as he was told.

The place Dean drove them to was on the poorer side of town and had perhaps been a small movie house in the 1930's. Now it was a graffitied yellow-stone with frosted glass windows showing the various tattoo designs. Cas stared, ostensibly fascinated, by a drawing of a zombie ninja riding on the back of a dinosaur ("Tyrannosaurs did not look like that," he pointed out), before Dean dragged him inside.

The place looked the same as the one where Sam and Dean had gotten their ink several years earlier.
dimly lit, with pictures of the tattoo designs covering the walls, and a few chairs (albeit empty) set up for customers. It smelled of Vaseline, plastic and disinfectant and there were glass display cases with every kind of jewelry for body modification imaginable; crappy punk and alternative rock played in the background, but Dean could deal with it for the few hours it took to get Cas some protection.

"Can I help you?" the chick at the register asked. She was petite, platinum blond and skinny, with more metal in her face than Dean had in the trunk of the car. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Cas's trenchcoat hobo look, which persisted despite Dean's BOC t-shirt and jeans.

"Yeah, he wants this," Dean said, tugging down the hem of his own shirt and displaying his own tattoo.

The woman made the obligatory comment about how interesting a choice it was, and then crouched behind the counter.

"I need you to fill out this form here," the tattoo chick said unconcernedly, sliding a sheet of paper and pen across the glass display case to Cas. "It's standard medical issues and consent. I just need it on paper that you're doing this of your own free will and not because your girlfriend is pushing you into it."

"I'm not his girlfriend," Dean snapped.

"Fine, wife, whatever," the woman rolled her eyes, earning a wordless splutter from Dean which Cas interrupted by quietly insisting, "It is of utmost importance that I receive this design."

"Sure thing, professor," she drawled. "Just sign your John Hancock and tell me where you want it."

After a nerve-wracking minute of wondering if Cas even knew what a John Hancock was but then being relieved when the former angel reached over and signed a clumsy Jimmy Novak on the sheet (and why was it so weird to see Cas actually using a pen?), the chick led them to one of the chairs and started to sketch out the anti-possession symbol that Dean showed her.

He and Cas quietly corrected whatever imperfections they noticed, and while she went to get the transfer papers to finalize the design, Dean suggested adding a few Enochian symbols to keep Cas off of Heaven's radar as well.

"My brother saw to that already," Cas assured him quietly. "I have the same protective sigils on my body as you and Sam do."

Which was one less thing to worry about, at least.

Thankfully the tattoo artist wasn't chatty, instead focussing on her task. Once she traced the design onto Cas's chest, she went to work quickly. Cas, for his part, only jumped slightly at the sound of the tattoo gun starting up, but as the woman began to etch the symbol into his chest and blood began to flow, he remained quiet. The only betrayal of any pain was when he suddenly reached out and tightly grabbed hold of Dean's hand.

Dean's instinctual response to any man holding his hand was to pull away, but the knowledge that Cas was only in this mess because of him forced him to tamp down that reaction. Instead, he simply told himself he was glad Sam wasn't around to see it and waited it out.

It was an uncomfortable few hours, which Dean filled with mindless chatter about how he was going to fix up the Impala once they got around to it and how he was going to teach Cas to drive. Cas made an occasional response if required, but seemed focused on the entire tattooing process. Dean
eventually stopped talking as well, and simply watched in fascination as Cas's face went through several variations over a short period of time, expressions he never imagined actually seeing on the former angel.

"You okay?" Dean asked about halfway through the session, noticing the tense set of Cas's jaw as the pierced chick got up to answer the phone.

"It is…interesting," Cas replied, testing the word for appropriateness.

Dean wasn't able to hold back a chuckle. "Only you would classify someone poking needles into your skin as interesting."

Cas met his gaze, blue eyes almost as intense as they had been when it was an angel looking out from behind them. Solemnly, he replied, "Dean, I laid siege to the depths of Hell to retrieve you, while the fires of damnation ate at my grace. You, of all people, should understand that this –" he nodded at the outline of the pentagram, " – is hardly something to be concerned with."

Which, when put like that, Dean had to agree with.

An few hours after that, they left the tattoo parlor considerably more broke, but at least protected once again. When they settled in their motel of choice for the night, Sam had bags of new clothes to offer Cas, and had set up his laptop and camera in the living area in order provide Cas with his own identity. The process took until the next day, and it wasn't until Sam slid into the seat across from Dean and Cas at the diner a block away from the Copymart in Moline, Illinois that they actually got to see the finished products.

"Here you go," Sam said, pushing a handful of cards forward.

Cas blinked blankly down at the topmost square of plastic. "What is this?"

"We've been over this. It's your new identifications – well, one of them," Sam explained; the expectant look on his face was similar to the one he used to wear waiting for Dad to stop cleaning his guns to glance at his term report card. "This one's your primary one, and I'll made a few for you to use on cases."

"This is not the name of my vessel," Cas remarked.

"Yeah, well, it's not a vessel anymore, Pinocchio, you're a real boy," Dean muttered under his breath as the waitress appeared and poured steaming hot coffee into their cups. As she took their orders, Cas angled the card in his hand toward Dean, who squinted at the false driver's licence.

"That's the whole point, Cas," Sam went on, as though they hadn't been interrupted. "Pretty sure since our great escape, people are going to be looking for Jimmy Novak."

"Cassidy Campbell?" Dean read. He shot Sam an unimpressed look. "Dude, could you pick a girlier name?"

"It's unisex," Sam defended with a scowl, bringing out the other ID cards. "And it was either that or 'Casper', and I figured our lives are ironic enough. Hey Cas, pass the sugar, would you?"

"At least that's a guy's name," Dean retorted as Cas reached for the requested condiment.

"I am neither male nor female," Cas pointed out. "Angels do not have –"

Dean's ready retort for that line of rebuttal was cut off when Cas's sleeve caught on the coffee cup
placed before him and knocked the thing over. Apparently, thousands of years as an angel didn't make an overly graceful human. He and Dean both jumped to avoid it, but a large amount of the beverage landed on Cas's trenchcoat.

"Nice moves, butterfingers," Dean snorted, although he checked surreptitiously to make sure none of the scalding drink had hit Cas. Third degree burns from coffee were not pleasant, or so he'd learned from McDonalds. "You good?"

"I will survive," Cas replied gravely. "Although, I believe I should…compose myself in the washroom?"

"Yeah," Sam said, already getting up. "You need help, or – ?"

"I am not an infant," Cas reminded them, almost impatiently as he shrugged out of his sodden coat and headed across the diner.

Dean watched him go, and then offered Sam a mock-proud look. "They grow up so fast, don't they, honey?"

Sam shook his head and busied himself with mopping up whatever amount of the mess hadn't landed on Cas.

Dean shrugged and took a gander at some of the other IDs. In each of them, Cas looked tired and pale, with dark circles underneath his eyes. Sam had tried to Photoshop as much of that out as possible, but it was still obvious.

He noticed some of the other names, and stared for a moment. He flipped through all of them quickly, and when he realized what he was seeing, he full-on glowered at his brother. "What the hell, Sammy?"

"What?" Sam asked, the butter-wouldn't-melt look not fooling Dean.

"Cassidy Joplin? Cassidy Larkin – why do all his IDs have the same names as mine? You run out of imagination, or something?"

"No, I'm trying for more authentic," Sam retorted with a self-satisfied smirk. "Even when we look normal, Cas doesn't resemble us in any way, so we can only say he's our brother so many times before someone who's actually paying attention gets suspicious. So, next best idea, you guys are married."

Dean gaped. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Come on, Dean, admit it, it's a good idea," Sam continued, unaware of the way Dean's fingers clenched and unclenched with the desire to strangle his little brother.

"So why aren't you married to him?"

Sam snorted. "You really need me to answer that one? You're the one he can stare at for hours at a time, not me."

"He does not stare for hours. And besides, he so does do it to you too."

"Not like he's trying desperately to see if he can see my soul again," Sam replied smugly. "Guess my soul's just not as bright as yours, huh?"
"I will cut you," Dean threatened.

In the end, he let the issue lie. He may not have liked the idea, but Sam had a point.

'I'm just gonna be the one to make the next batch of IDs,' he decided as he finished off his coffee. 'And if Sam's new name is 'Ivana Tinkle', than that's his issue, not mine.'

"Speaking of significant others," Sam went on. "I was thinking we should maybe stop by Cicero. Maybe check in with Lisa and Ben."

"No," Dean stated, levelling a glare across the Formica diner table at his brother, who stubbornly mirrored the expression.

"It's on the way," Sam pressed, his mouth twisted into the petulant little-brother bitchface he had been pulling since he was old enough to complain.

"I don't care. That's all I need to make this week suck more."

Sam's expression turned knowing, and Dean cursed his brother's tendency to be able to pick up his thought wave-lengths. "You really think she'd care?"

"I have no intention of finding out."

"Finding out what?" Cas asked as he returned to his seat beside Dean, his trenchcoat folded awkwardly over his arm.

"I was just telling Dean it might be an idea to stop in to see Lisa and Ben on the way back east," Sam explained, altering the pitch of his voice so that he sounded like he was trying to be reasonable instead of whining about why he was right and Dean was wrong.

"That is the woman you sought asylum with after the Apocalypse failed," Cas stated, with an almost curious hitch to his voice. "If you considered it a safe location, why would you not wish to return there?"

At this, Sam's expression turned mocking. "He's worried they'll be intimidated by his new breasts."

"Screw you."

"Why would she be unsettled by your cleavage?" Cas asked, his forehead wrinkled as he waited for whatever English-Enochian translator thing he had going in his head to catch up with the conversation. "It does not appear to be overly large or in any way threateni –"

"Dude – just – no," Dean managed, caught between glaring at the inept former angel and his smirking brother. The blood was rushing to his face, because were they actually talking about this?

"In all seriousness, we're going to run out of cash soon and it'll take a bit before the new cards come in. Especially since our usual P.O. Box has closed down on account of huge truck," Sam went on, taking a sip of his coffee. "It'd be nice to have a place to crash while we make a few bucks instead of sleeping in the car."

"Your vehicle is much more confining than Dean's," Cas allowed reasonably, filling Dean at once with pride that the former angel had at least developed an appreciation for the Impala since the last time he was human, followed by annoyance that he was agreeing with Sam.

Neither of those emotions completely drowned out his overwhelming regret that he wouldn't be
seeing or driving his baby any time soon. She was safe, for now, but still a wreck.

"I don't care what either of you think," Dean said, returning to the problem at hand. "And even if I didn't look like the psycho Slayer from Buffy right now, I still wouldn't go there. We don't need to be bringing our issues down on them. Or have you forgotten just how many sons of bitches are lookin' for us?"

"Got any bright ideas, then?" Sam challenged. "Without Bobby's, we don't have anywhere to go. Cicero's the only place I can think of that's protected and where no one wants to kill us."

"We'll come up with something else," Dean stated firmly. "Right now, I'd stay with Becky Rosen before I went back to Lisa's." Sam's mouth closed with an audible snap, which Dean counted as a win, and he continued, "Although, - hey, here's an idea – we could always crash with Chuck for a bit."

"That is not advisable," Cas shook his head. "After the release of Lucifer, Raphael was given the responsibility of guarding him. Now that my brother has returned, he will be even more protective. If the prophet remains in his abode, which is unlikely, he will be heavily guarded. You would be needlessly exposing yourselves to danger."

The tone had the familiar doomsday intensity that had characterized most of Cas's past warnings. Still, Dean was having trouble reconciling the familiar image of the untouchable, very inhuman angel that had helped them in the past with the unshaven guy in jeans, a grey thermal undershirt and a navy sweater.

Cas moved his hand absently toward the place where his new talisman had been etched, his fingers lightly brushing against the shirt covering it.

"Don't scratch, man, you'll get it infected," Dean reminded him, reaching forward and slapping his hand away. "Or worse, mess up the lines."

"It itches," Cas told him blandly, even though he folded his hands back down into his lap.

"It's going to do that for about a week," Sam told him. "Try to ignore it."

"How?"

"Find a distraction," Dean suggested, casting his gaze about and then grinning when he saw the waitress headed their way, balancing a tray of mouth-watering dishes. "Look, food! That's distracting."

"Maybe if you're you," Sam said under his breath, but Dean ignored him in favor of biting into his double cheeseburger once it had been set down in front of him. "You know, substituting salad for the fries once in a while wouldn't kill you."

"That you know of."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Seriously, Dean, what did vegetables ever do to you?"

"They're not meat and grease, that's what they've done to me," Dean answered cheerily, tossing back a slug of soda.

"You should be trying to set a better example," Sam muttered, inclining his head toward Cas.

The former angel was watching them with thinly disguised curiosity and apprehension, and then
stared distrustfully down at the tall glass of milk that Sam had ordered for him. Dean had almost laughed at the ridiculousness of a grown man being ordered for, except he was beginning to think that Sam was just really enjoying the sense of taking care of someone. Dean rarely let him do it without major teasing or protest, and Cas didn't yet know any better.

"He's an ex-soldier of God, not a three year old," Dean maintained.

"He's never had a human body before that was actually fully operational," Sam shot back. "You saw how sick he got with those breakfast sausages yesterday."

"Maybe he just doesn't like sausage," Dean returned facetiously, waggling his eyebrows. "To each their own."

Sam wasn't impressed. "Real mature."

"I am beginning to understand your annoyance with being talked about as if you were not present," Cas remarked mildly. "Is this merely more human behaviour or a specifically Winchester brand of comportment?"

"Both," Sam and Dean chorused, and then grimaced at one another.

"Moving on," Sam finally said after watching Dean drench his fries in ketchup, "if Lisa's out, what's the game plan?"

"I say we stick to the idea of heading for New York," Dean declared. "It's going on two weeks now, and as nice as it is not to have the world on our ass about something, I'm getting tired of having to remember to put on a bra every morning or be stared at by perverts at every diner we stop at."

"Dean…" Sam began, looking like he was preparing his own arguments on the subject.

"Plus, Dad's lock-up is back that way. It'd be nice to have an extra arsenal if we need it," he went on, pretending he didn't see the constipated twist in Sam's face. "What do you think, Cas?"

It was remarkable how easy it was to include Cas in their future plans. Despite having been 'Dean and Sam' for so long, Dean didn't feel any kind of resentment or discomfort at the idea of Cas travelling with them. He'd teamed up with other hunters before, but it had always been out of necessity and with the unspoken agreement that as soon as the job was done, they would go their separate ways. Even before that, when Dad had been alive and it had been him, Sam and Dean hunting together, there had always been that undertone of tension that never went away. Sam and Dad had been too alike for their own good, and it had caused problems, while Sam and Dean had always made one hell of a team.

'Minus the occasional betrayal and tendency to get ourselves killed for each other,' Dean added thoughtfully.

But Cas was almost like Bobby, in a way; the brothers were comfortable enough with him by now to welcome him into the fold.

"I believe Sam is correct in suggesting that you will need some kind of base of operations," Cas said thoughtfully, "especially if you are going to attempt to rescue your brother. The car is not conducive to that. However –" he frowned, as though unfamiliar with trying to put his thoughts in order, "– Dean is also right. Placing other innocents in danger is not wise at this juncture. And it will attract undue attention."

His tone was calm and businesslike, a very big difference from the way he behaved at night.
"I'm thinking we could probably find somewhere in New York to stay while we figure everything out," Dean said without preamble. "And it might be an idea for you to meet this guy Bobby sent us to, Cas. I know you don't actually have any of your mojo left, but do you think if you spoke to him you'd be able to figure out if the way into Hell is the real deal?"

"It is a possibility," Cas allowed, expression shifting from the serious look he had sported while he confided in Sam to a calculating one. "However, I was under the impression that this contact of yours was reluctant to share information with you until you had procured the help of a witch."

"Well, yeah, but he's never met you before and you could, I don't know, act like an angel or something to get him to let something slip," Dean suggested.

Cas appeared both offended and bemused by this.

"I'm gonna grab the cheque so we can leave when you finish off your rabbit food," Dean said, swinging out of the booth. "And so help me, Sam, if you eat that side order of beans, I will be hanging your rotten ass outta the window while we drive."

"Dean has told me that you remember Hell," Castiel remarked almost as soon as Dean left the table.

Sam accidentally inhaled some of his yoghurt and had to cough a few times to regain the ability to breathe. Castiel was staring at him in his usual penetrating way, completely unaware of the effect his words had had.

"He did?" Sam managed finally, trying not to show how much that bothered him. It had taken Dean months to finally tell Sam about his experiences in Hell, and Sam had kept that secret close to his heart.

The fact that Dean had told Castiel felt almost like a betrayal, until Castiel added, "He wished to know if there was some way to help you once again forget you experiences there."

Sam jerked his head up to where Dean was paying the bill, flashing the waitress a smile that would seem flirtatious on his usual face but which came off as overly friendly on this one. It figured that Dean had known he was still reliving his brief stint in the Cage; unfortunately, his brother still had that uncanny ability to see through Sam's attempts at soldiering on with annoying clarity.

"If there were a way, you would have helped Dean forget when you were still an angel."

"No, I would not."

Now Sam was full-on staring at Castiel, disbelief rising up along with something close to anger at the revelation. Because it had been Sam, not Castiel, who had had to share a room with Dean the past two years and pretend he didn't know what Dean was dreaming about. And it was Sam, not Castiel, who had gone on the road with his brother and sometimes been afraid to look him in the eye on the off chance that the hell-ravaged part of his brother was staring back at him.

"Are you kidding me?" he hissed.

"Maybe before," Castiel went on pensively, "but not now."
"Why the hell not?"

"Dean's nightmares and memories allow him to compartmentalize his experiences. They help him work through all he has seen," Castiel explained lightly. "He has not remembered everything yet."

"He remembers enough," Sam answered tightly. "I know that much."

"He has not yet remembered how my garrison saved him, or the journey from Hell," Castiel went on, oblivious to Sam's mounting anger. "I do not know if he ever will, in this lifetime. He has a tendency to focus on the worst parts of his life, you see. But there is one particular moment of his time in Hell, one which is so valuable, that I would never risk destroying it by taking those memories away."

"One moment…over thousands of terrible ones?" Sam demanded. "Cas, maybe you haven't been human for very long, but one good point, whatever it is, doesn't make up for a lifetime of bad ones."

"Perhaps I have judged it incorrectly," Castiel allowed. "You are better versed in your brother's behaviour and worth than I am, perhaps you could offer your opinion." Before Sam could ask why Castiel was getting into this with him now, in a diner of all places, the former angel continued, "When I came for Dean, he was elbows deep in the shredded carcass of a damned soul, feasting on flesh and blood and revelling in the suffering. I am sure you can imagine what that looks like."

The way Castiel was considering him, all-too-knowing, made Sam think that maybe Dean wasn't the only one who knew exactly what Sam saw in his dreams every night.

"When my brothers and I entered the circle of Hell where Dean was ensconced, and he realized that we were making our way to him, he did not flee the way many other demons would have or beg to be saved as any damned soul might," Castiel recounted. "He begged us to take someone else – the soul he had been torturing, those waiting their turn – it didn't matter, anyone but him. He fought me when I approached him."

"What?" Sam whispered, stunned.

"Part of the reason was, I believe, that he didn't believe he deserved to be saved – I do not know if you have noticed, but your brother has a notoriously low sense of self-worth," Castiel said, and though the words were said in the rueful way of someone lamenting a character flaw, Sam also detected an almost affectionate twist to the former angel's mouth. "The other reason was that he was afraid if I removed him from the Pit, he would be dooming you to the death you might have had the first time." Castiel took an experimental sip of from the glass before him, made a face, and then glanced back at Sam. "Do you see why I might be hesitant to destroy that memory?"

Sam was silent.

"He was in Hell…a dimension that destroys any sense of kinship between souls within the first minutes of arriving there," Castiel continued, almost harsh. "And after forty years and nearly becoming a demon himself, his thoughts were still on others. On you."

Sam swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat, glancing up again at Dean who was giddily pointing through the display case up front at what was probably some kind of pie or another. The waitress, obviously charmed despite herself, was laughing and likely explaining the different offerings.

"Why are you telling me this?" Sam asked, his feminine voice a little more hoarse than usual.

"I believe humans have a saying along the lines of 'that which does not destroy you makes you more resilient', yes?" Castiel said softly. "I deeply believe that to be true in Dean's case. And in yours."

"Do you see why I might be hesitant to destroy that memory?"

Sam was silent.
paused. "At first, the deal I made required that you not remember. My intentions were clear, Sam, I wished you and your brother peace. I had not counted on your encounter with a leprechaun breaking down that wall. But now that it has happened, I can only imagine you benefitting from them."

"How the hell am I supposed to benefit from watching myself carve open my younger brother every night?" Sam demanded tightly.

Castiel fixed him with the same look that he often aimed Dean's way, and Sam felt absurdly like he was being x-rayed.

"Your memories from the Pit," Castiel finally said, "whatever they show you, might hurt now, but I have no doubt there are moments that will more than make up for that. And if that possibility is not sufficient for you, I have another theory."

"Oh, yeah?" Sam grunted.

"You spent the equivalent of ten years in the Cage with Lucifer and Michael," he said. "You likely have a better picture of them than any angel of the Host has had in a long time. No one has known Lucifer as intimately as you have --" Sam made a face at the phrasing, "-- and even when he was in Heaven, Michael remained apart from the rest. The last time I had spoken to him was when the first creatures crawled out of the seas."

And if that didn't give Sam a second's pause, the next thing did.

"I never told you what happened to me when the Host…recalled me…last year," Castiel told him evenly, continuing to watch Sam's face.

"Well, you sort of implied…and Anna said it was probably unpleasant," Sam hedged, not entirely comfortable talking about Heaven and torture. As much crap as the angels had put him and Dean through, it was hard to have an ideal you had grown up believing in completely shattered the way his faith had.

"That is putting it mildly. It was not unlike experiencing one of the nightmares this body is prone to," Castiel said. "I was tortured, of course. Disciplined, my brothers called it. And then they started off my re-education by having me experience destroying you, Sam. Over and over." A hard, almost angry tone inched into Castiel's voice. "I was hesitant at first, because I had seen first-hand that you truly believed what you were doing could help people. Even as an abomination, you had a good heart."

Sam bristled at the word. "You haven't called me that in a while."

"I have not believed it in a while. I could see the good in you, where others could not. But once that belief was ripped away from me by the Host, I still hesitated to strike you down because it would invalidate the promise I had made to Dean."

Sam shifted uncomfortably, once again aware of just how badly he had treated his brother during that year with Ruby. Dean had been killing himself trying to make sure that the angels were going to leave Sam alone, and Sam hadn't want to hear it.

"Better men than you have been led astray," Castiel reminded him, as though he could read Sam's thoughts. "Even angels are not immune to adversity. I learned that lesson myself." His forehead wrinkled at the memory. "Once it became nothing to me to burn your very soul from its body in my brothers' little simulations, they changed the lesson. It was Dean I had to rid the world of, because he would ultimately be the biggest obstacle in getting to you."
Castiel went quiet for a moment, and this time Sam was sure he saw more than a little heavenly fury burning in Castiel's eyes at the memory.

"You know, we don't have to talk about this if it upsets you," Sam attempted, but Castiel waved him away and continued talking.

"It was a last resort exercise, of course, but my brothers wanted to ensure that when the time came to act decisively, I would not hesitate. I was forced to kill Dean over, and over, and over. I am sure you appreciate what an effect that might have had on my state of mind."

"A little," Sam admitted tightly, remembering the Mystery Spot in Florida all-too-well.

"I was kept prisoner by my brothers quite a bit longer than you and Dean were in Hell," Castiel explained. "Heaven is eternal, more so than Hell, and so time passes much slower there. And when I returned to you, I returned full of Heaven's intent and firm in my convictions once again."

"Yeah, I remember that," Sam said. "Dean was in a funk for a week after that."

"I apologize for that. My mind was not my own after the ordeal," Castiel inclined his head to one side. "But in the end, what I suffered by the hands of my brothers meant nothing. Dean – and you, to an extent – broke through the lessons they had forced on me. I was able to regain the sense of self I had developed because of you both."

"Uh…well, that's a relief."

"What I am trying to impart to you, Sam, is that as bad as the situation is, there is hope. Adam has already been down in the Cage longer than you or Dean. Longer than I was in Heaven. And while every moment is indeed a trial – I am sure that once you find him, you will find a way to help him back to himself," Castiel concluded.

Sam stared, feeling the bizarre urge to reach out and hug Castiel. Which would be completely awkward, even if Dean hadn't been striding back down the aisle towards them.

"I take it you haven't said any of this to Dean?" Sam asked, lowering his voice the closer his brother got.

"Dean does not take kindly to sensitive conversations," Castiel stated matter-of-factly. "You, on the other hand, are more likely to appreciate the value of them. Even more so in your current form."

Sam blinked. "Did you just call me a girl?"

He might have imagined it, but it looked like Castiel's lips twitched. "If you wish to interpret it that way." The expression was gone a minute later as Castiel glanced up. "What has happened?"

Sam glanced up to see Dean standing by their table, a grim expression on his face.

"Nothing happened. But…look." Dean brandished something at them; it took Sam a moment to recognize that it was a newspaper.

"What – did the Detroit police decide to circulate our photos across the country or something?" Sam asked, automatically reaching for the paper to see if their cover was blown. There were no photos in the paper though.

"Huh? Oh, nah, they probably didn't get a good enough look at us," Dean said, waving that away. "But check that out." He tapped one of the columns in the newspaper.
Sam scanned through the story. "Decatur, Illinois – series of murders of brides minutes before their wedding ceremony – locals believe it to be the Greenwood Bride, the ghost of a –" He looked up sharply, thinning his lips. "Dean, is this you suggesting we take a job? Weren't you just bitching about wanting your junk back?"

"You know any other hunters we can call to deal with it?" Dean returned. "Last I checked they all hate us. Or worse, they're on angel lock-down who-the-hell-knows where." He scowled. "It's not the best timing, yeah, but last I checked, this was still our job up until a few weeks ago."

Sam stared, trying to collect his thoughts. Despite Castiel's revelations and their previous conversation, he still felt more than a little conflicted about the entire issue. "What happened to our plan of helping Adam?"

"It's still our plan," Dean retorted, sounding defensive, like he didn't like it being implied that he wasn't trying his hardest to find their brother. "But so far, the best lead we've got on that front is a spell that's going to need a witch. And it's not like we can just place a personal ad saying 'SWM seeking reject from The Craft to open a gate to Hell' in the local paper."

"So you're just going to troll through the paper looking for random hunts and hope there's a witch at the other end of it?" Sam asked, incredulous.

"It's how we used to do it," Dean shrugged. "And it already sounds kind of like more than your usual ghost, right?"

"It is odd, considering evil spirits cannot usually cross sacred ground," Castiel agreed thoughtfully. "If something as lowly as a spirit can break such ancient laws, it might be something to look into. We may be able to discern how it did it and use that for our own purposes."

"Exactly," Dean asserted. "It sounds like our kind of thing. We should look into it."

"It might also provide an opportunity for me to become more familiar with hunting as a human," Castiel suggested. "If I am to be of any use to you, I would need to accrue experience in this life, yes?" At Sam's unchanging expression, his shoulders slumped a little. "It is, of course, your choice."

Which, of course, made Sam feel guilty; as important as Adam was right now, so was Castiel. It wasn't an easy thing going from an all-powerful being to just a human, and he supposed that right now Castiel was feeling more than a little frustrated at his weakened state. If Sam had been in his position, he would have been eager to better himself as well.

"Look, man, I know this isn't how you want to do things. But…we looked into less when you were trying to keep my deal from coming due," Dean pointed out. "An extra day out chasing down a lead to help Adam, whether it's this ghost thing in Decatur or hunting down the crap we need to do the spell, it's not going to make much difference."

Sam considered the earnest expression on Dean's face, for once devoid of the frustration and desperation he had become so used to seeing during the Apocalypse. He sighed, and looked back at the newspaper. "So, Decatur, huh?"

Tongues of flame licked at his skin, making it blacken and curl while the smell of burning flesh and
fat filled his nostrils. Adam was splayed on the ground before him, choking up blood while Sam groped around in his chest cavity, shredding organs and breaking bones in his attempts to burrow clean through the body.

"You see, Sam?" Lucifer whispered to him, using Sam's lips and voice to speak. "Family only goes so far."

His response was cut off as Adam's hand suddenly flashed out, dealing a blow to Sam's throat that made his head jerk back with an audible crack and his windpipe crush inwards. As he staggered back, grasping at his throat with blood encrusted hands, Adam – no, Michael – loomed over him, the flesh on his chest knitting up.


He grabbed hold of Sam's – no, Lucifer's – ruined throat with one hand, while a sword made of fire and light and grace materialized in his other hand. Before Sam could scream, he brought it down across his face –

SLAM!

Sam jerked awake, nearly hitting his head on the low ceiling as he did so. For a moment, he was disoriented and confused at his surroundings, unable to separate reality from the nightmare. As his senses returned to him, though, he relaxed and glanced out at the gas station; in the side view mirror he could see Dean leaning against the car as he filled up the tank. Jefferson Airplane was playing on the radio, a soft counterpoint to Castiel's rhythmic breathing in the back seat.

'Probably passed out again,' Sam thought, sitting up straight and rubbing crud out of his own eyes. Much as he was onboard with Castiel joining them now that he was human, it was going to take some getting used to, hunting in a unit again. It had been Sam and Dean for so long he had almost forgotten what it was like to hit the road with an extra body. He was sort of glad that Castiel was in hibernation mode a few hours a day, because it gave him some time to slowly adjust to his presence.

Castiel was still waging his war on sleep after the first few nightmares he had had, snoozing only when exhaustion forced his body into shutdown-mode. Usually this only happened during the day, and Sam was pretty sure that it was because Castiel felt more secure when either he or Dean was awake to put an end to any nightmare that threatened. If Dean slamming the car door hadn't roused Castiel, he was probably going to be out for a little while. Sam wished he could say the same for himself, but unfortunately a lifetime of hunting had made him a light sleeper.

Wanting to forget the images that were seared into his brain, he watched Dean in the side-mirror for a while, smirking when the gas station attendant sidled over to him and attempted to strike up a chat. For someone who was so smooth when it came to charming women, Dean was beyond useless when it came to holding a conversation with a man that was genuinely hitting on him, rare an occurrence as that usually was. Living in California, Sam had managed to develop a politer form of rejection when he was hit on by an interested party of the same sex, but Dean's default setting in that respect gravitated between awkwardly stuttering through excuses or lashing out with a punch.

'Wonder which one we'll see today,' Sam thought idly, not particularly wanting to have to bail Dean out of a local jail cell for assault but also sorely needing something amusing to cheer him up from the nightmare he had just been having.

Fate intervened before anything could happen, because the attendant was flagged by an annoyed
looking trucker wanting the keys to the washroom, and Dean was able to finish pumping the gas. He wandered into the small station, paid the cashier, and then returned, swinging into the drivers' seat.

"I hate this body," he said for the millionth time as he tossed Sam a plastic bag and glanced into the back seat. "Mr. Comatose there still down for the count?"

"Yeah," Sam said, frowning at the contents of the bag: chips, chocolate bars and fizzy drinks. "You know, I'd blame your new physique for the junk food cravings, but you always eat like this. Wasn't there anything in the store not packed with sugar or sodium?"

"Yeah, the toilet paper," Dean rolled his eyes and turned the key in the ignition. "Quit complaining. I've seen you down more than a few Butterfingers in the past few days when you thought I wasn't looking."

"'Cause they were the only thing you'd bought. Seriously, are you channeling the Trickster's spirit now?"

"I haven't dipped your fingers in warm water lately, have I? 'Sides, you got a problem with what I buy, you do the grocery runs from now on."

"I would, if we stopped anywhere for more than five minutes!"

"We've got a schedule to keep," Dean reminded him. "Speaking of, run me through the case again."

"Jawohl, mein Führer," Sam muttered under his breath as he opened the browser on his Treo to the page he had bookmarked earlier. "Says here, Stephanie Hindley was getting ready to marry her fiancé... a Roger Aitchison at St. James Catholic Church last week; she was in the back room getting ready and sent her bridesmaid out to get her father for the big walk down the aisle. When he got there, though, the door was locked and she wouldn't answer. They thought she might have gotten cold feet and ran off, so they broke down the door."

"Let me guess... she was still there but significantly less alive?"

"The paper doesn't give too many details, but the word 'shredded' was used," Sam allowed with a wince, able to imagine what had happened only too well.

"Shredded? Could be a werewolf."

"Lunar cycle's not right."

"Deva maybe? Or a Hellhound?"

Sam pretended not to notice the subtle pitch of fear in his brother's voice at the notion. "There was no damage to the doors or windows, and there's no mention of her behaving suspiciously or paranoid before her death," Sam said. "At least not in what I've been able to find."

"So what's the official theory?"

"Police think there's a serial killer on the loose, while a lot of the locals are saying it's the resident ghost doing the killing."

"Wait, they're actually blaming the ghost?" Dean asked, glancing at Sam. "Scratch that -- they have a local ghost?"

"Yeah, it's a famous legend around these parts," Sam replied, opening a new browser window to
"And no hunter's come to check it out before this…why?"

"Probably they did and found nothing – or they got rid of it, but people keep talking up the story anyway to generate tourism," Sam shrugged, entering a search term into his browser. He opened the first link that looked promising. "Oh-kay, according to the legend, Irving Jones and Anne Williams of Decatur fall in love and decide to run away when her parents don't approve of the match. Jones was a bootlegger during Prohibition – "

"He made videos?"

"No, Dean, he smuggled booze."

"Dude's my kind of awesome."

"Anyway, they run off to get married, but he decides to go on one last whiskey run. I guess he wanted to make sure they were living the high life wherever they were going. He ends up cornered by business rivals, who murder him and leave his body in the Sangamon River. When his fiancée finds out, she drowns herself in the same river. Ever since then, she supposedly haunts the Greenwood cemetery. People reportedly see her walking among the graves in a wedding gown and crying or wringing her hands."

"Almost sounds like a Woman in White," Dean pointed out. "The whole river thing, and the white dress. When was the first death in town?"

"Five months ago."

"Anything before then?"

"Nothing that I've been able to find."

"So if this happened a hundred years ago, why hasn't the ghost been offing Bridezillas until now?"

"Someone must have disturbed something," Sam theorized.

"Could be a simple salt-and-burn, then."

"Maybe. But I don't think so. Especially if this spirit is able to cross church grounds to go after its victims."

"The spirit of the Hookman managed it."

"He was tied to a physical object, though," Sam pointed out. "And from what I've seen in the paper, only three of the weddings were going to happen in churches. The others took place at city hall. I really doubt it's the same case."

"Has anyone actually seen the ghost?"

"No one who's lived to tell about it," Sam answered grimly. "It's probably just the dead bride thing that's got people thinking it's the Greenwood Ghost."

"Awesome," Dean sighed, turning onto the last exit to Decatur. "So, what's the game plan? Morgue first or victims' families?"

"I checked the business hours online, the local morgue isn't open until noon on Wednesdays, so
we've got time to kill. I figure we should probably check the crime scenes first."

"Well, City Hall's gonna suck, but the churches might be an easier place to start."

"Don't count on it. I called around last night to see if we could swing an interview, but I was practically hung up on every time. The reporter thing isn't going to work here. Maybe we could try the FBI angle."

Dean made a face, and shook his head. "Nah, it's pretty rare for two chicks to be on assignment in general, but FBI? They'll see right through that."

"One of us could go with Cas?"

Dean cast a would-be surreptitious glance in the rear-view mirror. "I dunno if he's ready for that. The last time he and I pulled that, we were lucky he didn't blow it. Besides, he looks dead on his feet half the time. Also not believable."

There was silence for a moment, and then Sam shifted, a sudden idea forming in his mind. "You know, there is something else we could try…"

"I am not comfortable with this," Cas pronounced as he and Dean proceeded up the small flight of stairs leading into the church.

St. James Catholic was a decently sized brownstone edifice on the corner of Clay and Webster. It had recently been refurbished, if the pristinely painted white panes were anything to go on. Its roof remained the original copper, though, judging by the oxidized green hue. The sound of Old Glory flapping in the wind overhead mingled with the noises of local traffic going by. There was an odd collection of objects off to one side, surrounding the portrait of a sheepish looking, heavy-lidded blond woman.

"Who are you telling?" Dean replied in disgust.

"I believe I was telling you."

"You were…? No, you – Cas, look, just let me do the talking and we can get out of this with minimal awkwardness," Dean groaned. "When I get my body back, just let Sam try to pull his crap…of course he gets to be the one actually working while we do all the distracting…"

"That is not the reason for my discomfort," Castiel insisted. "I simply do not wish to lie to a man of God."

"Get used to it. Happens a lot in this line of work," Dean shrugged. "Just don't try to hug or kiss me, okay? That'd be weird."

Cas looked up from where he had been staring at the collection of flowers, stuffed animals and handwritten notes that were gathered off to the side of the church entrance. "Why would I attempt to do any of those things?"

"Because we're pretending to be…never mind," Dean sighed as they went through the front doors. "Stick to what we went over the car and we'll be okay."
"Very well," Cas nodded, thoughtful. "Should I clasp your hand then?"

Dean jerked his head up. "What? Why?"

"I have noticed that humans who have established a relationship based on mutual affection and sexual attraction often grasp each other's hands," Castiel explained. "Since being cut off from Heaven, I have also noticed that human touch creates a feeling of comfort as well."

Dean blinked, mind flashing back to all the moments in the past few days when he or Sam had reached out for Cas, whether to wake him from his nightmares or the casual brush of fingers when they passed him things. Every memory was tinged by an expression of great relief on the former angel's face.

With a start, Dean realized that Cas was lonely. That thought was immediately followed by a mental kick to himself. He had been so focussed on Cas's decision to give up Heaven to help him and Sam, he hadn't thought of the little things.

'Damn it, this is Sam's department, not mine,' he thought half-heartedly, although he had a certain amount of dislike for the idea of Sam being the one Cas might lean on for comfort. Dean was the one he'd hauled out of Hell, not Sam.

Rolling his eyes skyward and inwardly praising the fact that Sam wasn't around, he reached out and clapped Cas on the back, his fingers squeezing the curve of his shoulder lightly.

"Look, this here? This is fine," he said in a slow, patient voice that he hoped Cas recognized as his 'teaching-the-angel' voice. "But for no more than five seconds, 'kay?" He pulled away after the requisite amount of time, and Cas nodded, that expression of relief blossoming on his face again in a way that made Dean's stomach warble uncomfortably. "But no more talk of handholding. Even with me in a girl's body, that's way too gay."

Castiel cocked his head to one side. "I do not understand your aversion to happiness."

"I'll explain it to you later, let's get in there before the priest notices Sam's sneaking around."

Like most churches Dean had been inside, the interior had a domed ceiling from which hanging ornate lamps cast shadows on the floor. High windows with stained glass displayed the Stations of the Cross, the colours creating patterns on the polished pews. Beyond this, the altar and tabernacle were built into the elevated chancel, carved ornately out of some kind of marble. The images of Jesus Christ, Mary and Joseph resided in a display that Dean thought looked like it had been ripped off from the Disney castle.

They had timed their arrival to be long enough after the morning service to avoid strangers, but early enough so as to not run into anyone coming for afternoon mass. As luck would have it, the only person in the church was the black-clad priest up front, who was arranging programmes in the wooden display.

"Good morning, Father," Dean greeted, his voice echoing in the church despite his softened tone. He strode forward, forcibly relaxing his body to seem nonthreatening. "We're not bothering you, are we?"

"It's no bother at all, as long as you're not reporters," the priest said, straightening up and peering at them. "I've had my fill of them this week. One guy in particular…" the man shook his head in annoyance, before sighing and smiling again. "Anyhow. What can I help you folk with, Miss…?"

"Ritchie. Erica. And this is my…fiancé Cassidy Spungen," Dean said, schooling his face carefully as
he halted on the offending word and offered his hand.

"I'm Father Matthew," the man said, taking Dean's hand and shaking it briefly, and then reaching for Cas, who stared at it for a moment, before taking it as well. "And congratulations on your upcoming nuptials."

Dean had to work hard not to wince at the man's earnest well-wishes; behind his wide smile, Dean's teeth were gritted and he had to remember to keep his body angled toward Cas in what he hoped would be interpreted as closeness. "Thank you."

He was still not impressed with his brother's grand plan. He had nearly pitched a fit in the car when Sam had first suggested it.

"There something you wanna say, Sammy?" he had snapped, glaring at Sam between glances at the road. "'Cause joking around with our IDs and telling a drag queen I bat for the other team is one thing, but this idea of yours? Makes me think you've been reading some of Becky's fucked up stories.

Sam couldn't keep his mouth from twitching. "Come on, Dean, it makes the most sense."

"How does my pretending to be with Cas make any sense?" he had shot back. "Ever? Beyond giving you something to chuckle about for the rest of the drive."

"Not everyone stays up nights thinking of ways to make other people squirm, you know," Sam had pointed out flatly. "Besides, any idiot can see you guys have a connection –" Dean had bristled at the word choice, " – almost as much as people can see you and I have a connection."

"I swear to God, Sammy, if you start spouting that soul mate crap –"

"Look, I could go in and do this with Cas, but it's pretty obvious that we're nothing more than friends. You two have this, like, profound bond or something that anyone just looking at the surface would figure you were into each other –" At Dean's threatening look, he had raised his hands in defence and amended, " – you know, now that you look like a girl."

"Screw you."

"If you have that much of a problem with it, you and me could go in there. It's not like we haven't pretended we were a couple before –"

" – we do not talk about that. Ever."

" – but somehow I don't see the priests being too enthusiastic about a pair of lesbians wanting to get married in a church. And then there's the whole Cas not knowing how to pick locks, or work the EMF, or –"

"Alright, alright, Jesus!" Dean had cut him off. "Fine, we'll do it. But you're talking him through it, because the more I think about this, the more likely I am to change my mind."

Sam had smirked in triumph, and then an expression like he had just remembered something appeared on his face.

"Hold on," he had said, shifting in his seat to haul out his wallet. Neither he nor Dean had given into the temptation to carry a purse yet, no matter how practical it might have been in their new bodies.

Sam slid his wallet open and began to rifle through it, and then pulled something out which he
offered to Dean. "Here. For your cover."

A small silver ring with some kind of gem inset had gleamed in the sunlight.

Dean had cocked an eyebrow. "Dude, I love you an all, but that shit's illegal in this state, last time I checked."

"It's the one I bought for Jess, asshat," Sam had retorted, shoving Dean none-too-gently in the shoulder. "And it's just for you to show off. You're going to be pretending to be engaged, and engaged women wear rings. I want it back when you're done."

"I feel so much less creeped out about you apparently carrying an engagement ring around in your duffle now that I know it belonged to your dead girlfriend," Dean had said dryly, trying to make light of the situation despite the worry that cropped up inside. It had been five years, and yet despite everything, Sam was still carrying a piece of his past around with him. Dean had felt his expression turn serious. "Sam, I can't—"

"Dean, just put the damn thing on," Sam had snapped, clearly not wanting to talk about it.

Dean had sighed, made a face and taken the piece of jewelry, shoving it onto his finger. "Shit – did Jess not have any bones? This thing is tight."

"Not my fault you have sausage fingers – maybe lay off the double cheeseburgers."

The ring was still cutting off the circulation in Dean's fingers now, but when he noticed the priest's gaze flick to his left hand, he silently admitted that maybe Sam had been right. About that, at least.

"So what is it I can help you two with today?" Father Matthew asked.

"We were just passing through on our way to St. Louis and we saw this place – it looks a lot like the church where my folks got hitched," Dean explained. "Except theirs got burned down a couple years back."

"It's always a shame when something like that happens," the priest said in a sympathetic voice, but Dean caught the inquisitive note in the tone that begged why this was his problem.

"Anyhow, we saw this place and I just had to check it out for the wedding," Dean lied, laying it on as thick as possible.

'Girls say shit like that, right?' he asked himself, glancing at Cas to make sure the former angel was going along with this. He would have laughed if they hadn't been in the middle of a job; Cas looked like he was concentrating so hard on being normal that he might poop himself any second.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time I've performed a ceremony for out-of-towners," the priest said, sounding both surprised and gladdened. His tone became hesitant, "Er, were you hoping to do this today, or…?"

"Get married? Oh – no! God no," Dean burst out, and then coughed in embarrassment, "I mean…"

"It's alright, I've heard worse," the priest said with a smile.

"Uh, what I meant was, I thought we'd see if it was okay to check this place out and put it on a list of possible venues. I've…" He winced inwardly, knowing that if Sam were there and not stealthily sneaking around the church premises right now he would be laughing his ass off, "had my heart set on something small and homey – you know, needs just the right kind of atmosphere."
"It's always nice to hear people wanting to stick with the traditions," Father Matthew said genuinely, unaware of Dean's uncertainty. "Especially considering the fad of flying out to a beach somewhere."

"Oh, well, I don't do planes and this guy's practically allergic to the sun," Dean responded smoothly.

"I do not have any particular aversion to the sun," Cas said, offering Dean a sidelong glance.

"Well, you may not, but your skin sure does," Dean replied, a note of warning in his voice.

Thankfully, Cas seemed to get the message, because he nodded thoughtfully, and said, "Ah. Yes. It…fester." 

Father Matthew raised an eyebrow and looked on the verge of asking a question, but Dean cut him off, "Really, this place is so charming. Really, uh, welcoming. Not like some of the other places we've seen." He lowered his voice, would-be-conspiratorially. "Cas's family's pretty overbearing. They can't do anything small. They throw a party like it's the end of the world."

"Well, if you would like to discuss arrangements and terms, there is some time before midday service," Father Matthew offered. "My office is just off to the side of the nave."

"Well, thank you kindly, Father," Dean beamed, motioning with his head for Cas to follow them.

The priest led them into a small room behind the church, which was brightly lit by two small windows on the sides. Bookcases and shelves with curios lined the cramped walls, and a worn couch was squeezed into the corner of the room, covered with neatly folded bedding. In the center were a filing cabinet, two chairs and a desk that held an ancient looking computer.

Father Matthew offered them the chairs by the desk and took the couch himself. "I apologize for the cramped space, we've had a few months' lean living."

"It's no problem at all, Father, real cozy," Dean assured him. Then, he began casually, "If you don't mind me asking, we passed that wall of flowers and candles outside the door. What happened?"

Father Matthew went quiet for a moment, and then sighed, sadly, "It was a tragedy. There was a death in our community recently. It happened the day she was supposed to get married, which made it all the worse."

"Wow, that's terrible," Dean simpered. "Now that you mention it, I think I read something in the paper about that."

The priest sighed. "With that reporter trolling around the past few months, I'm surprised this hasn't been turned into a made-for-TV special."

"Wasn't she…wasn't she actually in the church when it happened?"

The priest's expression became rather closed. "It is unfortunate, but yes, the incident did occur here. I'll understand if that affects your decision about having your ceremony here…"

Dean felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, and surreptitiously glanced down at it. The message was from Sam, and read, 'Church is clear. No EMF or ectoplasm.'

He pasted the smile back on his face and looked up at the priest. "Of course not. I just have a few questions about the place, if you don't mind?"

"That depends on the questions," the priest replied, his smile warm but his eyes guarded.
Considering what had happened here, it was more than likely the man had had to deal with a lot of negative media attention lately.

When they left a half hour later, after discovering there was nothing in the entire history of St. James Church that might explain Stephanie Hindley's death, Sam was waiting for them by the car.

"What is the point of those items?" Cas asked, eying the memorabilia for Stephanie Hindley as they drove away. "The woman is not here to read the messages or take comfort in the objects. She has no use for them where she is."

"It's not always just about the person who's died, Cas," Sam said gently, and with infinitely more patience than Dean ever managed when he was on explain-humanity-to-the-ex-angel detail. "Mostly it's about the people they've left behind."

"And humans take comfort in the collection of useless objects and dying flora?" Cas inquired.

"Some do," Sam nodded.

Cas considered this, and then in a thoughtful voice remarked, "Such offerings were absent when Ellen and Joanna Beth perished."

Dean and Sam both tensed, and Dean made a mental note to have yet another conversation with Cas about what topics you didn't bring up.

"Everyone grieves differently," Sam explained after a pause. "Besides, Ellen and Jo…if they were around, they'd probably kick our butts for leaving flowers and teddy bears lying around for them."

"And then tell us we were being wusses and to go get drunk already," Dean added. "Which we did, remember? It's what they would have wanted."

"I am to take it that you would not engage in this particular practice, then?" Castiel indicated to the makeshift shrine across the street.

"Nah, we'd just go Dark Side and bang demon chicks," Dean deadpanned, only a little pointed. Considering what Sam had just put him through, he figured he had the right to be a little snarky.

Sam's face turned shadowy, and he glared, "Or sell our souls. Because that always works out so well."

Cas glanced between them, apparently having difficulty following the subtext of their conversation. "You find humour in such unpleasant reminders?"

"It's either bitch about it or go nuts, Cas, and life's just too damn short," Dean said, clapping him on the shoulder as he opened the car door. "Trust us, we definitely know that." He nodded at Sam. "So, where to next?"

"Well, that's City Hall and every damn church on the list," Dean complained a few hours and a trip to a diner later. He groaned and stretched his arms along the back of the booth, in an action which would have annoyed Sam but which Castiel either didn't mind or didn't notice. "Not only were they all a total waste of time, but I feel completely emasculated to boot."
"Wow, five syllables, I'm impressed," Sam put in.

"Bite me."

"We should view the body now," Castiel remarked, picking unhappily at the salad Sam had bought for him. He had been eyeing Dean's plate hopefully, but had given in to Sam's recommendation that he put off really heavy foods for another week or so. His first experience kneeling before the porcelain god was obviously still fresh in his mind.

"That's a good idea," Sam agreed, out of habit glancing around the restaurant to make sure no one was paying them any attention. "The morgue should be open."

"Yeah, well, you can go with Cas this time," Dean told him. "You look like the less fun chick anyway, you could probably rock the serious med-student look real easy."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Sure, if you feel like making the rounds of the local library and bookstores for information on the Greenwood Bride."

Dean made a face, and Sam knew he had won that argument; Dean and books would never be good friends. "Fine. Drop us off there first, nerd."

"I should make you take the bus."

"Try it, Samantha," Dean shot back, making a 'come on' gesture with his hands. Jess's ring glinted on his finger, which he noticed at the same time Sam did.

The pang of pain at the memory of how long it had taken him to pick out the stupid thing was lesser than it had been when he first lost Jess, but it was still there. He had brought the ring with him all those years ago because it was the only thing he had left of her after the fire that hadn't gone back to her family; in the first few months, there were days when he would take it out and look at it when Dean wasn't around. As their lives became more complicated and dangerous, especially after losing Dad and Dean selling his soul, he had barely glanced at it, consigning it to the bottom of his wallet like an afterthought.

There had been some days back then, especially after returning home to Lawrence that one time to exercise the poltergeist from their childhood home, that Sam had wondered if Jess might have ended up like Mom – a ghost trapped in the home she had died in. But knowing what he now knew about Mary Winchester, who had definitely had some unfinished business, he felt sure that Jessica had moved on. She was probably in her own version of heaven, living out her days with her family and perhaps dragging a simulation of himself to parties he didn't want to go to.

Wherever she was, Sam was sure that Jess was at peace.

Staring at the ring, Sam wondered if he would ever have that luxury.

Dean tugged the trinket it off and handed it to Sam, mercifully not saying anything although his expression suggested that he very much wanted to.

Sam cut that off by standing up. "Well, come on, let's do this quickly. We still have some witnesses to talk to today, so we should finish up the scut work quick."

Dean shot him a look that clearly told him he wasn't buying it, but instead said to Cas, "Come on, buddy, finish your rabbit food. We've got to see a man about a corpse."

Sam dropped the two of them off at the morgue where two of the bodies, including Stephanie
Hindley's, had been taken following the murders, and then left the car in an all-day parking zone.

There was little success to be had at the library.

It seemed that the recent string of murders had attracted not only Sam and Dean's notice, but local history buffs' as well. Every book on the local history or having to do with the Greenwood Bride was out on loan. Sam supposed he should just be glad that the crazier element of urban legend enthusiasts hadn't entered town, as in the case of the UFO followers in Elwood. Or even worse, the Ghostfacers.

'I would take going to another Supernatural convention over running into those clowns again,' he thought as he walked through the doors of a small hole-in-the-wall bookstore called Pyewacket's. It was the fifth place he'd been too, all of the other bookstores in town catering more towards the Oprah's Bookclub crowd than the occult.

This place smelled like potpourri and dust, and shelves upon shelves of old books, some in different languages. There was an entire section based on the town's history, which Sam was glad for. It was a single level bookstore with wide aisles and more books than cheap items for sale, which brought it up in his estimation. It was a mark of how well a bookstore was doing if it could get by on just selling books instead of kitschy gift merchandise.

Unfortunately, nothing in the section looked the least bit promising. He went through every book on the shelf, even crouching down to peruse the bottom levels, but there was nothing. The books were more along the lines of travel and tourist guides, with a few coffee table books thrown in for good measure, than what he was looking for.

He must have looked disappointed, because someone asked, "Can I help you find anything?"

He glanced up to reply, but was surprised to see the person who had spoken was eye-level with him while he crouched.

The woman was about his age, perhaps a little younger, and strikingly pretty in the blond, blue-eyed way that wouldn't have been out of place in sunny California. She looked like she had once been the athletic sort, with long legs and tanned skin. The only thing out of ordinary was the fact that she was sitting in a wheelchair.

"Uh, I don't know," he said, a little flustered.

"It's just, you've been going through that shelf for about half an hour now and you look like someone kicked your puppy," she told him. "Also, if you don't buy something soon, you're going to screw up my conversion for the day."

Sam blinked, realization setting in. "You work here?"

"On occasion," she said, raising an eyebrow. "Considering I own the place, and all."

"Wow, that's kind of awesome."

"When people buy stuff it is," she told him wryly. She offered him her hand. "I'm Nicki."

"Jane," Sam stated, taking her hand briefly.

"So, what can I help you find?"

"I'm looking for anything you might have on the town's history – specifically about town legends
and myths," Sam said. "I'm on a road trip, and every time we stop through a small town, I like to pick up some interesting reading material. I heard there's a famous ghost around these parts and thought I'd read up on it. The Greenwood Bride?"

"Greenwood Bride, huh?" Nicki asked, the sudden depreciating curl of her lip at odds with her otherwise pretty face. "So you're just another vulture coming to read about the town's stupid ghost."

"Uh…kind of a hobby," Sam said, sheepish. "Do you know anything about it?"

"Who doesn't?" Nicki rolled her eyes and then wheeled back out of the stacks. "I'm afraid you're S-O-L. That's been a hot topic the past few months, what with all those weird deaths in the newspapers. I've got book orders on backlog trying to get material on that particular subject. I'd suggest ordering something from Amazon."

"There's absolutely nothing here?" Sam asked, following her.

"Nothing in print, anyway."

"Do you know anything?"

Nicki shrugged. "The basics. It's Bonnie and Clyde meets the Notebook, I guess. Girl meets guy, guy turns out to be a schmuck who skips out on their wedding plans for whatever reason, screws up the whole thing, and she ends up spending her eternity pining for him in a boneyard."

Sam snorted. "That's a pretty unromantic way of looking at it."

"Let me tell you, if you've ever shelved entire carts of bodice-rippers in one shift, you'd lose your appreciation for romance too," Nicki replied, and Sam couldn't help grinning at that. "Tell you what, though. If you're that interested in a comprehensive look at the legend, you should talk to the writer that's doing a story on it."

"Writer?" Sam echoed. "What do you mean?"

"He's this freelance writer or journalist or something. He's really interested in the deaths that have been happening here and the possibility of it being some pissed off emo chick from the beyond. He showed up here right around the time that first girl died," Nicki shrugged. "Guy's kind of a nutjob, if you ask me. I guess he's just trying desperately to be the next Stieg Larsson."

Sam opened his mouth to ask for more information on what could possibly be a lead, when his phone rang.

"Can you give me a sec?" he asked, reaching for his phone. Nicki shrugged and wheeled herself off toward the front desk, and Sam accepted the call. "Hello?"

"Yeah, we've got zilch at the morgue," Dean told him over the phone. "Or at least as much zilch as before. Going in, I thought we might be looking at Hellhounds, what with the whole shredding thing. But this chick's body…it's not anything with claws that did that. She was ripped apart by something with fingers."

"Or someone."

"Considering there was no DNA or fingerprints anywhere, it's gotta be some kind of spirit," Dean said.

Sam turned away from Nicki and lowered his voice. "Did you try using a black light?"
"Course I did – what, you think I'm an amateur? Nothing showed up."

"And even Cas couldn't figure it out?"

"He said he can't think of any supernatural creature that it could be, but then again he's no CSI… which I learned first-hand when he took one look at the body and bolted. Had to tell the medical examiner he had food poisoning."

"You're kidding!"

"Turns out now that he's human, the smell of formaldehyde doesn't agree with him," Dean answered with a depreciating affection in his voice. "Pretty sure he's still in the bathroom puking his guts up."

Sam sighed. "Awesome."

Apparently, it wasn't a good week for Castiel.

Dean chuckled. "Anything on your end?"

"Not anything concrete, but the owner of the bookstore I'm at says there's a local writer who's been doing some research linking the ghost story with the recent deaths. We should check him out."

"Got any coordinates on this guy?"

"I'm going to get them now. I'll call you back with anything concrete."

"Right."

Sam hung up and wandered up to the front desk, where Nicki was checking through order forms. "So…this writer guy. He come in here often?"

"Yeah, almost three times a week for the past couple of months," she answered. "He practically lives in the section you were checking out, even though I don't think he ever found what he was looking for either. He just hangs out there reading in the stacks until I ask him if he needs help, then he leaves."

"You sure he's coming in here for the books?" Sam asked, voice only a little suggestive.

Nicki made a face. "Uh, ew. First of all, no one's knocking down doors for a piece of this —" she gestured to her immobile legs, " — second of all, the guy's like fifty and looks like John Wilkes Booth. He kind of reminded me of a hobo, actually."

"This guy have a name?"

"Not that he's ever told me, but according to the credit card slips he's signed, his name is D. Wood."

Sam stored the information away for later. "And you said he only showed up when the first deaths occurred?"

Nicki raised an eyebrow. "Uh, yeah. Why?"

"No reason," Sam assured, and then offered a hopefully beguiling smile. "Do you have his address on file by any chance?"
Dean grunted and hauled Cas over his shoulder, watching as the ex-angel landed with a painful exhalation on his back. He blinked in surprise for a moment, as though waiting for his mortal reflexes to kick in, and then he rolled to the side before Dean could take another run at him.

They circled each other in the wide open living area, and Dean watched Cas's eyes flit calculatingly up and down Dean's body as he tried to locate an opening. Despite his ready position, Dean could tell Cas was still holding back. Whether it was because he still felt disconnected from his body or if he was having trouble looking at Dean as a target, Dean wasn't sure.

He hadn't even realized that that was a thing until he had suggested taking advantage of an hour's worth of down-time the day before.

Cas had been reluctant.

"It reminds me too much of my re-education by the Host," he had explained when Dean commented on that reluctance.

"Meaning?"

Cas had gotten what could only be described as an uncomfortable expression on his face, but before Dean could ask about it, Sam had jumped in, "You know, maybe we should give him a little more time to adapt before throwing him into Dad's training regimen."

Cas had offered Sam what Dean could only have interpreted as a grateful look.

"He's gotta learn sometime," Dean had pointed out, glancing from one to the other. Sam had had that air about him that he tended to get when he was trying to avoid talking about something; Dean had a suspicion that it had something to do with whatever he and Cas had been chatting about while he scoped out pies at the diner in Molline.

"Maybe we could enroll him in a self-defence class or something?"

"Uh, why spend the money when he's got two damn good fighters to learn from right here? Boobs or no," Dean had pointed out. "Actually, make that one. Pregnant prom queens throw better right hooks than you do."

"Real funny, Dean," Sam had responded sourly.

"It is not about the cost," Cas had interjected quietly, offering Sam a look that was both appreciative and pacifying. "It is simply that from my first moment, I have been expected to exploit my enemy's every weakness. To think of you – either of you – as targets, when you are the only comrades that I have, is…rather difficult."

"Yeah, I can see where that might be a bit of a disconnect," Sam had said, nodding sympathetically. He had fixed Dean with a meaningful look. "Angels aren't exactly great at compartmentalizing."

Dean had felt oddly touched by Cas's admission, but rather than lapse into a chick flick moment the way he knew Sam was dying to do, he had shrugged, "Yeah, fine, but he's not an angel anymore. And on the off chance that we end up in a town with a siren or a crazy ghost doctor playing with electroshock therapy and one of us goes Dark Side, it'd be nice to know he can beat some sense back into us."
For once his logic must have made some kind of sense, because it penetrated whatever reservations Cas was holding onto. Cas had agreed to light sparring bouts to start off with.

Which Dean decided was going to be as difficult and frustrating a process as any of Cas's humanity lessons. Despite Cas having observed human combat techniques for thousands of years, he had trouble adapting any of that knowledge to his new body. Apparently Jimmy hadn't been a physically active guy, and as Cas was already somewhat weakened from his two-week nap and lack of food, the former angel was having trouble making his body move the way he needed it to.

Still, he was a fast learner, and never made the same mistake twice, Dean observed as he dove at Cas with a flurry of jabs. Cas managed to dodge all but the last, which grazed him lightly across the jaw.

'Dude needs to shave,' Dean thought idly at the rough scrape across his knuckles when he pulled back, giving Cas a moment to recover. It was an allowance that an actual opponent would never have given, but Dean agreed with Sam's suggestion that they needed to take things slow. There was no point to hauling out the full-fledged John Winchester training regimen until Cas stopped tripping over himself like an inexperienced puppy.

Considering the guy was still having trouble putting his socks on in the morning, it would be a while. That didn't mean Dean was just going to lie down and take a beating to stroke the ex-angel's ego, though.

Dean vaulted forward as soon as Cas recovered himself, using the forward momentum to give his diminished form some extra force. His arm hooked around Cas's neck as he swung his body around, pulling Cas into a combination of a headlock and chokehold. At the same time, he bent and nudged his knee inwards, trying to force Cas into a kneeling position.

He expected Cas to lean into his body and flip him over, as Dean and Sam had demonstrated at least twice. What he didn't expect was for Cas to curl into him, reaching one arm in and around Dean's left leg, and the other arm up behind his back. He bodily lifted him into the air and threw him down to the ground.

"Fuck!" Dean grunted in surprise as he belatedly curled his back and shoulders to keep from hitting his head on the barely carpeted floor.

As Cas continued to pin him down, a look of concentration on his face, Dean swept his free right leg upward. He knocked Cas upside the head, toppling the ex-angel over.

"Watch your balance, otherwise I can do this," he ordered as he crawled over, seized one of Cas's arms and twisted it behind his back, effectively pinning him face down into the carpet. Cas muttered something breathlessly, and Dean leaned closer. "What'd you say?"

Cas moved unexpectedly, pushing himself upwards and rolling them both over until he was holding Dean to the ground. He was panting. "I said, 'I am not the only one getting used to a new body'. Human or not, I remain stronger than you.'

Dean smirked.

"If that was an issue, I'd have stopped scrapping with Sammy fifteen years ago," he pointed out, scissoring his legs to reverse their position once again. "If you tell him that shit, though, I'll kick your ass." He took in their positions and grinned. "You know, more than I'm doing now."

Cas grimaced and shoved Dean backwards, forcing him to tuck and roll away. As Cas scrambled to his feet, Dean grabbed him around the neck and hauled him upwards in another chokehold. Before
he could settle back into a more grounded position, though, Cas reached around and flipped him over his back.

This time, Dean head did hit the floor, and he saw stars as the air rushed out of his lunges. "Ow."

Cas immediately loomed into view, upside down from Dean and with a worried expression. "Dean? Are you alright?"

He was kneeling by Dean's head and brought his face down within inches of Dean's, so close that the latter felt the ex-angel's every breath on his own cheeks. In the dim light of the room, Dean could see how the blood had flushed his cheeks and how a drop of sweat was inching down the side of his neck. It was a far cry from the stoic angel that had beaten him bloody in an alley outside Cicero; even back then, Cas had moved like a statue come to life.

'No more of that, though,' Dean thought idly. 'Might actually be able to get him drunk the human way now. Or laid.'

Staring up at the breathless man above him, with his perpetually dishevelled hair and pupils dilated from the stress of their bout, Dean could almost imagine what the guy might look like during sex.

There was a weird quaver in his stomach, and about a second after that particular observation Dean experienced a very vague sense of disengagement. He could still feel his own heart rate responding to the fight and the warmth of his entire body, but neither fact seemed half as important as enjoying the sight of Cas looking ruffled and human for once.

Then his good sense caught up with him.

'Seriously, where the hell did that come from?' he wanted to know as he blinked up at Cas.

Cas, who was still entirely too close, seemed just as perturbed by the infinitesimally short lull in Dean's movements.

Rather than dwell on it, Dean spurred himself into action, rolling his hips and knees up over his head to clamp around Cas's neck and haul him forward.

Castiel let out a surprised cry as Dean reached his arms up and used them to propel Cas up and over him, throwing him until it was the former angel lying on his back staring up at the ceiling while Dean landed in a crouch.

In an effort to recover himself, he put himself at a decent distance away from Cas and grinned down. "Just peachy."

Cas grimaced. "I was a warrior of God for hundreds of thousands of years. There should not be this amount of difficulty involved in learning to fight as a human."

"Yeah, well, no offense, but you chose a pretty wimpy vessel," Dean offered jokingly. "Jimmy wasn't exactly Hulk Hogan, if you know what I mean."

"I rarely do," Cas muttered.

Dean laughed, satisfied, and glanced around the farmhouse they were crashing in.

Rather than spend their limited funds on another motel, Dean had made the executive call to squat in an abandoned home that was about half an hour outside of Decatur. The small structure was built off one of the side roads of the one-lane highway and had no sign of recent habitations. The only clue to
why it was so far from the town lay in the long since abandoned fields and a decrepit, falling-down structure that had probably been a barn once.

The house itself wasn't much better; the front door hung off one hinge and many of the windows had been reduced to nothing but shards of glass clinging to the wooden frames. The grey walls beneath peeling red paint seemed to lean away from the wind, as though it always blew in the same direction here, and the roof was caved in on one side of the structure.

The interior was just as dismal, although the main living area where they had set up their things was closed off from the elements. There were water stains on the walls and the distinct smell of mildew. Patches of concrete showed through gaping holes in the worn wall-to-wall carpeting, and the beaten furniture had been pushed all to one side by whoever had occupied the house before them. The wide open concept of the room had been especially useful once Dean suggested they do some sparring.

The sound of a door slamming caused Dean and Cas to glance over to the entrance of the living room.

"I've tracked down D. Wood," Sam announced, in the exact moment that Dean suddenly felt his legs fold out from beneath him. Cas had used the distraction as an opportunity to sweep his foot out and send Dean over on his ass. "Whoa. Nice one, Cas."

"Cheap shot," Dean grunted, leaning up on his elbows to glower at the ex-angel on the floor. "You're lucky this body has extra padding."

"I would apologize, but as this was the entire point of the exercise, I feel justified in my actions," Cas replied, trying and failing to not look smug.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Dude, you could just say, 'Owned'. Takes a lot less time."

"You're just mad he got you," Sam pointed out. "It's a good thing he's such a quick study."

"Faster than you are, at any rate. It took you how long to be able to pin me?"

"You used to cheat."

"Had to compensate for your mutant growth spurts somehow, Gigantor."

"Anyway," Sam drawled, ignoring the attempt to bait him. "It took me a while to catch up with this guy – he might have visited Nicki's shop as D. Wood, but he's been living in a motel off the main highway under a different name – motel owner said it was David Shelley."

"Well, you said he was a writer, maybe it's a penname," Dean shrugged, but he was already getting up off the floor and reaching down to offer Cas a hand. The former angel accepted it without complaint, his grip strong. When Dean pulled away, he thought he saw a glimmer of reluctance in his friend's eyes, but it could have been the dim lighting. "Either way, it's a bit suspicious – this writer shows up in town the same time as the first murder? Come on."

"Have you found anything else on him?"

"Nope. Whoever he is, he hasn't been sharing his real name with anyone."

"So he's just jumped to the top of the list," Dean decided. "Well, if he's not completely human, he could be one of the serial monster types, like a shtriga or a siren. Any other towns going through a sudden wave of dead brides?"
"Just here as far as I can tell, but I haven't searched every city over the past hundred years," Sam replied. "We've kind of been on a schedule."

"If you wish to speak to this witness today, I can continue your investigation," Cas offered. "I am tired after our training exercise. I can spend the time researching as you taught me. Besides, it is probably best if I learn how to better use that infernal contraption." At Sam and Dean's identical looks of incredulity, he added, "The laptop."

"Sure, Cas," Sam said after a moment, sounding vaguely amused. "Just...don't break it. And if you go on the Internet, don't download anything, okay? I haven't put a new antivirus in there yet – and call me if there's anything that looks useful –"

"Yeah, yeah," Dean rolled his eyes, ushering his brother out of the room. "He's not going to break your toy, you giant girl." He turned and pointed a finger at Cas, parting with a joking admonition, "And stay away from the porn."

Beside him, Sam turned red and spluttered, "Dean!"

The drive to the motel where Sam had tracked down the elusive D. Wood was mostly spent in their usual back and forth bickering over whether or not Dean was corrupting the former angel or not. As usual, Dean brushed off Sam's complaints like they were nothing.

"He's been around for a few millennia – he's probably seen more weird shit than anything you or me could show him," Dean insisted once again as they pulled into the dilapidated motel on the other side of the city.

"Yeah, well, he's never seen your taste in entertainment," Sam retorted as they climbed out of the car in the back corner of the parking lot. They were obscured from most of the motel windows, and started gearing up their weapons and supplies. "What story are we going with today?"

"Reporters again?" Dean quirked an eyebrow. "Dude, I know you've been surfing my porn."

"I don't surf anything – you just never delete your browser history," Sam replied. "I was thinking something more personal. Friends of the family?"

"If he's really writing some kind of book and he's been here five months, he probably knows them all. And it's okay, Sam, there's nothing to be ashamed of. Porn is a natural –"

"I swear to God, if you don't stop talking about porn I will beat you," Sam hissed, shoving Dean roughly.

Dean made an inviting gesture. "Bring it."

Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Family from out of town, then?"

"Yeah, okay," Dean snorted. "Wuss."

A quick cash bribe to the motel management later, and they stood outside of the room where David Shelley had apparently ensconced himself.
The person who answered Sam's knock was a swarthy, unshaven man with grey eyes and a square face. He was slightly out of breath, but that seemed to be due to the rather large suitcase he was lugging in one hand as he glanced out at them suspiciously. Sam noticed that the guy's gaze rested on him a little longer than was usual when meeting someone for the first time, but instead of commenting on it, filed the information away until later.

"Mr. Wood?" he ventured.

"Can I help you?" the man asked in gruff, insincere voice. His speech was a rough, accented rasp that reminded Sam a little of how Crowley spoke, only with a more polished diction.

"I'm Jane, this is Erica – we're Stephanie Hindley's cousins," Sam introduced.

"I see," Wood said, his tone trailing upwards in a question.

Dean picked up the inquiry. "We're in town for the funeral and heard you were sort of investigating what happened to her…unofficially. That you might have more of an idea or some theories about it than the police did."

"And who gave you that idea?"

"A few people in town mentioned you were a writer and that you had interviewed a bunch of families like ours…families of people who died. Women," Sam explained. "We thought maybe you had another angle on what happened to Stephanie."

"I'm afraid I know as little about it as the police do," Wood said, striding past them with his bag and heading toward his car.

He didn't even offer any type of condolences, which was odd, for an investigative writer; they usually had to be able to feign some kind of human emotion in their work. Sam was actually having a hard time seeing this guy as a sympathetic person at all.

Beside him, Dean nodded meaningfully at the suitcase; it seemed like Wood was getting ready to skip town or something. Sam agreed with a barely-there nod that it was suspicious.

"As it is," the man continued on brusquely, "I have been asked to cease and desist in my continued research, and I am inclined to do exactly that."

"But you've been here for months," Dean protested, following Wood after he tossed his suitcase into the back of a beat-up pick up and started back to his motel room. "I heard the police have been after you to stop for months now, and you didn't. Now you're suddenly going to? Did you find something and they're paying your off, or what?"

It was a weak attempt at wheedling, but Sam knew Dean was just trying to keep the guy talking to them. They needed to figure out his angle before he left town.

Wood snorted. "It has nothing to do with that. My…creative spark seems to have burned out. I require a change of scenery."

Sam frowned at the lie.

"It kind of looks like you're running away," he pointed out. "People only really do that when they think they're going to get into trouble or if they think they're in danger."

Wood leveled a long look at him, and out of nowhere asked, "Have we met before?"
Sam blinked, nonplussed, and his eyes flicked to Dean. His brother appeared calm, but Sam could sense him trying not to tense up. "Uh, no. Why?"

"You remind me of someone," Wood said unhelpfully. He headed back through the door and turned to face them. "Ladies, I am sorry I cannot help you, but I am hoping to get out of here before the traffic picks up. Now, if you would excuse me –"

He started to close the door in their faces.

Dean, in his usual impulsive way, barged forward.

"Hold on a sec!" he cried, sticking a steel-toed boot into the door to keep it from closing. He brought the other one up and nudged the door back open, taking a step into the small room. "We just want to know –"

Several things happened at once.

Sam heard the familiar ratcheting sound of a gun's safety mechanism being undone and found himself staring down the barrel of an MK23; at the same time, he felt his brother move beside him and out of the periphery noticed that Dean was aiming his .45 directly at Wood's forehead.

For a long, tense moment, there was silence. Sam remained still and Wood didn't even flinch at the firearm pointed at his head.

"Who are you," he asked coldly, attention shifting from Dean to Sam but without any suggestion that he was paying either of them less attention than the other.

"I think we could ask you the same thing," Dean returned, keeping his own voice steady. From his position behind Dean, it would be difficult for Sam to disarm Wood if he decided to pull the trigger; while Sam was sure Dean could move before that became an issue, he knew better than to rely on something that could backfire that badly.

He cast his gaze around the motel room for something that could be used to help him, and his eyes fell on the window sill. A familiar looking white substance lined the ledge, and as he glanced down at the door, he saw that the same line was there, broken only by Dean's clumsy feet.

"D – Erica, look," Sam said, trying to call attention to his discovery. His brother continued to stare down the other man with his usual stubborn determination, searching for the right moment to act. "Hey, moron, put down the gun. The guy's a hunter."

Wood blinked in an approximation of surprise, but didn't lower his weapon. Dean didn't relax either, which given their current relationship with the hunter community was understandable, but which also wasn't something they really needed to worry about with their current disguises.

Sam grumbled softly and then sought out Wood's gaze, holding it and nodding at his empty hands. "Put it down, man, we're on the same side."

"Maybe," Dean said through gritted teeth. "Maybe not. Could be another homicidal asshole like Gordon, for all we know. 'Scuse me if I don't wanna take that chance."

This time Wood's expression did lose some of its tension. "Gordon? Are you talking about Gordon Walker?" He finally began to lower his weapon, glancing from one to the other as his jaw clenched.

"I hope your next words are that the depraved lunatic has shuffled off his mortal coil."
"Yeah, guy got turned by a vampire and had to be put down," Dean said, and then added, "Or so I've heard."

"A more fitting end I can't imagine," Wood remarked frostily.

There were several more seconds of a stand-off, before Sam let out an exasperated noise and hauled down the collar of his shirt and then his brother's. "Look, we're not demons."

Wood raised an eyebrow. "That's a clever idea there. I'm afraid I lost my taste for tattoos several years ago, however --" He completely lowered his weapon and dug a chain out from under his shirt; charms of many different religions and belief systems decorated it, "-- you can see that I am also demon-free."

Dean finally lowered his gun as well, and they both clicked the safety back on.

The other hunter held out a hand. "Daniel Ryder."

"Jane Campbell," Sam reintroduced them, accepting his hand when Dean didn't. "This is my sister, Erica." The man formerly known as Daniel Wood continued to study him carefully as he took his hand. When he didn't give it back, Sam shifted uncomfortably.

"Unless you're planning on going steady, maybe you should let go there?" Dean suggested, irritated. Sam wanted to roll his eyes at his brother's overprotective routine and remind him that he was a grown man – current female body notwithstanding – but he didn't get the chance.

"Campbell, you say?" Daniel Ryder asked, finally releasing Sam's hand and glancing at Dean like he still expected an attack. Knowing Dean, it wasn't a bad judgement call. "I met a few Campbells up in Michigan. They were good hunters. You look an awful lot like the youngest one."

Which was kind of the last thing that Sam had expected to hear; judging from Dean's blank expression, he wasn't the only one.

They had never known very much about their family. It had always just been John and Mary, and after Mary died it had just been John. He'd never talked about his parents very much while Sam and Dean were young – all they knew was that John's family was from Indiana and that his father had been a mechanic; Mary's family had never been talked about at all. Sam and Dean had known about an uncle who had died not long after Mary, and a great-uncle they had never met but who had paid for their mother's headstone. In fact, they had learned more about Mary Winchester when the angels stuck their noses into their lives than their father had ever told them.

Thanks to Dean's first trip to the past, they had learned all about the Campbells and the family business. Their grandparents and their mother had been hunters, and after Sam had done a little digging, he had learned that there had been Campbells associated with strange happenings since the time of the Mayflower. He and Dean had even encountered an old case of their grandfather's in San Francisco a few years back.

Given how much they still didn't know about their family history, though, it was entirely possible they had relatives somewhere – relatives who were hunters.

"We don't know a lot about our folks," Sam said when it became clear Dean wasn't going to step up to the plate this time. "Our family's all dead so far as we know. Dad raised us and sort of fell into hunting by accident. Passed it on to us."

"That's a rather unusual undertaking," Ryder observed. "I've known a few women in my time who hunted, but they usually fell into the life by accident. I've never heard of a man intentionally teaching
his daughters. Your father must have had immense confidence in you both."

He sounded surprised and Sam felt insulted by that, despite the fact he wasn't actually a woman. Dean also looked like he had a thing or two to say about it, but wasn't sure where to start.

Ryder turned away and began to move around the room, moving empty take-out cartons out of the way and tossing a bag of weapons aside. "I assume you're here working the Greenwood Bride case, then?"

"Yeah – but we didn't know there was someone here already," Sam said. "We'd heard that you've been here since the first death?"

"A coincidence, really," Ryder sighed. "I was passing through here on my way to Louisiana and the day I was here, the first murder took place. I stayed to see if I could suss out the cause – and that was five months ago."

"And you didn't find anything? For five months?" Dean snorted. "Maybe you're in the wrong line of work."

"And perhaps there is nothing to be found," Ryder retorted icily. "But, by all means, if you think you will have better luck than I have." He made an accommodating gesture and nodded to a box of papers and pictures. "I've been over this entire town and found nothing. None of the victims' families have had anything helpful to say and none of the leads have panned out. The police are adamant that nothing is going on and they've even been so kind as to allow me to see the evidence."

He gathered together his things and nodded at Sam and Dean.

"I would suggest finding another job to work that has the possibility of resolution."

"Wait – you're leaving?" Sam asked, incredulous. "In the middle of a job?"

"This case isn't going anywhere, and I have expounded enough energy on it when I could be doing something else," Ryder shrugged. "Besides, I'm needed elsewhere."

"What could be more important than stopping innocent people from being killed?" Sam demanded.

Ryder leveled an unimpressed glare at him. "A colleague of mine needs help with a demon infested town three states over. Perhaps you haven't noticed, Miss Campbell, but the natives of Hell have been acting out quite a bit in the past two weeks."

"We've been out of commission the last few weeks," Dean lied shortly. "Came off a job with a nest of kappas kinda badly. What's goin' on? Demons havin' a party or something?"

"I have no idea," Ryder shrugged. "But it's not just the demons. Another contact of mine told me about a town in Oregon that had every man, woman and child turned to salt. The authorities are calling it a major nuclear reactor disaster, but we're pretty sure the cause is of a more…divine nature."

Sam stiffened. "You think angels are involved."

"Have you ever read the Bible, young lady?" Ryder asked. "There's a specific story about Lot in Genesis that you might consider examining."

"We've been a bit more concerned with Revelations lately," Dean said through gritted teeth.
"But why would angels…?" Sam began, and then shut his mouth. After all, he, more than any other person in the world except for Dean, knew that there was nothing angels wouldn't stoop to. And if Raphael was really in charge, the archangel wouldn't care how many innocents he hurt in his quest to restart the Apocalypse or whatever he was trying to accomplish.

'Which is an argument for why Cas shouldn't have brought me back,' Sam thought sadly. 'Humanity could have used an angel like him in their corner.'

Dean's rigid stance told Sam his brother was thinking along the same wavelength of at least half that idea.

"Everyone has been, ever since this Winchester business," Ryder was saying, causing the brothers to look up at the sound of their name. "None of this would have happened if it weren't for them."

Sam and Dean exchanged glances. It was possible they could continue to play the dumb card, but that might be too unbelievable. Dean's eyes narrowed slightly in an encouragement Sam doubted anyone but him (and maybe Cas) would be able to notice, and hesitantly said, "Winchester…You mean those brothers, right?" He glanced at Dean again, before going on, "We'd heard rumours that something happened lately, but we never heard what exactly."

"Those damned fools started the End of Days," Ryder said angrily. "The way the story's being told, Sam Winchester opened the Gates to Hell and let out the Devil. And his coward of a brother didn't have the strength in him to stop him. Dean Winchester would have let the world burn because he couldn't do what needed to be done."

"I heard they were trying to stop it," Dean said, unable to keep the tense note from his voice. "I heard they did."

"And who are you getting your news from, Robert Singer?" Ryder inquired coldly. "The man practically raised those boys, if I've got my facts right – of course he'd be telling tales about them that show them in a better light. From the way things are looking right now, though, I would say they didn't stop anything. They just delayed it, then up and disappeared like the guttersnipe they are."

Sam had to nonchalantly grab hold of Dean's arm to keep his brother from flying across the room at the older hunter. As it was, Ryder took their silence as thoughtfulness.

"Things are a lot more serious right now than a few dead brides. If you wish to continue here, I wish you luck – you may even make use of what research I've done. But you would be advised to go somewhere where your help is truly needed," he said. And then, he gave a short little bow which would have seemed ridiculous on anyone else, and then disappeared from the motel room.

Sam and Dean watched him go, and then turned to each other.

"Do you think…do you think he's maybe right?" Sam asked, hesitant. "We do have more important things to do right now."

"Yeah, we do, but we've never up and quit a job before because there was something better we could be doing," Dean grumbled. "So I say, we stick it out. These deaths are going to keep happening if we don't do something about them. Unlike some douchebags." Sam chuckled, earning a raised eyebrow from his brother. "What?"

"Look at you, going all 'Righteous Man','" Sam teased. "Next you'll be donning a pair of tights and fighting for truth, justice and soccer-moms."

Dean snorted and shoved Sam aside on his way to Ryder's box of research. "Shut up and help me
lug this shit to the car."

After deciding that the FBI cover story was the best and most believable angle to work after all, Sam had made another quick shopping trip for clothes that looked more professional than what they had. He had left Dean to talk Cas through the process of working a job again. As Dean was going to be off trolling the town graveyards looking for evidence of the Greenwood Bride, Sam had hoped that their chat would be a little more comprehensive than an admonition of 'shut up and let Sam do all the talking'.

Not for the first time did he regret agreeing to Aggie's genderswap; it made something as precarious as posing as federal agents all the more complicated.

Dean must have done something right, though, because Castiel hadn't made any major blunders as yet. They had spoken with three of the five families of victims that morning, and although Sam had done most of the actual talking, Castiel had occasionally added one or two questions of his own. They were asked in a stilted, neutral way which suggested that Dean had forced him to memorize a list of acceptable questions to ask, but which enhanced the detached FBI image they were aiming for.

Their last stop of the day was the former fiancé of the first victim.

"Well, it took you long enough," Joe Cooper said flatly, frowning across the threshold at Sam and Castiel. Cooper was in his twenties, blond and with a swimmer's build, and dressed in an electrician's coveralls. He had been on his way into his house when they approached him. "This nutcase has been killing people for months now and you guys didn't even look into it. Even that sleazy writer was doing more. Maybe if you'd looked into this sooner…"

He trailed off, grief obviously still fresh.

"We're very sorry for your loss," Sam said, leaning forward and trying to meet the man's eye. He knew exactly what Cooper was feeling right now, and tried to convey that with his body language. "I can assure you, though, catching this killer is priority one for us. I know it won't bring Caitlin back, but if you could help us in any way, we can bring whoever did this to justice."

Cooper shifted angrily, but in the end nodded and ushered them into his home.

"Was there anyone who would have a grudge against Caitlin?" Castiel asked flatly.

"No," Cooper said with a sigh. "Everyone liked her. She was a veterinarian…who doesn't like a veterinarian?"

"People who do not like animals, I imagine," Castiel commented and Sam made a mental note to add 'sensitivity training' to Castiel's list of need-to-know human accomplishments.

He sighed inwardly, discouraged; none of the other victims' families had been able to come up with a possible enemy either, which closed yet another avenue to investigate. He was beginning to think that Ryder had been right, that this case was just a waste of time –

"Actually," Cooper said after a moment, as though remembering something from long ago. "That's not entirely true. There was someone who was on the outs with Cait…but there's no possible way
she could have had anything to do with it."

"She?" Sam inquired.

Cooper nodded, hesitant; like he wasn't sure he should be saying this. "Yeah. Uh, see, Caitlin had this best friend growing up and...they weren't really talking to each other when we were...getting ready to get married."

"This person got a name?"

"Well, yeah, but...see, it couldn't have been her because she wasn't there and even if she had been, she couldn't have done it..."

"Mr. Cooper?"

He sighed. "Nicole Tobin. Though Caitlin always called her Nicki."

Sam blinked. The same was familiar...

"The woman who owns that bookstore in town?" Sam asked, searching his memory. "The one in the...?"

"Wheelchair?" Cooper finished. "Yeah, that's her."

Knowing that being handicapped didn't necessarily mean someone was innocent, Sam pressed on, "Why would Ms. Tobin have a grudge against your fiancée?"

This time, Cooper shifted more in discomfort than in anger. "That's...a long story."

Sam didn't say anything, simply raised an eyebrow. Sometimes, silence was the best way to get someone to open up.

Cooper sighed again and looked away. "A few years ago, Nicki...Nicki and I used to date. More than date. We were going to get married, but..." Now he looked up, guilt clouding his expression. "Look, it's my fault she is the way she is. We were at the rehearsal dinner and...I don't know, we were having problems and there was all this stress at work, and Caitlin was there and - Nicki sort of caught us going at it in the bathroom. She got pissed off and then ran out of the building and got hit by a car."

"Paralyzing her from the waist down," Sam finished, careful to keep the judgement out of his voice.

"I tried apologizing. I tried giving her space. But she broke everything off and we stopped talking after that. She wouldn't talk to me, or Caitlin. And we both tried not to see each other after what happened, but...we couldn't help it. I loved Cait in a way I never loved Nicki. So I asked her to marry me. And then..."

"She was killed."

"Yeah. But there's no way Nicki could have done it. Even if she wasn't home the night it happened – which the police told us a while back – Nicki wouldn't have done something like that. She was always the most Zen person I know – she did yoga, meditated – she's a freaking vegetarian."

Sam exchanged glances with Castiel.

After another few questions which didn't reveal very much, Sam and Castiel thanked the man and left.
"It is possible for someone who has been offered so confining a fate to perhaps seek occult solutions to their problems," Castiel remarked as they left.

"I'm surprised Ryder didn't mention it, though," Sam mused.

"Perhaps he just didn't find any evidence to support his suspicion."

Sam thought back to something Nicki had said the previous day. "When I was in her shop, she did mention he spent a few weeks just hanging out in the bookstore. You think maybe he was watching to see if she was involved in the murders?"

"It is likely."

"Well, we should still look into the history of all the other victims to see if Nicki's connected to any of them – maybe she's not doing anything. She could have a poltergeist attached to her," Sam said, digging his phone out of his pocket, "In the meantime, I'll get Dean to put the graveyard search on hold. This is sounding less like an angry spirit and more like a 'woman spurned'."

The Tobin family lived in a picturesque bungalow just outside the city. Other than the fact that it had been retrofitted with ramps and a slightly wider driveway than the others in the neighborhood, it looked like every other house.

Dean yawned as he waited for Nicki's mother to finally leave the building. He had been watching the place since that morning when Nicki's father drove her to work. He hadn't returned, which Dean decided meant he was the breadwinner in the family while the wife stayed at home. In fact, she hadn't shown any signs of actually leaving until Dean got tired of waiting and placed a bogus call to the house pretending to be the local radio DJ giving away free gas gift cards.

The woman still took forever to leave the place, though.

If Mrs. Tobin had been home to vouch for her daughter's whereabouts, it was no wonder the police had crossed her off the suspect list. Even Ryder might not have done more than a cursory check of the wheelchair bound, always watched young woman.

According to the police database that Sam had hacked into the day before, the investigating officers had come to the Tobin home just after Caitlin Robinson's murder. It was protocol to check in with people who had been on bad terms with the victim, Dean knew. According to Mike and Linda Tobin, though, their daughter had been asleep in her bed at the time of the murder, and given the tricked out van Dean had seen in the driveway, there wasn't really any other way Nicki could have left the house to rip apart her former best friend.

'Or any of the other vics,' he mused.

If Ryder's notes on the subject were to be believed – and they were pretty extensive and written in such minute script that Dean figured the guy must have been a teacher or a secretary before he fell into the life – the other hunter had done some surveillance on her home and looked around the place, but found nothing.

"It doesn't hurt to be thorough, though," Sam had said that morning over breakfast. Sitting beside
Dean, Cas was eating his first plate of pancakes with a look of such bemused enjoyment that Dean almost didn't hear his brother continue, "That way when we finally leave, we can at least know we tried everything."

Dean had nodded wordlessly. He knew Sam still wasn't too happy about the detour they had made and the apparent lack of direction the case was taking. Still, if it somehow led them to a witch, it would be worth it.

Though what they'd do when they did finally find the witch, Dean still wasn't exactly clear on. Demons he could deal with, no problem; demons had a single-minded commitment to a master plan of evil and suffering, which made them easy to figure out. Witches on the other hand, never had really clear motives. There were the ones that loved their bit of chaos, but the run-of-the-mill witch was generally just in it for their own personal gain. It was usually hard to find those ones because they were so good at keeping under the radar.

'Stick hate witches,' Dean thought with a frown, glancing back at the house. The expression turned to a triumphant smirk as Mrs. Tobin headed for her sedan and climbed in. He doubted he would need much time to go through the house, especially considering he was alone.

Initially he had argued with Sam that it was important that Cas come along with him to learn how to properly break and enter a house, but as he got out of the car, he was actually a little relieved that he was doing this on his own. He was all for teaching Cas the ropes – it was actually a hell of a lot of fun schooling the guy in how to hunt evil as a mortal instead of a bad-ass angel of the Lord, but considering this job was already looking like a lost cause, the sooner he got in and out of the house, the better.

Besides, there was a better chance of Cas being of use when they checked out the bookstore. From what Sam had said, there were quite a few titles in other languages, and if they were dealing with a witch and she was working from a grimoire, it wasn't likely going to be in English; while Sam's ancient language skills were better than Dean's, Cas had probably forgotten more languages than humans knew existed.

'Next time,' Dean thought jovially as he heaved himself over the fence in the yard and headed for the backdoor entrance. There was a windowed door with muslin curtains and a key lock, which he smirked at and brought his tools out. 'Gonna have to teach him to do this, too. It's like Sammy all over again.'

It really did feel like it, sometimes; being around Cas so much felt a little like being back on the road with Dad and having to teach Sam the ropes. The only difference was, the constantly hovering sense of duty wasn't as present with Cas as it was and always would be with Sam. That wasn't to say that he resented Sam, or that he didn't care about Cas. If anything, the two weeks when he thought the angel was dead had proven the opposite. But where his relationship with Sam was born of something desperate and ingrained, his relationship with Cas was…complicated.

Sam had once joked to him that Dean was so socially retarded that he'd had to go to Hell before he made his first friend. Dean had slugged him and called him a bitch, instead of saying that 'friend' was somehow an insufficient explanation for having a guy pull you out of the Pit.

As was usual when his feelings wandered into that particular territory, Dean forcibly shook them off and thought about something else. Like the alarm that he managed to disarm in about twenty-five seconds.

'Why people still fork over so much money on these things is a mystery,' he thought, rolling his eyes disdainfully at the number pad. 'A dog would have been cheaper and more useful.'
A first glance of the main floor of the Tobin household showed a home as low-key and non-threatening as any other suburban house he had ever been in. As with the exterior, the stairs in the home had been replaced with ramps. The hardwood floors were covered in plush rugs, and the furniture buried under more throw pillows than anyone could ever need. The place smelled like potpourri and home cooking, and was brightly lit by windows in every room. Curios lined the window ledges and fireplaces, and family portraits and pictures covered the walls. In the background, he could hear Josh Groban playing over a tinny sound system someone had forgotten to turn off.

'These people are clearly evil,' he told himself sarcastically.

Wandering through the linoleum floored kitchen, with its polished cupboards and stainless steel appliances, he had to duck a few hanging plants and herbs. These he checked through quickly for anything with magical properties, but the only thing that would have been of use in a spell was the white sage and that he knew was for purification. It was highly unlikely that it would be used to conjure evil spirits or harm people.

He studied a few photos on the living room coffee table, noticing that most of the oldest pictures showed a pale, overweight young girl with braces and glasses, while the more recent ones showed a slim, blond athlete. Some of them looked like they had been cropped from the side, clearly cutting one or two people out of the photograph.

'Probably Caitlin and Joe,' he figured.

Once he got upstairs, it was easy to suss out which room belonged to Nicki. Even though it didn't look very different from the décor of the rest of the house, it had a lived in quality that was conspicuously absent of any place the Winchesters had ever resided. The room was painted off-white and smelled of the same potpourri smell. The bed and desk were kept neat, and there wasn't any clutter on the floor. Stained glass ornaments were hung in the windows, and there was a dream catcher over her bed; kitschy ornamental bottles of perfume lined the bureau beneath a round mirror. In the corner, looking like it hadn't been touched in ages, was a rolled up yoga mat and block.

Dean raised his eyes at the Precious Moments crucifix over the doorway, and then set to work, methodically going through every corner of the room. He mentally catalogued everything's proper place in order to avoid leaving a trace of himself.

After a half hour of searching, he had yet to find anything to suggest she was more than a bookworm with an obsessive collection of Self-Help books.

Dean crouched in front of the desk by the window and booted up her laptop. Nicki Tobin didn't seem to have anything to hide, if the lack of password on her personal computer was any indication.

Her desktop was lined with colorful, weirdly named icons, and when his eyes lingered on one called *WitchingHour* he couldn't help but check it out. It turned out it was one of those online games that charged money just to play. Apparently Nicki hadn't been satisfied with it either, because she hadn't accessed it in about a year.

'Another dead end,' he decided, clicking through her browser and her favorites. It seemed she was part of several forums that discussed contemporary literature ranging from several Russian titles whose names he couldn't pronounce to Harry Potter.

'Guess when you lose your mobility, your imagination's the best way to escape,' he thought, opening up some of her chat logs. Not that he would know, personally. He was a much more visually stimulated guy himself, but he remembered how Sam had been growing up: so desperate to pretend
their constantly-on-the-go-lifestyle was just a dream.

As he scanned through some of her chat history, most of which concerned online book clubs and what looked to be support groups for people permanently injured in accidents, Dean decided that Ryder and the police must have been right.

He flipped open his cellphone and pressed the speed dial. As it rang, he lazily read through some of the emails from Nicki's primary contact, a QueenBeeStark according to her username.

"Find anything?" Sam asked when he picked up.

"No sign of anything to do with witches on this end," Dean replied. "No suspicious herbs, no bodily fluids – and if she's summoning the spirit, there's no bones around here for her to do it. I think she's clean."

"Or maybe she's just good at hiding stuff."

Sam sounded suspicious, and Dean raised an eyebrow; usually he was the one who thought the worst of people, not Sam. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Cas and I just called back a few of the witnesses to see if Nicki knew any of them."

"And?"

"And she didn't – personally, anyway. But one of the victim's sister's said she bought her wedding gift at Pyewacket's."

"That's Nicki's store, right?"

"Exactly. It turns out that all of those other weddings, the bride and groom registered for gifts at Pyewacket's."

"So every bride who died was one who was registered at the store," Dean mused. "Other than the first vic, she had no real, personal connection to the other guests, though. What, she just up and decided to ruin their lives on a lark?" Dean stood up and shook the kinks from his knees, closing down the computer. "I dunno, Sam, that's kind of a big leap to make, even for us."

"Well, we're across the street from the bookstore now, so we'll find out," Sam said. "You gonna meet us back here or back at the motel?"

"Motel, I guess," Dean said, getting up. He rummaged absently through the knick-knacks on Nicki's bureau. "How's Cas doing?"

"Aw, is Mommy worried about her little angel?" Sam cooed over the line, in such a loud and obvious way that Dean knew Cas was probably not within earshot. Sam may not have had a problem mocking Dean, but he still hadn't entered the comfort zone where he was okay with teasing Cas.

"More worried about your influence on him," Dean retorted. He fiddled with a small, ornamental bottle on the dresser. "You've already got him eating like a bird, next thing you know you'll be trying to get him to grow his hair out like some kind of freak."

"You're just jealous I got the good genes."

"If you were the son of Andre the Giant, I'd agree with you," Dean retorted. "Seriously, though,
keep an eye on him. Just because he put me on my ass yesterday doesn't mean he's ready for the big leagues."

He could practically hear Sam's eyes rolling. "Weren't you the one who was telling me he's not a three-year old?"

"No, but he is a millennia-old angel whose way of dealing with things didn't really boil down to fistfights and a .45. I'd kind of like him to survive long enough for us to get his wings back in a way that doesn't put you back in the Cage," Dean grumbled. "Or did you forget we could kind of use someone on our side up top?"

"Of course not," Sam sighed, "Still, Cas was pretty clear on not wanting us to do that."

"No, he was clear on not wanting to invalidate the deal – which I'm on board with," Dean replied. "We're going to find a way to get him back his wings. He shouldn't be stuck down here because he was unlucky enough to take a liking to us."

"To you."

Dean paused, the bottle in his hands. "Huh?"

"Oh, come on, Dean, you're really sticking to the story that he gave up his grace because me and him are friends?" Sam pointed out. "We both know that's not true."

"Are we seriously having this conversation now? Because I gotta say, your timing s – shit!" Dean cursed loudly as the bottle, which he had put down rather harshly onto the dresser, suddenly cracked into two chunks.

"What?" Sam demanded over the line as Dean automatically reached for some nearby Kleenex to mop up the liquid he had spilled.

"I just knocked over..." he trailed off, pausing as he waited to inhale a waft of cloying perfume that most women liked to douse themselves in. Instead, he stared down at the dark stain spreading over the wood and cloth of the bureau. The shiny, dark red tint was more than familiar to him, as was the sudden metallic smell in the air. "Hey Sammy...you might want to wait for me to get there."

"What? Why?"

"I think there might be more to this Nicki chick than I thought," Dean said, his tone neutral. "Unless every successful twenty-something woman likes to keep bottles of blood in her bedroom –"

The phone was out of his hands and he was across the room before his mind caught up with him. Dean groaned as his back connected with a picture laden wall.

Swearing as he tried to get his breath back, Dean glanced up to see what had thrown him.

The young woman standing above him was blond and athletic looking, staring down at Dean with an expression of anger. From the pictures around the room, there was only one guess as to who she was.

"You're kinda spry for a cripple," he pointed out, struggling to his feet.

Her eyes blazed, and before he could react, she launched herself at him.
"Dean?" There was a commotion on the other line and Sam pressed the phone to his ear with more force. The sound of a dial tone blared in Sam's ear and he stared at it for several seconds in disbelief. "This is becoming a thing, isn't it?"

"What is becoming a thing?" Castiel asked, coming up behind him. He was dressed in some of Dean's casual clothing and carrying a newspaper that he had likely not even been reading; Sam had figured it was time to give the guy lessons in observing people without being creepy and stalkerish. Watching the bookstore seemed to have been a good job to start with.

"Is she still in there?" Sam demanded, already starting toward the bookstore.

"I was just coming to tell you she placed a sign on the door suggesting that she will return in fifteen minutes," Castiel reported. "Yet, I have been watching the building since the woman was dropped off this morning and she never left."

"Is there a back entrance she could have gone through?"

Castiel looked confused. "You asked me to watch the front."

Sam held back an aggravated sigh, "Come on, let's check it out. Even if she didn't have a back entrance, she probably couldn't get very far."

They hurried around the building, which housed several other businesses, and as soon as Sam was sure there was no one around to see them, entered the alleyway behind Pyewacket's. As it turned out, there was a backdoor, and after making sure there were no cameras to watch them, Sam quickly got to work on jimmying it open.

"Does it always take so long?" Castiel wanted to know, eying Sam's fingers at work.

"Mere mortals don't have the power to open doors with their mind, Cas," Sam replied, tongue between his teeth. "Don't sweat it, when we get a minute we'll teach you how to do this too." He grunted in triumph as the door finally clicked open, and straightened up, noticing the ex-angel was frowning thoughtfully. "What's up?"

"There is something I should tell you that I never got a chance to," Castiel told him, still staring at the door and sounding unsure.

Sam made a face as he reached into his jacket for the spare gun. "This really the time?"

"Given my mortality and the probability of getting killed on any given hunt, it would be foolish not to take advantage of every moment," Castiel answered flatly. "And it had not occurred to me to tell you this while we were preoccupied with the Apocalypse."

"– Cas –"

"When I was under Heaven's orders, I was the one who released you from Bobby's panic room," the former angel ploughed ahead. "For that, I am truly sorry."

Sam was frozen for a moment, staring blankly at the door which had prompted the confession, and then over at Castiel who was eyeing him uncertainly. A sharp, angry realization that his role in the Apocalypse – which he had always just blamed on the faceless denizens of Heaven – could be
partially attributed to the one angel they had come to trust, flared up within him. His hand briefly
tensed around the handle of the Beretta he was about to hand to Castiel, but at the naked sincerity in
the angel's face, he relaxed.

It wasn't Castiel's fault that he'd been manipulated by Heaven, and regardless of how crappy things
had gone done after, his sin still wasn't quite as bad as willingly letting a demon call the shots.
Angels were supposed to be the good guys, but Sam had followed Ruby even knowing she was a
demon and that it was in her nature to lie.

"Dude, we're going to have to work on your timing," he sighed, methodically pressing the spare gun
into Castiel's hands. "Like, not saying stuff like that when someone's got a gun in their hand."

"Should I have waited until your hands were unoccupied?" Castiel asked, taking the firearm
carefully.

"Uh, we'll talk about it later," Sam said, and gestured to the gun. "You remember what Dean taught
you about the safety?" Castiel nodded, his expression taking on the same business-like quality that
Sam was used to seeing when the former angel had gotten ready to kick some ass. He clicked and
unclicked the mechanism to prove he could. "Okay, cool. That one's filled with rocksalt rounds,
mine's actually loaded, just in case. Stay behind me for now."

'And don't shoot me, that stuff hurts,' he added silently as they crept in through the door and into the
back of the store.

The place was completely silent, devoid even of the easy listening music Sam had noticed when he
was in here the day before. He and Castiel made their way slowly through the cramped passage of
the store and out into the stacks, both checking through the shelves to make sure no one was about to
jump out at them. Titles in different languages caught Sam's eye; the ones in languages he knew
seemed to be nothing more threatening than classical literature. Off Castiel's expression, it seemed he
hadn't noticed anything amiss either.

They did a cursory check of the front desk and front of store area, but couldn't find anyone. It wasn't
until they made their way to the office off to the side of the store that they made a discovery. The
dero to the office was partially closed, but as they came closer, Sam caught sight of her.

He slowly opened the door. "Nicki?"

When there was no response, he threw the door open and marched into the room, taking in her still
form and the way her head lolled forward. He could see a line of red trickling down the corner of her
mouth.

'It wasn't her?' he thought as he crouched down in front of her, checking for a pulse with one hand
and trying to see if she had any other wounds with another.

Castiel lingered in the doorway. "Is she alright?"

"Yeah, I think she's still alive, but --" Sam's voice caught in his throat, his eyes falling on the track of
blood running down her chin. It dripped onto a small ornamental vial that was clasped in her hands.
A familiar scent filled his nostrils, and for a moment Sam felt something shudder through him. He
could smell metal, iron and sulfur, and his mind transported him back to a time when he had felt
powerful, when the strength of Hell had coursed through his veins –

Sam threw himself away from the unconscious woman, the action as violent as his panic.

"Sam?" Castiel asked, taking a step forward and lowering his gun.
"It's demon blood," Sam choked, forcing himself to breathe through his mouth even though it didn't help quell the nostalgic alluring quality of the substance. If anything, it made it worse, and so he had to stop. He hadn't craved the stuff since before the Apocalypse, but the smell was intoxicating. "But why would she have – ?"

His mind suddenly began to whirl to life, a crazy idea blossoming. He knew better than anyone how demon blood amplified natural strengths and abilities. What if she had gotten her hands on the stuff in an attempt to cure her legs? It would have taken more than a few draughts to make any significant change, especially to someone who wasn't already mentally gifted. But what if while she was drinking the stuff to make herself stronger, she somehow managed to find a psychic solution to her problem?

And right on the tail of that thought was the question of where a handicapped bookstore owner had managed to procure the stuff…

He stared at her quiet face, remembering that Nicki had been asleep during the first homicide – possibly during every homicide.

Panic seized him and he started for the door. "Cas, we have to get out of here – Dean's in trouble – !"

His words cut off as he watched the air between himself and Castiel waver, before swirling into the upright and very angry looking form of Nicki Tobin.

"Jane," she said, her voice the breathy, quavering echo that Sam always associated with spirits. Before he could respond, she moved in the same lightning quick, flickering motion that ghosts did and shoved her hand hard against Castiel's chest, sending him clear out of the room. In another blink, she was in front of Sam, leaning down at him with eyes that shone preternaturally. "Trespassing is illegal."

The next thing he knew, Sam was sent flying through the open doorway as well.

Dean was really glad that the house was filled with ramps, because if this thing had decided to toss him down a flight of stairs, he probably would have a few broken ribs. As it was, he was pretty sure he was going to have some spectacular bruising if he lived through this encounter.

The apparition or spirit was coming for him again, flicking in and out of existence in the same spastic way that ghosts did. Her every movement, even when she reached for him, was like the jerky, disconnected movement of a flipbook animation, only a hell of a lot less fun.

'I thought this chick was alive,' he thought as he desperately picked himself up from the ruins of an end table the Nicki apparition had decided to chuck him at. Considering he had tried to grab hold of her a few times while she was kicking his ass, and failed, that story was obviously not completely true.

For the moment he couldn't see her, but that rarely meant anything when dealing with ghosts.

He hauled his gun out of its holster, glad that he had had the foresight to load it with rock salt that morning even if they had been looking for a witch and not a ghost. He hated cases where they never figured out what they were hunting until it was too late – and even now, he still had no idea what the
hell Nicki was. Thinking back to the fact that she'd committed her killings within protection of sanctified ground, she was obviously not the run of the mill spirit.

Still, it was best to try every venue while he tried to come up with a plan.

When she appeared before him again, he noticed that she looked a little less solid, and there was an expression of concentration on her face, which was odd – ghosts usually didn't express much beside rage, if they expressed anything at all.

She reached for his throat, and he brought up the gun, emptying a few rounds into her spectral face. There was a clatter of glass as several hanging pictures were hit, falling to the ground.

She jerked back, although whether it was from surprise or pain, he wasn't sure. What was clear, he realized with a sinking feeling, was that the rock salt was having about the same effect as it had had against that Tulpa he and Sam had fought in Texas.

He swore inwardly as she looked back at him, her expression dark. "That was my favorite picture."

And then she was in his face again, hauling him up by the collar as though he weighed nothing. Her eyes were shining with the same otherworldly gleam as he had seen in ghosts, but they seemed more focused than the average spirit. He also noticed that she lacked quite a few of the attributes that ghosts tended to mimic, like the decaying, rotting smell of dust and cold.

'Not a ghost, something else – some kind of deva? No, she's pretty damn visible – might say shtriga, they don't necessarily go after kids,' he thought urgently. The idea sparked something in his memory, and he almost remembered it before she gave an angry snarl and threw him once again.

He slid to a halt in the kitchen, his face skidding painfully against the floor before his head knocked into the bottom of the stove.

With the amount of times he'd been hit on his head, Dean wondered why he hadn't fallen into some kind of a coma yet.

He blinked.

'That's it.'

There had been that girl in New York. She had been manifesting as a spirit, but she hadn't actually been dead yet. She had been in a persistent, vegetative coma but her frustration had caused her to lash out, causing deaths all over her small town. In her case, she had been psychically influencing people around her to commit terrible, violent acts, but who said this type of thing manifested the same way all over?

'Maybe this Nicki chick is doing the same thing,' he thought, staggering to his feet and looking around for a sign of her. She had disappeared again. 'Instead of lashing out psychically, though, she's projected herself with her mind to escape her chair.'

It made more sense than anything else he had come up with.

"You're all the same," a voice said quietly in his ear, and then he was sent crashing into the island in the kitchen. "What is it about girls like you? You have no respect for other people's belongings?"

Dean barely had time to recover before a set of steak knives came flying at him, and he rolled back over onto the floor to avoid them.
'Of course, the theory doesn't explain how she did it or why she's such a bitch,' he thought grimly, crawling away on his hands and knees. He ducked out of the way as the kitchen table flung itself across the room at him, followed by several wooden chairs.

He had no idea how long he could keep up outrunning Nicki. Considering she wasn't a real spirit, none of the usual defences worked against her, and he had no idea when she was going to get tired. There was only one way he could think of getting rid of her, and it wasn't pleasant, nor was it anything he could do where he was.

'Gotta tell Sam,' Dean thought desperately, casting his eyes about for a phone; his was still in pieces up in Nicki's room.

He knew his brother wasn't going to like this – exorcising something and killing someone still alive were two very different things – but if they didn't stop Nicki, more people were going to die. Cas was with him, though, and he knew the former angel was the more practical minded of the two. All that time as an angel meant Cas wouldn't hesitate to carry out what needed to be done –

Dean yelled in pain as the projection of Nicki was in front of him again and he felt her rake nails down his front, tearing through his shirt and into his flesh.

Sam shook off a bout of dizziness caused by several rather large tomes falling on his head, and automatically cast his eyes about for both Nicki and Castiel. The former was nowhere to be seen, but the ex-angel was crumpled several feet away across a fallen bookshelf, his left arm wrenched into a painful looking position and his eyes staring up at the ceiling in a dazed manner.

As Sam struggled to his feet, the projection of Nicki shimmered back into view. She was less distinct than before, but still too threatening for comfort. He briefly glanced back at the office where her body remained slumped, wondering if he could maybe wake her up somehow and if that would stop the attack. It wasn't the best plan, but he couldn't think of anything else off the top of his head. If all else failed, he could shoot her, he supposed, but his gun had fallen out of his hands somewhere…

"I've never killed a man before," Nicki's echoing voice remarked quietly as she advanced on Castiel. "Do they make the same noises, I wonder?"

Sam had the sudden, sharp thought that Dean would never forgive him if he let Castiel die, and for a moment he abandoned any half-formed thoughts of waking Nicki in favor of at least distracting her.

"Nicki! Stop!" he called out, taking a step forward. "Why are you doing this?"

The projection of Nicki halted, and then turned around to face Sam in the same flickering manner that characterized all of her movements. It was almost like she was constantly being hit by a strobe light. She eyed him coolly, cocking her head to one side and then before he could react, she was up close, her nose inches away from his.

"You wouldn't understand," she whispered quietly, eyes roving over him. "You've probably never felt powerless in your life…travelling around whenever you want, looking the way you do…you never had to work for anything, did you?"

Sam held his tongue, knowing that chatting with an angry spirit about how he had spent most of his
life feeling powerless against other people's plans for him wasn't going to mean anything to her.

"I spent my whole life being mocked and picked on for not looking right, for not being the popular, cheerful one – everyone wanted to know why I couldn't be more like my best friend. Caitlin, the perfect daughter – a freakin' veterinarian," she hissed at him, wrath dripping from every word. Her form wavered again in anger. "So I changed. I did everything I could to become what people wanted me to be – pretty, sporty, successful, social – and it worked. I got everything I wanted. I got Joe." Her expression turned pained. "Too bad he didn't want me either." The lights in the store sputtered with the weight of her fury. "Even after that, I was trapped. Trapped in that damned chair, trapped with my parents, forever."

"But there are other ways," Sam reasoned gently. "Demon blood's not the answer."

She seemed surprised and peered at him searchingly. The mad gleam in her eyes faded somewhat. "You knew what it was. You're not just someone on vacation, are you, Jane?" Before he could respond, her eyes hardened again and he was pinned back against the wall behind the cash register. "Another liar."

"I can offer you truth."

Sam's eyes flitted over to where Castiel had managed to get up. He was watching Nicki's spirit with a carefully blank expression. She too eyed him speculatively.

"Every drop of demon blood that you drink consigns your soul farther into Hell," Castiel told her, eyes intent on her. "Even before you took innocent lives, partaking of that sin condemned you. But there remains hope."

Sam felt the power holding him to the wall ease a little, as Nicki's attention turned to Castiel.

"You have not fallen into damnation as far as some," Castiel continued. "If you stop now – if you ask forgiveness, God will listen."

Sam winced, as on the word 'forgiveness', Nicki's hold on him tightened painfully.

"Forgiveness?" she repeated, voice ringing cold in the empty store. "I'm not the one that needs forgiveness! They should all have been asking me – begging me for it, after ruining my life!" She waved a hand and several other stacks of books fell on top of Castiel.

"You're the one drinking demon blood," Sam pointed out, trying to pull himself away from the wall. "That's your choice."

Her expression changed from mad rage to uncertainty for a moment. "She said it would help. She said I could use it to get out of the chair again."

"Who?" Sam prompted. "Who told you about all of that?"

But Nicki wasn't listening any longer, and Sam made the difficult realization that the woman they were dealing with was no longer completely sane. Whether she had been before the accident or before she took the demon blood was one thing, but whatever sanity she had had before had been eradiated by the sinister drug.

"Why do you think so many flamed out already? They weren't strong enough," a chilling voice murmured in his mind, and he could practically hear Azazel's voice in his head, see his yellow eyes gleam with terrible mirth.
'We aren't going to be able to save her,' Sam realized.

"They don't deserve to be happy," Nicki was murmuring. "And I can make it right. Who's going to suspect poor little paraplegic Nicki asleep in her parents' house?" She smiled at Sam in an ominous way. "Don't you see?"

"Nicki, come on, it doesn't have to be this way," Sam pleaded with her.

"Yes it does," Nicki told him, a look of concentration on her face. "But don't worry, I won't make it too messy. I don't want to have to clean blood off my floors. You and that bitch in my house will be able to have closed caskets at your funeral, okay?"

'Dean,' Sam thought blankly, realizing with dismay that Nicki wasn't just projecting herself to him and Castiel, but that she was also projecting herself to Dean halfway across the town. The demon blood hadn't just amplified her madness, and he could only wonder with mounting horror just how much she had been chugging over the past few months to get strong enough to do that.

She was wrapping her fingers around his throat, and he could already feel the pressure cutting off his airway –

BANG!

For a moment, they were both frozen in surprise.

Sam looked over her translucent shoulder and saw Castiel, Sam's gun in his raised functioning hand, glaring over at them.

Nicky stared at him for a moment, before saying quietly, "You're really stupid, you know? Guns don't work on me."

"They work very well on your human body, though," Castiel told her stiffly.

Nicky's eyes went wide, and she whipped her head around, staring into the open office in horror. Sam wrenched his own gaze toward the door, and saw with startling clarity that Castiel's shot had indeed hit Nicki – there was an entry wound on the side of her head and bloods-spatter all across the walls of the office.

"I would say you have a few seconds left before death finally sets in," Castiel continued quietly. "Now would be the time to ask God's forgiveness."

Nicky let out a shriek of rage and threw herself at Castiel, releasing Sam as the last of her thrall over him broke. He saw the former angel go down hard and Nicki loom over him, laying into him with fists and clawed fingers.

Sam stared in shock, looking around in vain for the rock salt loaded gun Castiel had been carrying with him. If she was actually dead now, likely it could work as a repellant to get her away from Castiel until they –

He tensed up when he realized what they were going to have to do to ensure Nicki's spirit finally went to rest.

His hesitation lasted barely a second when Castiel let out a pained sounding cry, and Sam hurried into the office, digging through his pockets for the extra salt rounds he had brought with him. Ignoring the sight of the plum-sized exit wound in the side of Nicki's head, he let the open salt rounds spill over her body and dumped some of the lighter fluid on her before setting the flame.
There was a shriek from the other room as the fire surged to life, and he added as much flammable material that he could find in the office to the blaze as he could. He was once more thrown from the room as Nicki made a last desperate attempt to take him out, but a second later her spiritual body disintegrated into embers before him.

There was silence in the store.

Sure that she was gone now, Sam picked himself up and went looking for Castiel. The former angel was huddled in a heap, bloody scratches down the side of his face and soaking his shirt. "You okay, Cas?"

"I dislike pain," the ex-angel mumbled as he tried to get to his feet. Sam reached over to help him, earning a wordless yell as Castiel's left arm jostled. Sam winced at the sight of his shoulder, which had looked slightly dislocated before and now looked like it actually belonged to someone else.

"Yeah, well, no one does," he pointed out. "Let me fix that for you. You can't walk out of here looking like that."

"Get it over with, then," Castiel told him through gritted teeth.

"This isn't like using angel mojo to heal things, Cas, it's gonna hurt," Sam told him. "Even more so if you don't relax."

Castiel grumbled, but visibly loosened up somewhat.

Sam braced himself. "Okay, so I'm going to count to three and I'll pop it back into place, okay?"

"Yes."

"One –"

Sam shoved the former angel's shoulder back into its socket, and Castiel let out a stream of Enochian that Sam could only imagine was some rather impressive cursing. He glared up at Sam. "You lied. You did not count to three."

"That's the point," Sam said, hauling Castiel to his feet. "You can't be tense, so I had to catch you off guard."

Castiel opened his mouth, possibly to argue, and then blinked. "That makes sense."

Sam snorted. "Yeah, well, stick with me, kid and you'll go places. For now, we just have to go find Dean."

Castiel's face clouded over instantly. "Yes."

They left the bookstore in a hurry, knowing that it wouldn't be long before someone came to investigate the sound of gunshots and the smell of burning flesh. Sam drove them as quickly across town as he could, a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach that wasn't just caused by his worry over Dean. He hated cases where he was forced to kill people who had become corrupted by circumstance. Now it was Nicki joining more names of once innocent people – like Madison and Jack – that he had been forced to take out.

"What happens to them?" Sam asked quietly as they pulled onto the street where Nicki lived – had lived. "They don't just…get sent to Hell, do they? Is she going to…?"
"The demon blood makes a strong case for her eventual resting place," Castiel told him earnestly. "Her sins were…not forgiven as yours were. And even if they had been, she would not enter Heaven immediately. She would need time for penitence. Purgatory, most likely."

Sam blinked, staring at Castiel. "That actually exists?"

Castiel cocked his head to one side. "Of course."

Sam forcibly stifled his curiosity, recognizing that now was not the most opportune time to exercise it. They parked a ways away from the Tobin house and went in the back way, which was still open.

Dean was lying on his back in the kitchen, covered in blood from deep wounds down his front.

"Dean!" Sam yelled, running forward with Castiel on his heels. Had they been too late?

Leaning over his brother, he saw Dean's eyes – one of which was swollen shut – spring open and he groaned. "I think I might have pulled a muscle."

Sam let out a harsh chuckle. "You think?"

"Job's done?" Dean asked as Sam leaned over him.

"Yeah, she's gone. Still a few things left unanswered, but I don't think any more brides are going to be ripped apart in this town," Sam replied as he helped his brother to his feet. He made a face at the ripped cloths and shiny red scrapes down over Dean's sternum and one breast. Nothing fatal, thankfully. "You good?"

"I'll live."

"I am glad you are unharmed," Castiel said tightly, as Sam pulled away from his brother.

"Yeah, me too – it'd suck if I got schooled by a chick in a wheelchair," Dean replied with an easy grin at Sam, who rolled his eyes.

Castiel seemed to hesitate a moment, and then reached out tentatively, patting Dean's left shoulder in an awkward approximation of a friendly tap. His hand rested there a bit longer than was a standard comforting touch.

Sam raised an eyebrow, waiting expectantly for Dean to go rigid and tell Castiel off about personal space. To his surprise, Dean simply shook his head at Castiel as though to say, 'you're something else, you know that?'. For an even bigger wonder, Castiel seemed to get it because there was subtle quirk to his lips as he pulled back his hand.

There was a brief instance where they were both watching each other, and for the first time in years, Sam felt like an interloper in a private moment.

That moment passed just as quickly as it had come, leaving Sam to think he had imagined the entire thing, and Dean was looking up at him again.

"So, what was her deal, anyway?"

"You aren't going to believe it," Sam warned him. Off Dean’s curious look, he added, "Demon blood."

Dean's eyes widened in surprise. "That's what that was? You sure?"
"Uh, yeah, pretty sure."

Surprise turned to worried suspicion. "Are you…?"

"I'm good – zero cravings," Sam assured him. "But I'm kind of confused as to how some girl in Decatur, Illinois gets a hold of the stuff. She said someone gave it to her, but…well, there wasn't much time to ask her the particulars."

"She had already begun to exhibit signs of insanity," Castiel put in helpfully. "It was imperative to stop her."

"You think someone's handing out DB to desperate folks, then?" Dean asked. "Could be a demon."

"Maybe. Not like we have a clue."

Dean frowned. "You know, we might. I was up in her room before, and checked out her laptop. Some of the forums she was active on were really weird. Maybe she found someone selling the stuff online?"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "That's kind of farfetched."

In the distance, they could hear sirens. "It's our only lead right now."

"Okay, fine, go grab it and we'll split," Sam said. "I don't think we're going to be getting off scot-free with stuff anymore, either. Our blood is all over Nicki's store…" He eyed the trails of red across the floor. "And here. They might not know our identities, but the authorities are going to start compiling info on us again."

Instead of looking chagrined, though, Dean appeared hopeful. "Does that mean we can head back to New York?"

Sam knew what his brother was getting at, and sighed. "Dean –"

"No way, Sam, we said two weeks," Dean stated, voice firm. "If the universe is out to get me, it's gonna take its issues out on the ass that actually belongs to me. Besides, there's no point in keeping the boobs if they're about to lose their effectiveness anyway."

Sam watched his brother practically bound up the stairs despite his injuries, sure that his annoyance over the latest job was clouding his judgement. Sam didn't like being trapped in a female body any more than Dean did, but he'd be stupid to say it wasn't useful.

Sam supposed New York was as good a next destination as any, and they did need to check in with Yong. Perhaps along the way there Sam could appeal to Dean's common sense and try to wheedle some more time out of him. All they needed was to stay off the radar long enough to figure out how to enter Hell.

Because after that, no spell in the universe was going to hide them long.
Bobby gets a proposition from an unlikely source and Balthazar has a really bad feeling about this...

Chapter Summary

Interlude IV

In the past week and a half, Bobby had become familiar with the swooping sensation in the pit of his stomach, and the abrupt change in scenery between one moment and the next, which characterized angel travel. It didn't mean he liked it any better his fifteenth time than he had his first.

"I don't care what you are, you lay your hands on me one more time and I'll end you," he growled, staggering away from the still raised fingers of the angel beside him.

Balthazar snorted and adjusted his coat. "As amusing as it would be to watch you try, I have somewhere else to be."

'I'm getting too old for this shit,' Bobby thought as he glanced around the latest sanctuary he had been dropped off in. He hoped that this time he would at least have plumbing. Apparently an angel's idea of a safe house was anything with four walls and a roof, and didn't necessarily involve furniture.

Wherever he was, it was familiar to him; he knew he had been here before, although he couldn't pinpoint exactly when. The wooden walls and lack of heating told him he was in a cabin somewhere, and glancing around he took in the open-concept space with a small kitchen area, tables and chairs, and an old television. Off to one side, there was a deer's head hanging over a fire place, and a bunk beside it. There was a rickety stairwell off to one side, and two doors – one leading outside, he assumed from the sounds of nature beyond it, and the other probably leading downstairs.

'Basement,' he decided, suddenly realizing where he must be.

It was the safe house he and Rufus had holed up before heading out to Omaha.

It had been years since he'd been here.

"Yes, you have some awful memories associated with this old hovel," Balthazar drawled, bored. "That's what makes it one of the best places to stash you, at the moment." He idly toed a stray ball of dust from his loafers. "It's one of the last places anyone would look for you – and I've already done you the solid of stocking it with food, as I'm going to be gone for a longer spell. There's a rather tense family reunion going on in Bangladesh, and it's only right I put in an appearance."
"You do that," Bobby grunted in a would-be-neutral tone.

The angel's eyes narrowed and he jabbed his index and little finger in Bobby's direction. "Before you decide to pull a runner again, let me remind you that unlike little brother's handiwork, those sigils I carved into your ribs won't hide you from me. And if I have to take the time out of my busy schedule to track you down again, you'll spend the rest of your natural life believing you're a golden retriever. *Capisce?*"

"Thought you were cut off from Heaven," Bobby replied sourly.

"Oh, I'm sure I've got enough juice to play with your mind a little," Balthazar retorted calmly. "Shall we find out?"

" Doesn't exactly jive with your prime directive right now," Bobby pointed out, not answering the question. "If you ask me, you're a bit overqualified to be babysitting an old hunter."

"If by a 'bit' you mean 'completely', then I'm in agreement with you. But I'm doing the job my brother asked me to do," Balthazar retorted. "So, instead of trying to convince me of something I already know, why don't you sit yourself down and do something marginally useful? Like, I don't know, trying to save your tattered soul?"

Bobby bristled. "Lemme remind you that that 'tattered soul' is the reason the boys were able to put off the Apocalypse indefinitely."

"Believe me, luv, I'm still trying to decide if that was the right course of action – I never wanted the world to end, but I didn't want to have to share it with a colony of cockroaches, either," Balthazar pronounced crisply.

"It's a real wonder why I'm havin' a hard time trusting an angel that thinks I'm no better than an insect," Bobby rolled his eyes.

"It's not my intention to insult you, you know, I'm simply stating a fact," Balthazar articulated crisply. "Look at it from my perspective – there are billions of you, you cover the earth, you never die when you should, you have a tendency to spread disease and panic wherever you go, you ravage God's beautiful world with your very breath –"

"Then why haven't you joined up with Raphael yet?"

Balthazar sighed in a put upon way. "Because for all your faults, humanity remains my Father's favorite creation. And, you've got your good points – chocolate, creative sex, Manchester United. If my brothers had their way, all of that would be nothing but a distant memory." He groaned in exaggerated agony. "I don't know about you, old boy, but if I would sorely miss not being able to conclude my day with a bottle of Sauvignon and a happy ending."

"That's more information than I ever needed," Bobby muttered.

"Right!" Balthazar said brightly, clapping his hands together. "Well, if we've got that little session of obligatory male bonding out of the way, I've got a rebellion to see to because a certain besotted angel decided to abandon ship." He waggled is fingers at Bobby. "Be good for Daddy, now, and no parties."

And with the tearing sound of wings, the angel was gone.

"I'm gonna fry him," Bobby said decisively to no one in particular.
"Ooh, can I watch?" a familiar voice piped up, making Bobby jump and reach for the colt in his gun holster. The familiar sharp-faced meatsuit of the former King of the Crossroads smirked back at him. "Now's that really how you greet an old work colleague? Especially when you know it won't do anything to me?"

"Old habits," Bobby grunted, still not putting the gun down. "How'd you find me?"

"Your angel bestie thinks he's clever, moving you all around the globe," Crowley remarked conversationally, eyes roving judgementally around the cabin. "The thing is, I learned my lesson from Lilith's little misstep. She might have gotten her hands on your not-sons sooner if she'd bothered keeping track of them. So there's a bit in your contract that allows me to find you whenever I want."

'Great, now I have two stalkers,' Bobby thought to himself. Out loud, he growled, "So what's stopped you?"

"Been a bit busy downstairs, darling. Downsizing is never an easy business – you know, you might want to look into warding the place up against demons," Crowley commented, knocking lightly against the wall of the cabin. "Of course, it's rather moot at this point, seeing as how you're pretty safe."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the demons looking for you all think the angels have you – the ones in charge, not your dear renegades – and those angels can't find you because of your lovely rib décor, and all your hunter friends think you were taken out by either of those sides."

"Good to know," Bobby hedged, fists clenched.

"Isn't it, though?"

"Still, there's something I'd rather talk about right now than who's tryin' to kill me this week."

"Oh?"

"My soul."

"You mean 'my' soul."

Bobby's fists clenched tighter; he had been afraid that this might happen. Damn angels taking him from his home, he might have been better prepared to deal with Crowley reneging if he had his spell materials!

Still, rather than become ostensibly worried, he forced his voice to remain level. "How's about you hold up your end of our arrangement and give it back."

Crowley adopted a look of innocent confusion. "Give it back? Why Robert, I'm surprised so learned a man as you didn't bother to read your contract all the way through…"

Bobby narrowed his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Paragraph eighteen, subsection B," Crowley drawled and snapped his fingers. Bobby tensed and felt an uncomfortable ache shoot through his body as writing appeared on his skin, the sensation not unlike having a scraper dragged across him. "I only have to make the "best efforts" to give you soul back. And for all you know, I already have and just, well, couldn't."
"You lying sack of –"

"Ah-ah-ah, not finished yet, precious," Crowley interrupted. "In case you didn't realize, I've been busy working damage control since we put our archangel *Führer* back in the box. Your pawned soul isn't exactly on top of my list of to-dos. However," His smirk widened. "I might consider bumping it up the queue if given… an extra incentive."

Bobby felt the blood rush to his face in anger. "You can take your 'extra incentive' and shove it up your ass. I ain't doin' no demon's dirty work."

"Oh, did I give you the impression I was asking?" Crowley purred. "I apologize, I forgot the limited brain capacity I'm working with. Let me provide the Yankee hick translation: I'm blackmailing you."

Bobby snarled a wordless curse, while Crowley made another ambling turn about the cabin space. "I have a rather irritating thorn in my side these days. Petite, lips red as blood and eyes to match her black heart? I have it on good authority you're well acquainted."

"You talkin' about Meg?"

"Last I checked, that is what she calls herself these days."

"So why can't you take care of her yourself?"

"You mean in my abundant spare time?" Crowley inquires dryly. "Well, let's see – there's the part where she's the daughter of the last tyrant of Hell, which means she's got her share of supporters that I can't afford to royally piss off directly. Oh, and the fact that she was favored by Lucifer, if that bastard could ever be said to favor a demon. He likely taught her to stay under the radar and bide her time. Meaning I can't find her."

"But you think I can?"

"Oh, Bobby, Bobby, Bobby… I thought you were the intelligent one," Crowley sighs. "Seasoned veteran and all that? What do you think she's doing when she's not trying to upset my new regime?"

Bobby tensed, clenching his fists as he remembered his latest altercation with Meg. She had been more than intent on discovering the whereabouts of the Winchesters, and had come to him to do just that. She was the entire reason that Bobby was currently under angel house arrest.

Crowley nodded, reading Bobby's expression. "There's a good lad, I knew you'd get it."

"So you basically want me to be glorified bait?"

"There's nothing glorified about it. And it's not so much bait as… bating. Lure her out of wherever she is and send her downstairs so that she and I can have a frank chat, is all I'm asking."

"What's to stop you from keepin' hold of my soul after I do this?"

"Hm," Crowley pretended to muse, and then shrugged. "Well, absolutely nothing. I suppose it will depend on what kind of mood I'm in – but really, it couldn't hurt your chances to give it a go, could it?"

"I can think of something to improve his chances." There was a recognizable flutter of wings, and Balthazar was standing between Bobby and Crowley, his vessel's entire body tense. "Crowley."
"Balthazar," Crowley greeted, unsurprised and at ease. "I see rumours of your demise were greatly exaggerated. If I had known you were the one playing guard dog, I'd have popped in for a pint sooner."

"You owe me five quid, as is," Balthazar returned lazily, taking a step forward. "Unless you're here to pay your tab, kindly sod off."

"Oh, someone's still sore about that girl in Spain," Crowley snorted, and then studied Balthazar with a sardonic smirk upon his lips. He pretended to hide a yawn. "Well, as charming as this little soiree has been, I've got a hell dimension to run and you have a job to do –"

"Not so fast, demon," Balthazar said in a calm voice that did nothing to hide the tension in the tone. And standing behind the angel, Bobby could see the muscles in its vessel's neck twitch. "I have business with you, while you're here."

"Oh?" Crowley feigned a wide-eyed, innocent look.

"A deal was recently made," Balthazar said stiffly. "The collateral was an archangel's grace. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"I haven't the foggiest what you're on about, mate," Crowley answered mildly. "But I'll tell you what – I'll look into that if you help Robert here on a little chore."

"You think I'm going to make a deal with you?" Balthazar asked, disgust dripping in every syllable. "Well, you wouldn't be the first," Crowley's eyes twinkled tauntingly. Balthazar made to move forward, but aborted the movement almost as quickly. "Ooh, smart decision there, pet. I think you know that would have been the last cock-up you ever made."

"Are you gonna let your mouth flap in the wind all day, or are you gonna say your piece and get outta here?" Bobby demanded, unnerved by the angel's sudden hesitance. He had never seen an angel back down from taking out a demon – one-on-one, there was no contest between the two. Balthazar's reluctance to attack meant that Crowley had an advantage that Bobby didn't know about, but which the angel obviously did.

"Patience, sunshine. We're all still on the same side, yeah?" Crowley said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. He returned his attention to Balthazar. "You help the redneck here get rid of my Meg problem, I'll pony up a significant portion of Hell to keep your megalomaniac brother from bolloxing up the world."

"What's the catch to all this?" Bobby demanded.

"At the moment? Nothing," Crowley answered smoothly. "I just happen to have problems that need attending to, and I don't have time to see to it myself." His expression darkened. "I don't care which one of you gits fixes said problem, so long as it stops being mine." He tipped his head slightly. "Ta."

He was gone before Bobby could blink, leaving him standing in the cabin with an overwrought angel of the lord.

"Thought you were in Bangladesh?"

"I was en route," Balthazar replied darkly. "And then I sensed something powerful heading back here. I didn't think he would be so bold, but then I remembered exactly who we're dealing with."

"So what the hell were you waiting for? Couldn't you have taken him out with a tap on the head?"
Bobby demanded.

"Once," Balthazar said darkly, turning to face Bobby. For once, his expression wasn't twisted into the arrogant look of distaste but one of serious anger. "Not anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because Crowley isn't just a demon any longer," Balthazar said, narrowing his eyes at the now empty space beside the fireplace, "and I have a rather horrible feeling as to the reason why."

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6x05 Dangerous Attractions

Chapter Summary

The boys run into some unexpected roadblocks, not only on their mission to get their bodies back, but in their case as well. The brothers and Castiel find out that there might be more than one witch to worry about. Sam and Sarah have a little chat, Cas comes up with a plan and the brothers deal with their witch problem.

Five

Club2-N-1,
New York City, New York
Monday 7 June 2010

"This object is cumbersome," Castiel remarked, glowering down at the sling that immobilized his arm.

It was a complaint he had voiced more than once over the past two days, and Sam wasn't looking forward to another week of it. Even after the sling came off, Cas was looking at a minimum of four weeks before his shoulder fully recovered.

"Yeah, well, that's what you get for not falling the way I showed you," Dean replied as he pulled the Charger over on the side of the road and parked.

"There were many overturned bookcases in the way. I did not have much of a choice," Castiel returned, almost petulantly. There was a beat, and then he said in a voice that mixed complaint with hopefulness, "I believe the painkillers are wearing off again."

"Nice try, buddy, you've got another hour before you're getting any more drugs," Dean retorted easily, sending Castiel a significant glance in the rear-view mirror. "Until then, let's go do something distracting." The driver's side door creaked open as he got out, but Sam thought he heard him mumble, "Like get our livers carved out so we can be real boys again."

Sam shot Castiel a sympathetic, 'yeah, he's a jerk' look, as he too got out of the car. He frowned at
Dean over the roof of the car.

"I'm kind of with Cas on this one. It's the first time he's really felt a dislocation," he argued. "Maybe something a little stronger than ibuprofen might not be a bad idea this time?"

"Not happening, Sam," Dean answered, turning away to focus on the familiar old building across the street. In daylight, the former fire station's pink hue stuck out even more than it did at night.

"Yeah, well, you haven't really explained why not."

"Because I said so."

"Dean –"

"One addict in the family is enough, Sam. Now drop it." He glanced both ways and then started across the street, while Sam watched him with a hard look.

Sam was all for defending himself against that dig, except there was an intense quality in his older brother's tone that brooked no argument on this. Under normal circumstances, that would have goaded Sam into a snappish rejoinder, but Dean had been really edgy for two days now, and Sam wasn't really in the mood for a huge blow-out.

Castiel got out of the car as well, wincing as the movement jostled his arm.

"I dislike your brother's patronizing attitude," he grumbled mutinously.

"Welcome to the past twenty-seven years of my life," Sam sighed. "Acting like an overprotective prick is how Dean shows he cares."

Castiel's silence as he followed Sam across the street was contemplative, his mind apparently off his injury for the moment. Sam was glad for that, at least, because even if Dean wasn't as adamant about the ex-angel toughing this out right now, it wasn't as though they could just drag him to a hospital on a whim and have him looked at. Not after what had happened in Decatur.

They had had to leave the town in a bit of a hurry – and none too soon if the report on the car radio had been anything to go by. The discovery of Nicki Tobin's body and her ransacked house had sped through the community the ways news usually travelled in small towns. If Sam was right, investigators would be finding a few new sets of DNA between both scenes.

For now, he and Dean were still safe, as according to Aggie their blood signature had been altered enough that they couldn't be linked to any of their crimes on file. That in and of itself was great, because when they got their bodies back, neither of them wanted to be looking over their shoulders because some of their blood had allowed the feds to declare the Winchester file open again.

Their legal deaths had been the only good thing to come of Henricksen's sacrifice in Colorado.

Still, the problem they now faced was that the feds could probably tie the very mortal Castiel to the crimes – or at least Jimmy Novak. Once the law checked out Jimmy's information, and then heard about the two women breaking him out of Sinai Grace, it wouldn't be too hard to put two and two together. When that happened, it wasn't likely they would be able to remain under the radar much longer.

Dean had been bitching for days about how Castiel was going to spend the rest of his mortal life with a criminal record, while the former angel had simply watched him pace around their motel room, calmly spouting platitudes about free will. Sam had always thought that he was the only one able to
rile Dean into a fury, but apparently the fallen warrior of God had learned those ropes really well.

The one upside to the snafu in Decatur, according to Dean, was that with the possibility of the police looking for them, they had an excuse to get their bodies back. He seemed more than happy to rely on hex bags and angel sigils for protection, and while Sam was doubtful of the effectiveness of that strategy in the long-term (due to previous experience), he wouldn't lie and say he didn't want his own body back.

Being a woman was interesting, of course, and there were advantages, but he really, really wanted to be himself again before certain disadvantages arose. It was one of the reasons why when Dean insisted on heading to New York to find Aggie, Sam had only put up a token of resistance.

The only address they had for Aggie was her club, which wasn't open yet, but Sam figured if it was being run like a normal club, the day staff would already be inside preparing for the night's activities.

Dean prodded the buzzer a few times, and they could hear a distant ringing beyond the solid door. They waited several minutes before the sound of a lock opening confirmed that there was someone around.

When they saw who it was, Sam winced in dislike.

"Yes?" Ethon drawled, looking as bored and unfriendly as he had the night they met him.

"Where's Aggie?" Dean asked without prelude.

Ethon wrinkled his nose as recognition alit in his eyes. "She's not available."

"What do you mean, she isn't available?" Dean spat.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Ethon replied, sounding bored. "She's not here. But if you wish me to pass on a message or perhaps another vital organ, I'll be sure she gets right back to you."

This wasn't the response Dean wanted, Sam knew, and his brother's mood was not improving his reaction to Ethon's attitude. Dean clenched his fists and looked for all intents and purposes like he was about to dive forward and lay into the balding pagan.

"Dean," Sam reached forward in an attempt to calm his brother, but Dean shrugged him off roughly. Sam held back a sigh and glanced at Castiel, who was hanging back a foot or so behind them. He was watching Ethon with an expression of distrust and repugnance.

'I guess even if he's not an angel anymore, he's still not too keen on pagan gods,' Sam thought, although he wasn't exactly sure if Ethon could be considered a pagan god, exactly; maybe some kind of primordial nature spirit? He hadn't yet narrowed down Ethon's exact identity, but he had a suspicion the guy hailed from a time when the Greek gods had been big.

"Where the hell is she then?" Dean demanded, jarring Sam from his thoughts.

"Turkey – not that it's any of your business," Ethon replied silkily. "A former client was in a spot of trouble and needed her help."

"We need her help!"

Ethon observed Dean like he was an interesting yet disgusting insect. "Do you really think she caters only to charity cases like yourselves? Lady Agdistis's services have been sought by the most powerful families in the world since bull-leaping was in fashion."
"I don't give a shit – get her back here!"

"I hardly think your little foray into gender dysphoria is going to give her much incentive to return before she's ready," Ethon sniffed. "Not unless you can top the seven figure sum she was offered and the private jet that flew her out."

Which, of course, they couldn't, and even Dean had to know that trying to scam an ancient deity with fake credit cards was a bad idea. Just like he should know that full-on attacking one without a weapon was an even worse one, but from the gleam in his brother's eyes, he was actually entertaining that thought.

Castiel moved before he did.

"Dean," he implored, reaching forward and placing his hand on the hunter's left shoulder.

Sam fully expected his brother to shake the ex-angel's hand free as well, but for some reason Dean's entire frame instead went still. He spared a long-suffering glance at the former angel, and then exhaled an exasperated sigh before taking a step back. Castiel's hand lingered barely a second longer before he remembered himself and increased his distance as well.

"I require a moment," Castiel said to Ethon, though his eyes remained on Dean.

"My dear, you can have as many moments as you want," Ethon said, and then – and Sam shuddered at the sight – all but leered at Castiel.

Dean noticed it as well.

"Hey!" he bit out, planting himself back next to Castiel, fists clenching and unclenching. From the way his eyes snapped, Sam knew he was imagining going for Ethon's throat again, but instead he simply jutted his chin out and growled, "Keep it for the health club, pal."

Sam's eyebrows shot up, and he took a second to look from Castiel's placid expression to Dean's livid one. He'd seen that exact look before, but never on his own brother's face. It looked remarkably like…

'Nah,' he told himself, immediately stopping that thought process. 'Not possible.'

In the meantime, Castiel was ignoring Dean's over-protective routine and met Ethon's gaze.

"Akoús, kaukásios aetós," he began, and the rest was lost in a sea of syllables and words that Sam's rudimentary understanding of ancient Greek couldn't help him with. Judging from the way Ethon went steadily paler, though, and replied quickly and fearfully, Sam had a feeling Ethon knew exactly what Castiel was saying. He also suspected that Castiel had literally just put the fear of God into him.

"Are we clear?"

"Of course," Ethon said nervously.

"Very well," Castiel said, and turned to Sam and Dean. "I believe we are finished here. I would like to go eat something now."

He started back to the car, leaving Dean and Sam looking at each other questioningly. Only the sound of Ethon slamming the door hastily as he returned to the club shook them from their disbelief, and then both of them hurried across the street after Castiel.

"What was that all about?" Sam asked breathlessly, while Dean broke in, "Dude, that was badass!"
"It was nothing," Castiel lied unconvincingly.

"It didn't sound like nothing," Sam pressed.

Castiel frowned, thoughtful, and then with an air of finality stated, "We had a brief exchange of philosophical differences."

Sam stared. "Seriously? That's what you're going with?"

"The pagan assured me that as soon as Agdistis returns she will get in contact with you and reverse her magic," Castiel, pointedly ignoring Sam's question. "Until that point, it might be advisable to do something else with our time."

He didn't seem keen on sharing exactly what he had said to Ethon, and while Sam was all for figuring out that mystery, he supposed they had more important priorities at the moment. Like –

"Goddamnit," Dean cursed, the impressed look on his face fading with realization. "That means were stuck in these bodies until that friggen' bitch gets back here, doesn't it?"

"Looks like," Sam agreed. "But hey, how long can it take? I mean, she did us in a night. So she flies overseas, deals with whatever she got called to do, and comes back. It can't be more than a few days, right?" They climbed back into the car. "We survived two weeks, a few more days won't kill us."

"Won't kill you, maybe," Dean grumbled. "Pretty sure you're in your element right now, Samantha. I feel like jumping out of my skin."

"That would be inadvisable," Castiel remarked seriously.

Dean groaned and leaned back in the driver's seat for a moment. "Christ, I need a drink."

"It's eleven-thirty," Sam pointed out chidingly.

"Yeah, well, it's five o'clock in Barcelona."

"Hey, how about we get some work done before Happy Hour?" Sam deadpanned. "We still have a lead to check up on while we're here."

The day they had left Decatur Sam had spent the evening in their latest motel going through all of Nicki Tobin's emails and browser history, looking for a clue as to whoever she had gotten the demon blood from. After several hours of work while Dean had tried to introduce Castiel to the wonders of motel television, Sam had discovered several interesting conversations between Nicki and someone with the username QueenBeeStark, as well as online records of money transfers.

Curiously, there were never any descriptions of what was being bought or paid for, but he had tracked the email and IP address to an art gallery in New York. Considering it was always the same IP address, it was obviously not someone used to hiding their tracks. So he had suggested checking into the rather spurious lead while they were in the city.

"We might as well see if it pans out," Sam went on. "And I think we should check in on Professor Yong. See if we can wheedle a bit more info on this so called way into Hell. It would suck to go through all this trouble just to find a witch and have it turn out the ritual's a fluke."

"There'd still be a witch dead at the end of it," Dean pointed out. "That's an upside in my book."

"Do you want to check out the gallery or should I?" Sam asked, already knowing the answer.
"You kidding? I want to see Yong crap his pants when Cas pulls his 'Angel of the Lord' thing."

"I am not an angel anymore," Castiel reminded them both, sounding half-exasperated.

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that. Just spout some biblical crap and give him that freaky stare of yours, and he's a goner," Dean said in satisfaction. When Castiel pinned him with an unimpressed, intense gaze, Dean shifted his shoulders uncomfortably and turned the car key in the ignition. "Yeah, that's the one."

A half hour later they pulled off in front of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. Dean practically jumped out of the car, waiting impatiently for Cas to follow him as Sam got into the driver's seat.

"Don't know how long this'll take, so we'll meet you back at the motel," he told his brother.

"Right. Call me if there's anything. And Cas? Try not to let him terrorize the guy too much," Sam instructed dryly.

"I will do my best, however even I can't work miracles," Cas answered in a similar tone.

Dean bristled. "This teaming up thing? So not cute."

"Yeah, well, neither are your mood swings," Sam retorted, and he pulled away from them.

Dean flipped the finger after the disappearing Charger, and huffed in annoyance as he gestured for Cas to follow him into the nondescript building.

He didn't know why he was feeling so edgy of late, but he was. Cas's injury had a lot to do with it, he figured; for two nights now, he had been treated to nightmarish memories of the drugged out version of his friend from 2014. But there was something else that was making him uncomfortable and restless. It felt like there was something he needed, or wanted, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what it was.

Whatever was putting him on edge was making him more abrasive and impatient than he normally was, and things which he would usually just shrug off irritated the hell out of him.

'This sucks,' he thought to himself sourly. It was probably stress over the mess they had found themselves in, especially now that he knew he was going to be stuck as a woman for even longer than he had anticipated. He hated that he was being such a, well, a bitch, lately, but he couldn't control it. 'Add that to the list of shit I can't control in this body.'

"You believe this man truly knows a way into Hell?" Cas asked as they climbed the spiral staircase to the floor where Yong's office was located.

"I wouldn't call it believing, but until we got you back, it wasn't exactly like we had any other leads to follow," Dean pointed out, half-defensive. "The only other idea we sort of discussed was using the Horsemen's rings, but there was a slight hitch in that idea, if you know what I mean."

"Yes," Cas said, nodding thoughtfully. "Did this Yong person give you any idea of what was needed?"

"Other than the spell that's supposed to jumpstart the whole process? Not a whole lot, which is why
we've been on this witch-shtick the last week or so. He also said something about a key and a guide and the 'protection of Death', but that was as much as he would give us. The little worm decided to get us to do his dirty work for him." Cas was quiet for a spell, and when Dean chanced a glimpse at him, he noticed the calculating frown. "What is it?"

"Those components sound legitimate, but I cannot be sure," Cas told him. "Not until I know what the rest of the requirements are."

"Well, great, that's why you're here," Dean stated cheerfully. "Just scare the pants off him with some intense angel staring and –"

"I will not impersonate an angel."

Dean stared, and then slowly said, "Dude…you're not impersonating an angel. You are an angel."

"Without grace, I am mortal," Cas said, speaking to Dean like he didn't understand a very simple concept.

"Okay, maybe you're not all full of grace right now, but you've been an angel for like a million years," Dean rolled his eyes. "Just because you got your club membership revoked for a bit doesn't change who you are."

Cas stilled, and then his expression softened. "Thank you, Dean."

"Don't thank me for something that's true," Dean replied, gruff. "Just go in there and work your angel mojo. Or, you know, lack thereof."

"I still will not lie about my abilities," Cas insisted.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because we want this man to help us, and deceiving him will only make him less likely to do so."

"Who said anything about deceiving him? I just want to freak him out enough to show us the damn ritual." Cas pinned Dean with one of his intense stares, and Dean rolled his eyes. "Yeah, fine, we'll do it your way – Jesus, you're worse than Sammy – but if Yong still doesn't budge, you're buying me lunch."

Cas blinked. "I do not have any money."

"I'll lend you some, and when you can hustle pool on your own, you'll pay me back," Dean declared, going to clap Cas on the back and only just reigning in the impulse when he remembered his friend's injury. Instead, he settled on lightly tapping Cas's right shoulder and stalking off before he could see whatever face the ex-angel was giving him now.

Yong wasn't at his desk when they got there, and according to the guy in the cubicle a few feet away, he wouldn't be back until his noon class ended in half an hour. Dean elected to wait around, playing idly with the professor's mini collection of HotWheels while Cas examined the postcards that were pinned to Yong's wall. They must have been extremely interesting, because for thirty-seven minutes his thoughtful expression didn't let up.

Yong arrived then, flustered, with an overflowing briefcase and his bow-tie askew. "I apologize for making you wait, I wasn't expecting – oh. It's you."

"Try not to sound so enthusiastic," Dean said, leaning back in Yong's chair with no intention of
"Did you find the witch, then?" Yong asked, lowering his voice as he put down his briefcase.

"Not exactly. Maybe," Dean shrugged. "Not why we're here though. This is Castiel. He wants to take a gander at that ritual of yours."

"I see," Yong frowned, looking incredulously at Cas; his eyes lingered on the sling. "And why do you think I'm going to let him see it when I wouldn't let you?"

Dean smirked. "He's an Angel of the Lord."

"Bullshit."

"Does anyone ever believe that even when it is true?" Dean asked Cas conversationally.

"Not yet, it would seem," Cas returned.

"Okay, he was an Angel of the Lord," Dean amended. "He's actually the one that hauled me out of Hell."

Yong crossed his arms. "If you think you're being funny—"

"It's not a joke—in fact, I'd give you the whole story, but the more time we waste the longer my brother's in Hell, so the teaser's gonna have to cut it," Dean stated decisively, while Cas poked at the Blanka figurine on Yong's desk. "Angels really exist, just not in the diaper and harp variety." He remembered the Cupid he had run into in Sioux Falls. "Usually."

Yong didn't appear convinced. "Prove it."

"What part of 'he was' are you not understanding?" Dean deadpanned.

"You're going to have to do better than a fake angel to change the terms of our agreement," Yong said dryly. "We don't have anything else to talk about, unless he's about to sprout wings."

"Gamureo," Cas said quietly, and Yong suddenly froze. Cas then continued into a flowing, smooth language with a few harsh syllables that had Yong's eyes widening with every word. Even Dean blinked in surprise, although it wasn't the first time that day that Cas had hauled his language skills out of retirement.

More surprising was when Yong replied in the same language, albeit more haltingly. He switched back to English in a moment. "How did you…?"

"You have several depictions of the Cheonjiyeon Waterfall and other locations on Jeju Island," Cas said, gesturing at the postcards and photographs. "Some with family members. It was not a stretch to infer you spoke the language."

Dean raised his eyebrows, and glanced closer to the postcards and photos Cas had been studying before. In one of them, a more youthful Yong was portrayed with his arms around an old Asian woman who shared his features.

"But how…?"

"Despite becoming mortal, I still retain a small percentage of my former knowledge," Cas explained. "Languages are apparently part of that."
Yong's mouth was agape, and when he realized it, he shut it with an audible snap. Shaking, but clearly trying to recover himself, he bit out, "That doesn't prove you're an angel. For all I know, this is just a really good con. You're hunters, I wouldn't put it past you."

"I am not a hunter," Cas said quietly, taking a step closer and immobilizing Yong with nothing but the intensity of his gaze. If nothing of his angel mojo had remained, that at least hadn't changed. "I am what you have been told I am. I can stand here and describe to you the beauty of the Library of Alexandria or the carnage of the Battle of Canae, but at the end of the day you will believe what you wish and we will simply have wasted time. The choice is yours."

Dean couldn't help the smirk on his face at Yong's absolute shock as he tried to process this. He glanced nervously at Dean. "You're serious? He's really…?"

"Told you. Angel of the Lord."

"Oh," Yong appeared suddenly nervous. He ran a hand through his hair, then stared at his hand like he had just done something impolite, and gave Cas a pained look. "I…sorry, I didn't…"

"Cas doesn't really care about the formalities," Dean remarked.

"Our continued association has almost entirely removed any expectations I ever harboured of being shown a fitting degree of respect," Cas told him dryly, "at least from you."

Yong suddenly looked knowing, eyeing Cas and then Dean with realization. "Oh…wait…is this a *City of Angels* deal?"

"I do not understand that reference," Cas said, curiosity in his tone.

Dean, however, did.

"Never mind," he told Cas quickly, and then pointed a finger at Yong. "And dude, just…no. Not least because Nick Cage is on my extreme douche list and Meg Ryan couldn't act her way out of a paper bag."

Yong opened his mouth to speak, maybe to protest, but was interrupted.

"Show me what information you have gathered," Cas ordered, with the same conviction of someone who was used to his orders being obeyed. It the type of conviction that always tempted Dean to do the exact opposite.

Unlike Dean, though, Yong immediately reached into one of the drawers of his desk, removing the false bottom with no more than a cursory glance around, and then passed the former angel a silk and leather-bound book that was as thick as Dad's journal.

Cas stared down at the book for almost ten minutes, ignoring Dean's attempts to get him to talk, or Yong's anxious, curious stares. When Dean was sure he couldn't take the silence any longer, Cas finally did glance up. There was a confident glint in his eyes.

"This is genuine," he said, the words a breath of near reverence.

"How do you know?" Dean asked, noticing Yong's expression flicker away from awe at Cas into momentary smug validation.

"Each of these components, and the directions…they are too specific for it not to be authentic," Castiel explained, dragging a finger down the wrinkled page. "The elements themselves are powerful
individually, but together...together they just might work."

"Of course it works," Yong insisted. "I told you it did, I saw it work."

Cas opened his mouth to ask a question, but Dean cut him off before he could.

"Why didn't you know about this ritual before?" he demanded of Cas. "And don't pull the 'above my pay grade' line, because if you were a freakin' archangel long enough to clue into Daddy's secret key, you could have known about this."

Yong did a silent double-take at the word 'archangel'.

"No, I couldn't."

"Bullshit! You could have saved us a lot of trouble, man, not least of all you having to give up your grace just to free –"

"I didn't know about it because its existence was hidden from me!" Cas snapped testily, and Dean blinked at the sudden loss of contractions. Cas was actually glaring at him with real frustration...and anger. "Whatever you may believe, I don't have all of the answers. I have even fewer now that I'm mortal."

He didn't voice it, but Dean could almost hear 'because of you' tacked on to the end of that sentence. They scowled at each other for another second, before Dean looked away. "Fine, okay, whatever. So you didn't know about this ritual."

"None of God's angels knew about it, because he didn't create it. I imagine it was created recently, and at someone's behest." Cas explained stiffly. He seemed to notice Dean's discomfort despite the attempts to hide it, and his tone gentled somewhat. "Even if I had known about it, you would still be exactly where you are now, only without Sam by your side."

Dean felt his stomach clench at the thought, and even his current angry anxiety couldn't keep him from admitting that Cas was right.

"Sam?" Dean and Cas tuned to Yong, who they had momentarily forgotten. "Who's Sam?"

"My sister," Dean replied easily, shooting Cas an annoyed glower for letting that slip. "She is. Samantha Jane," Dean lied. "She prefers Jane – you know, it's more feminine. I've always called her 'Sam' to piss her off." Yong gave Dean a stare that a lifetime of hunting had taught him meant his con was falling apart, and so he cleared his throat and nodded to the book in Cas's hands. "So, you're saying someone asked for a custom made gate to Hell?"

"Yes," Cas nodded, finally returning his own attention to Yong. "You intimated that it was your father who left this to you?"

"Yeah," Yong said, attention lingering on Dean for a moment before it shifted to Cas. "Like I told them, I walked in on my father just as the portal was closing. All that was left of him were all his notes."

"But no ritual items? No clues?"

"Nothing outside of what's in the book," Yong nodded to the journal. "I figured it was all one-time
use stuff that got burned up when the portal closed. Besides, most of it is stuff I never would have…"
He trailed off, looking angry and regretful for a moment. "I'm not a hunter. I don't have the guts to go out into the field. The one time I tried… I nearly got killed by a ghost. It was an accident that I lived. I've never been able to help my Dad because I'm a coward. It sucks, but I've accepted that." He gave Dean a repentant look. "It's why I asked you and your sister to do it. I figured you'd have experience."

"You could have just said that instead of sending us on a wild goose chase," Dean pointed out roughly. "If you showed us some of the shit we needed for the ritual, we could have started with something else. Getting a witch to help might not be the easiest thing to start with."

"It is one of the easier components," Castiel said absently, without looking up from the journal that he was flipping through.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Jesus, who even came up with this, anyway?"

"A god," Cas explained unconcernedly. To Yong, he said, "Your father must have petitioned a specific deity to receive these directions. It was likely a god of travel, or perhaps the afterlife." He went quiet again, thoughtful. He gazed at Yong's pictures again, and then nodded in resolution. "Bari-degi."

Dean made a face. "Who?"

"In Korean mythology, she was a human who became a goddess," Yong explained, not taking his eyes off of Cas. "My grandmother used to tell me stories about her." When Dean made an impatient noise, he hurriedly went on, "The myth goes that she journeyed to the afterlife to save her ailing parents. She was hindered by many ghosts along her way. When she finally made it to the Water of Life, its guardian wouldn't agree to help her unless she married him. Which she did, and then she was able to save her family. After she died, she became the goddess of guiding the dead to the afterlife."

"Okay, that's a nice bedtime story, but it doesn't mean it's her. There are hundreds of gods it could be."

Castiel pointed to the picture of Yong and the old woman. "Your grandmother was a mudang."

It wasn't a question.

"Yeah," Yong nodded.

"Meaning what, for those of us who don't speak Korean?" Dean snapped, his temper rising up again.

"An intermediary between the spirits and gods and humans," Cas explained. "If she told him myths when he was younger, chances are she did the same with her own son. He would likely have sought help from a pantheon of deities he was familiar with."

"Wait a sec – you mean all that was real?" Yong gaped.

"You know angels and demons and ghosts are real but you don't think gods are?" Dean asked in disbelief.

"I had always assumed…" Yong trailed off, shook his head and then peered at Cas, as though seeing him for the first time. "You know, for a Judeo-Christian being, you seem to know an awful lot about pagan mythologies."
"I have been a soldier since before mankind existed. I have become adept at studying my enemies," Castiel returned.

He paused to let that sink in.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Dean demanded. "There's got to be a way of summoning this goddess here."

"Why would we do that?" Yong asked tightly.

"So that we could see if there's a way to get into Hell without the whole ritual?" Dean suggested impatiently. "Maybe whatever gave your dad the directions can be convinced to help us out."

"It is not a good idea," Cas contended. "We have nothing to offer this deity as incentive to appear in a summoning, let alone to trade for ideas about how to travel into Hell."

Dean shrugged, and then grinned winningly. "Doesn't mean it's not worth a shot."

Sam hadn't been to an art gallery in years.

The closest he had come since getting back on the road with Dean was the auction house in New Paltz, but even that didn't really count because he and Dean had been working a job at the time. Before that, he had tried going with Jess, but she had been a lot like Dean in that she wasn't fascinated by modern art so much as partying with friends.

The last time he had been to an art gallery was his first semester in college; in his recently emancipated glory, he had taken an art history with the sole intention of trying to meet girls. Instead, he had discovered a genuine interest in impressionist art.

'None of which will be seen here,' he thought, glancing around the open space at the various examples of modern art. He'd really never gotten the allure of the stuff, and even pop art pushed the limits of what he could call tasteful.

The Margaret Stark Art Gallery was a privately owned studio located in a rather large loft deep in the city center. According to the website Sam had checked that morning, it was owned by the wife of a property developer in Prosperity, Indiana. Mrs. Stark flipped houses for a living and was very active in charity work in her spare time. According to the society notes on the web and in the online newspapers, she divided her time between Indiana and New York throughout the year.

'Apparently, though, she's spent the past six months here in the city,' he remembered as he circulated through the gallery, stopping every now and then to pretend to look at the art while in reality searching the crowd for Mrs. Stark. The event that Sam was gatecrashing that day was actually one of her bi-monthly charity auctions.

It hadn't taken a great leap to focus on Mrs. Stark as the prime suspect in the case. The online moniker QueenBeeStark and the IP address leading to the gallery provided a strong case for her being Nicki's demon blood supplier. The only problem was, on paper, Margaret Stark was more vanilla than those bored book club witches he and Dean had encountered the year before Dean's deal came due.

At this point, Sam wasn't even sure that the woman was even going to be present at the auction, but
he might at least be able to find out where she was staying while in New York. The internet hadn't turned up a permanent residence, which could either mean her address was unlisted or she was living in a hotel suite somewhere.

He began to make another round of the gallery, listening carefully around the stodgy art speak and inane chatter of art aficionados chattering around the paintings. His best bet would be someone who worked at the gallery – better still, someone who was affiliated with the Margaret Stark Charity Foundation.

There were several people dressed in similar black professional ware circulating the event with appetizers and papers for buyers interested in participating in the silent auction going on, but he wouldn't be able to tell who worked with the foundation without interviewing each and every one of them.

'Which I can't do in one day,' he thought with a frown. He glanced down at his watch, noting that it had been two hours since he dropped off Castiel and Dean and then hightailed it to a nearby mall to buy some more formal clothing. (He'd allowed the salesgirl to choose the black blouse and pencil skirt, not trusting his own judgement in the matter). He was just hoping they were having better luck than he was when he changed to look up across the room. 'Then again, maybe I just got lucky.'

A beautiful woman in chique clothing had wandered into the room, followed by one slightly diminished looking but no less coifed. Her assistant, Sam supposed absently, as he studied Margaret Stark. She was olive skinned and leggy, with dark eyes and a flirtatious smile which she seemed to be turning on everyone she came in contact with.

'Best to get the basic tests out of the way,' Sam decided, fingering the holy water in the pocket of his skirt. There was a small chance that whoever supplied Nicki with the demon blood had actually been the demon itself, and if that was the case, Sam and Dean would have to be careful.

He strode forward, intent on getting to Mrs. Stark quickly through the throng of people.

He obviously wasn't paying attention to where he was going, because in his haste to maneuver around the guests that packed the gallery, he ran headlong into a dark-haired woman who was gliding in the opposite direction.

There was a moment of impact where the clipboard and pens which she had been carrying flew out of her hands, and Sam automatically reached out to steady the woman before she could fall down.

"Sorry," he said, face flushing when the people around them looked over and inwardly cursing the attention now focussed on them. Without looking at her, he let go of her and knelt down to pick up her things, cursing his wasted chance at getting to his target.

"Oh – no, you don't have to – it was my fault," the woman said. Her voice was familiar. "I've been running around like a chicken with my head cut off all morning."

Sam straightened up, pen in hand, ready to fake a laugh at their little gaffe, but he froze before he could.

Disbelief flitted through him.

"Sarah?"

There was a pause.

"Can I help you?" the woman who was most definitely Sarah Blake inquired, her polite smile not
able to hide her confusion at how some stranger knew her name.

"Uh…"

It was a measure of how caught off guard he was that Sam couldn't immediately think of anything to say to her. It should have been a simple, automatic matter for his brain to formulate some story, and it wasn't like he had said anything to her yet which would give her any kind of expectation. As far as she knew, this was a first meeting, an impromptu introduction following a rather amusing act of clumsiness.

Staring into Sarah's earnest hazel eyes and noting the curve of her smile, Sam felt like his tongue was made of lead. His only immediate thought was that the last four years had been very kind to her. She had gained a little weight in all of the right places, which was immediately apparent in the short, wide necked black dress she wore and the way her body moved when she shifted away from him into what was a socially acceptable distance. Her hair was shorter now, cut into a professional looking bob whose long bangs framed her high cheekbones and she was watching him expectantly, the set of her shoulders suggesting the same confidence she had displayed the first time he met her.

Sudden realization flickered in her expression. "Oh! Did Derek send you?"

"...yes," Sam said, not sure what else he was supposed to say. His brain flicked back into gear and maneuvered the pens and papers he had just picked up into the crook of his left arm, offering her his hand. "I'm, uh, Jane. Campbell. I was told to speak to you? I mean, I guess it's you, because you're Sarah, right? Sarah Blake?"

And Christ, could he sound like any more of a complete moron? But she didn't seem to notice, only chuckling brightly and taking his offered hand. "That's me – and it's good you got here when you did. A lot more people showed up than we thought. I didn't think Derek would be able to find anyone for us on such short notice." Her eyes flicked up and down Sam's body searchingly. "Must have been really short notice, he didn't even send you with a uniform."

"I literally got the phone call fifteen minutes ago," Sam lied with ease. "I was at a funeral this morning."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Sarah cried, looking disheartened. "If I had known the jerk was going to call you at a funeral..."

"It's no problem, it was just a cousin that everyone hated anyway," Sam said quickly, and gestured to his attire, deciding to go with the story she had provided him with, "So, this is okay, right?"

"It's going to have to be, we're on a tight schedule," Sarah sighed. She pointed across the gallery to a small alcove. "The backroom is that way; it's being used as a prep-room, so you can get a tray and everything back there. Just make sure the wine keeps flowing and the guests stay happy, and you're good." She raised her eyebrows when she noticed that he was still staring at her. "Are you okay?"

Sam shook himself.

"Yeah – I'm fine. It's just...you don't really strike me as the party-planner type," he commented, trying to gain a little more information about her without blurting out, 'hey, you and I had a thing a few years ago, except I was a guy then, I just wanted to know if you remembered me and hey, what have you been doing all this time?'. It wasn't the weirdest thing he'd ever said to her, but it still wasn't a great thing to lead with. "I thought you were..."

He trailed off meaningfully, as though he knew exactly what she was doing there, and as expected,
Sarah laughed. "Yeah, I know. I thought I was going to be behind the scenes the whole time, but Maggie's really stressed right now, so she needed all hands on deck. Seriously, though, I'm getting off easy. Her PA, Marcie, hasn't slept in three days trying to make sure everything's perfect."

"Sounds like Maggie's kind of a slave driver," Sam offered with good-natured humor.

Sarah's eyes widened at that, a quirk to her lips, but before she could reply, a smooth voice behind him intoned, "Only during functions, I swear. I'm Mother Theresa the rest of the year, I promise."

Sam had to control himself not to whirl around to face the owner of the voice, and carefully schooled his expression when he came in contact with Margaret Stark. She raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at him coyly, in an expression that was haughty and challenging.

"I don't know," Sarah put in jokingly before he could come up with some kind of apology, "I remember the silent auction at the Museum of Modern Art last winter, and 'slave driver' is putting it lightly."

The momentary tension dissipated immediately. Maggie laughed, a high sound which Sam expected to sound false but which was actually warm and honest. Beside her, the woman Sam had taken to be her assistant tittered nervously. She was waiflike and of average height, with dull brown eyes and hair, and seemed physically dwarfed by her boss, despite them being the same height.

"Sarah's been putting up with my Foundation's art auctions for the past three years, so she gets a pass," Maggie explained in a would-be conspiratorial voice. She suddenly snapped her fingers, and her assistant straightened up. "Marcie, can you go get us something to drink?"

"Champagne or wine?"

"Surprise me," Maggie purred, and when Marcie looked expectantly at Sam, Sam simply shook his head. He had yet to figure out if his alcohol tolerance was the same in this body, and he didn't intend to start today.

As Marcie hurried off, Maggie considered Sam. The action was more judgemental than the way Sarah had done it moments ago, but when she spoke her tone remained polite.

"Sarah's the best buyer I've ever had. Everything you see here –" she gestured to the paintings on the walls and several sculptures, " – is entirely due to her excellent taste." Maggie lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I prefer Renaissance art myself, but Sarah just has talent with the more recent stuff."

"You're not that bad!" Sarah protested.

"Please, honey, I pay you to do this for me because anything after Dali reminds me of cartoon drivel," Maggie made a dismissive motion as Marcie returned with two glasses of sparkling white wine, which Maggie and Sarah both took gingerly. "You sure we can't get you anything?"

"She's not actually here for the actual auction," Sarah said delicately as Maggie raised her glass to her lips. "This is Jane. Derek sent her over."

Maggie's entire demeanor shifted instantly, and she lowered the glass with a pleased smile. "He managed to find someone after all? That's great! I thought we were going to be so short-staffed that I'd have to start serving people."

Sarah and Marcie both rolled their eyes at that comment, but Sam could tell it was all in fun while he smiled hesitantly.
Maggie's friendly expression suddenly disappeared and an expression of annoyance over took it. "Oh, no, they did not!" she hissed, practically shoving her glass into Marcie's hands and stalking away, beeline for two men with cameras.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a press-free event?" Sarah asked Marcie.

"I bet they just heard that Don's in town for the divorce proceedings," Marcie sighed, rubbing her temple with her free hand.

Sarah made a noise of sympathy. "I don't know how she does it."

"She pawns it all off on me," Marcie grinned. She winked at Sam and raised Maggie's untouched wine to her lips. "Something tells me I'm gonna need this…better not let it go to waste."

"Better not, that stuff was expensive," Sarah joked as Marcie downed the stuff in one gulp.

There was a moment where time seemed to stop, and then suddenly Sam saw Marcie's eyes widen. The glass fell to the floor, smoking and giving off a sharp smell. Marcie doubled over, clutching at her throat and making retching noises. Sarah gave a cry and jumped back, while Sam dove forward to catch Marcie before she hit the ground, getting a glob of blood spat in his face for his trouble. Smoke emanated from her throat as well, and her eyes were wide in pain and confusion.

"Call an ambulance!" Sam shouted, pleased to note that Sarah was already hauling her phone out. There were shouts of surprise and dismay all around as guests realized that something was going on.

As Sam tried to calm Marcie down and figure out how to help her, he caught sight of the twisted glass. It looked like someone had filled it with some kind of acid, because it was still smoking and the cup part was twisting in on itself. He could only imagine what Marcie's insides were looking like right now –

Something glinted at the base of the warped flute, and it took him a second to realize what he was seeing before he dove forward. He wrapped his fingers around the object, wincing as acid residue burned at his fingertips.

It was a coin, ancient, and exactly like the cursed ones he had seen used by the brother and sister witches that had summoned the demon Samhain the year before. It wasn't inside a hex bag, but it was clue enough to what was happening that Sam had to move quickly.

Behind him, Sarah was frantically giving directions to whoever was on the other end of line. Maggie had reappeared and she was immediately on her knees, her features twisted into disbelief and worry. "Marcie! Honey, can you hear me?"

Everyone was so focused on the twitching form of the personal assistant that they didn't see Sam set the coin on the ground and begin to grind it beneath his heel. It wouldn't have worked for a modern coin, but the oxidized silver of the ancient coin was weak enough that he soon felt it crumble. Marcie gave a final shuddering heave and went still.

"Is she okay?" he demanded, already reaching for her pulse, which was weak; by some miracle, she was still breathing.

"I don't know – what's happening?!" Maggie cried, tears smudging her mascara.

"They'll be here in five minutes!" Sarah was saying, and then she was moving around trying to get
the guests to move away from Marcie's prone form. There were several bright flashes, and Sam heard her curse at the press, "Get the hell out of here! Don't you people have morals?"

Her voice retreated to the back of Sam's mind as he stared down at his fingers, stained from the blood on the coin. It was probably a binding agent to strengthen the curse.

Mildly, he brought it up to his nose and sniffed, tensing when the underlying scent of sulphur made its way up his nasal cavity and into his lungs.

Demon blood.

It looked as though their lead had panned out; Nicki's mysterious supplier had to have some kind of affiliation with the gallery.

"Is there anyone who would want to hurt Marcie? Or you?" Sam asked as paramedics finally showed up.

"How should I know?" Maggie demanded, obviously distraught. A moment later, she stared at Sam with wide eyes. "You think someone did this on purpose?"

"I doubt someone accidentally laces a wine flute with acid," Sam pointed out.

To his surprise, instead of shock and fear at the suggestion, a knowing look flickered in Maggie's face. It was so brief that only someone trained to notice detail, like Sam, would have noticed, before her concern returned in full.

"I'm going to the hospital," Maggie said firmly, already starting after the paramedics.

"I'll stay here and hold down the fort," Sarah was saying as Maggie and Sam stood up.

"Thanks," Maggie said, reaching for Sarah's hand and squeezing it lightly. "You're a lifesaver."

"Let me know how she's doing!" Sarah called after her, and then turned to Sam with a tense expression. "My God…"

'I don't think God had anything to do with it,' Sam thought, but wisely kept it to himself as he tried to parse everything he had seen in the past hour.

"Poor Marcie," Sarah sighed as people began to mull about again, chattering excitedly over the last few minutes events. There was a hard, thoughtful look in her eyes. "Who would do something like that?"

"Good question," Sam murmured, watching as Maggie disappeared.

If they didn't arrive at Yong's apartment and get this stupid summoning ritual over with soon, Dean was going to shoot the guy.

It turned out that the goofy-looking professor was a fiend for questions, which he asked with the rapid-fire curiosity of a school child as they drove to his apartment in a crappy Honda Civic. When Cas had finally given in to Dean's suggestion to summon Bari, he had insinuated that a more private place would be advisable. The professor had immediately volunteered his apartment.
Right now, the air around Yong seemed to vibrate with nervous excitement as he posed every vapid, angel-fanboy question he could think of. The guy was putting even Sam's nerdiness to shame.

It had only been ten minutes but Dean already wanted to haul out his own stupidly long hair.

Even worse than the questions were the awed looks Yong was shooting at Cas. It happened so often that Dean was surprised the guy hadn't crashed the car yet. He looked at Cas like he was the number 42, which was ten times more disturbing than the way Sam had looked at Cas when they first met. Like he was about to go down on his knees in front of him.

Which was a really, really disturbing image and he hoped he never thought about it again.

The absolute kicker, though, was that Cas didn't even seem to notice the epic wretchedness that was Yong popping a nerd boner. He answered all of the questions with a patience he had never shown with the Winchesters. And okay, granted, Dean had always maintained that he didn't want to know anything about angels beyond how to avoid them and how to kill them, but back when Sam was still the proper little angel-lover, he'd have given anything to know some of the stuff Cas was explaining. Being the 'Boy with the Demon Blood', however, had completely alienated him from ever again asking Cas questions.

'And now bow-tie-boy is lucking out,' Dean thought sourly, glaring at the two men sitting up front. He'd been relegated to the backseat because of some stupid logic having to do with his diminished height, which he really didn't appreciate, because the last few times he had been sitting in a car's backseat he had been dying from blood loss or had just been arrested. There was just something fundamentally wrong about him being in the back while Cas was riding shotgun.

"You could clear up so many academic questions – and not just in the field of classics, but in science as well," Yong was saying excitedly. "The things you must have seen…you have a unique perspective –"

"I really doubt they're going to accept 'because I lived it' as actual evidence of anything besides Cas needing to be locked in an institution somewhere," Dean spoke up sourly, annoyed to find that his voice had taken on a rather catty tone.

Christ, he needed to be out of this body sooner rather than later.

Yong looked momentarily taken aback, but then shook his head. There was a hopeful look in his eyes. "Maybe…maybe if he offered proof about things, the locations of forgotten civilizations – what Jesus of Nazareth was actually like –?"

"The knowledge is irrelevant to our mission, as well as my current purpose," Cas deflected disinterestedly.

"Which is?" Yong wanted to know.

Cas was the one to meet Dean's gaze in the rear-view mirror this time. "To ensure my charge doesn't do anything foolish like getting sent back to Hell."

The words 'my charge' sent something that was equal parts resentment and equal parts warmth cursing through his veins, and Dean had to remind himself to glare at Cas. "That'd work a lot better if you still had your wings, don't you think?"

Cas's response was cut off by Yong's breathless exclamation, "You had actual wings?"

Dean rolled his eyes. Honestly, the guy was turning out to be like a male Becky Rosen.
"Yes, but not in the sense that humans depict them," Cas answered after a moment's thought. "They are metaphysical manifestations of our grace and as such do not exist on this plane."

"Sure, Cas, give away all the trade secrets," Dean deadpanned.

Cas turned in his seat to stare at Dean. "You are always suggesting I be more personable. Am I doing it wrong?"

"Oh, no, bang up job," Dean replied sarcastically. "Just make sure he buys you dinner before you go all the way, okay?"

Cas's expression was utterly perplexed. "Go all the way where? We just had lunch not an hour ago."

And Dean really couldn't help the way his mouth quirked upward at that, because it was just such a Cas thing to say. It also helped that Yong's eyes, framed in the rear-view mirror, flashed with embarrassment and he quickly turned his attention back to the road. A sense of vindication flared within Dean for a moment, before he clued into just how many changes his mood had gone through within the past five minutes.

'Holy shit, I need a hit of testosterone before I completely cross over,' he thought with mounting horror.

He spent the remainder of the drive trying to remember when the next Stallone movie was coming out and making a mental note that they were going to a fucking steakhouse for dinner.

Yong's apartment was decently sized, and just as messy and ramshackle as his desk space at the university. Within minutes, Dean could see exactly why he and Bobby were colleagues, the way ancient books and odd relics cluttered up the space.

Something in him clenched up, because he hadn't spoken with Bobby in days – hadn't seen him in weeks. The only reassurance that the old hunter was alright was based on the word of a supposedly trusted dick angel that he'd never met.

'Can't think of that right now,' Dean told himself as he and Cas cleared as large a space as possible while Yong hovered around anxiously, getting in the way as he proposed different ways to make the space more protected or rushing around to get the materials that Cas said he needed. It was a measure of how much of a life the guy didn't have that he actually had every spell component needed.

They laid out a makeshift altar along the kitchen table, placing various bowls and containers in a specific pattern and filling them with offerings of fruit and wine. While Yong burned incense and Dean lit the candles, Cas took a paring knife and slit open the palm of his immobilized arm, using the blood to paint symbols in what looked like Korean across the top of the table.

"I could have done that, you know," Dean muttered as Cas grasped a napkin to stem the flow of blood.

"We've already discussed why that's a bad idea," Cas returned. "Now be quiet, I have to concentrate."

Dean's annoyed protest was cut off as the ex-angel began to chant something in the same, fluid language he had spoken with Yong in earlier. He made yet another mental note to complain that Cas was inheriting some of Sam's bitch tendencies, and tightened his grip on the wooden stake he had found in one of Yong's closets.

Just because they were asking this thing for information, didn't mean that he was stupid.
On the final syllable, the entire building shook, and then every candle in the apartment suddenly let off spurts of flame like they had morphed into fireworks.

Dean blinked when the lightshow stopped, realizing a moment later that they were no longer alone.

Bari, or whatever her name was, had taken the form of a pretty Korean woman of average height and with dark eyes that dominated her entire face. Eyes that were glaring out at them with such rage that Dean was surprised she didn't go for their throats right away.

Cas said something in Korean, and then bowed his head and finished in English, "Your presence is appreciated."

"That particular summoning hasn't been spoken in more than two thousand years. No one living should know of it," the goddess said, also in English. Her tone accusing as she stared Cas down. "You are no mere mortal, are you?"

"Not until recently," Cas replied, "but that has nothing to do with why we wish to speak to you."

"And you think three day old apples and melons are enough to warrant an audience with me?" she sniffed. "I have souls to guide and not enough time to deal with the likes of you."

"Then let's make this quick," Dean spoke up. He jerked his thumb in Yong's direction. "Did you give his old man a ritual to get into Hell?"

"How should I know?" she asked in annoyance.

"My father was named Hwan-Seung Yong," the professor spoke up, his wide in disbelief. For someone who supposedly knew so much about hunting, Dean was surprised at how new to the more practical side of things Yong was. Still, he was taking it rather well. "He was...he was a hunter."

"Hwan-Seung Yong," the goddess murmured, her eyes suddenly softening. "Yes, I knew him."

Yong looked hopeful.

"Hwan-Seung did contact me regarding a route to the Afterlife," Bari went on quietly, "but only when all other options exhausted themselves. When it turned out his wife's Savior God would not come through."

This was said with scorn, and the stare she leveled at Cas was unfriendly and judgemental in a way that made Dean sure she suspected what his friend had been.

"So, you helped him open a gate to Hell?" Dean prompted.

"I did no such thing," she replied coldly. "I merely showed him the way. The choice to travel that path was left to him. I knew what awaited him if he tried, and I attempted to warn him against the folly, but he would not listen."

"Then why give him a way in in the first place?" Dean wanted to know.

"Because I had no choice. I had a debt to repay, and that was what he asked for in return. A way to enter the Beyond to find his wife...that that path brought him to Hell..."

She trailed off, looking genuinely upset for something so inhuman.

Yong's voice was trembling, probably from disbelief over the entire ordeal. "What debt?"
Bari’s expression softened as she looked at him. "Your father saved my life. The life of an immortal is precious, and I did not know how else to repay him but to promise him a favor. That was what he chose."

"So you did help him, then. Does that mean you can open the portal for us?" Dean wanted to know.

"I can. But I will not."

"What do you mean? Why not?" Dean demanded.

"Exactly as I say," Bari retorted. "Hwang-Seung's fate is already on my conscience, I will not condemn his son, or any other mortal, to the same one. Not before their time."

"Will you at least grant us your protection?" Cas asked. "The ritual you left suggests we require the 'protection of death'. You are considered an intermediary of Death, I would expect that would fulfil the requirements?"

"It would, but as I said, I will not," Bari answered. "Find some other being who will provide that to you, if you are so desperate to enter damnation. My work in this business is done." She glowered at all of them. "Do not summon me again."

Every candle in the apartment went out, leaving them in the semi-darkness of the afternoon.

"I suppose we should be lucky she wasn't hungry," Dean commented after a while.

"That was a terrible plan," Cas told him after a pause.

"Yeah, well, next one's yours," Dean shot back grouchily.

"Sarah?" Dean repeated incredulously as he leaned back on his motel bed, can of beer in hand while he stared up at his brother.

"Yeah."

"New Paltz auction house 'Sarah'?"

"Yes."

"Like, helped us hunt down Little-Orphan-Sweeny-Todd 'Sarah'?"

"Yes, Dean!"

"Okay, okay, relax, just making sure," Dean snorted, took a sip of beer, and then leered. "So, she still hot?" Sam made a face, and Dean whistled. "Hotter?"

"That's…not the point."

"The fact that you believe that is grounds for another check in the 'Sam was always a girl' column. Just so you know."

Sam rolled his eyes, not impressed. Dean had been testy since returning to the motel, probably because their latest attempt at supernatural help in saving Adam had been turned down by 'another
bitchy pagan goddess'. Sam also suspected that Dean's initial dislike of Yong might have something
to do with it, if his contemptuous snort when Sam had asked Castiel how he had managed with the
professor was anything to go by.

'Looks like Cas made a friend and Dean's jealous,' Sam thought, eyeing Castiel, who was now
hunched over Sam's laptop across the room, trying to look up the coin Sam had described to him
from memory.

The ex-angel had a perplexed look on his face, like trying to navigate Google was as difficult as
deciphering the Sumerian language. Granted, he probably spoke Sumerian, so maybe browsing the
Net was a bit more difficult for him. Either way, Sam was going to take pity on the former angel in a
few minutes and suggest a break.

For now, though, he refocused on his discussion with Dean. "Can we get back to the whole witch
situation? A woman was attacked today."

"Yeah, I know. And it sucks, but it means we're on the right track. We've found ourselves a witch,"
Dean said in satisfaction. "And now that we know the ritual Yong gave us is the real deal, we're that
much closer to getting Adam."

Which Sam couldn't really argue and it did make him feel a little better. But there was still one thing
bothering. "I'm just…worried that maybe it's Sarah."

Dean stared, nonplussed. "Why would it be Sarah?"

"Because we don't randomly meet up with people from cases in the middle of another case. Not
unless they're involved," Sam pointed out. "Remember Meg? And Gordon or Bela?"

"They were trying to kill us," Dean returned, and then after a thought, "Well, Gordon was trying to
kill you."

"The point still stands."

"And I think you're being paranoid. We knew all those people were weird when we first met them."

"Meg was pretty normal the first time I met her."

"Yeah, well, speak for yourself. I knew she was trouble right away. No one ignores the Dean
Winchester charm unless they're battin' for the other team or possessed by a demon."

"That why you kept trying to get me to sleep with her?" Sam deadpanned.

Dean shrugged. "Evil sex is better than no sex – and you had one hell of a dry spell going on." A
look of dawning comprehension came over his face. "Holy shit."

"What?" Sam demanded.

"I haven't had sex in like a month," Dean said, eyes wide as though he was just become aware of the
end of the world. Again.

Sam was not impressed. "Seriously? That's what you're focussing on now?"

"It all makes sense," Dean went on, like someone solving one of the world greatest problems. "That's
why I feel like ripping my skin off lately."

"Aw, come on, Dean, TMI!"
"Guess this body just feels it differently and that's why I didn't notice," Dean continued. He suddenly looked at Sam. "And you! Sammy, it's been forever for you, how are you not spontaneously combusting right now?"

"I can't talk to you when you're like this," Sam groaned.

"According to this Google person, the coin Sam saw was a Sicilian **aquile**," Castiel announced, breaking up their little discussion. "They were used as currency as far back as the fifteenth century."

"Meaning we're not dealing with the garden variety witch," Dean groaned. "Great."

They spent the remainder of the afternoon in the motel. While Dean did some research on Marcie Ross and Maggie Stark and Castiel fell into an exhausted, cautious sleep, Sam called Sarah again under the pretense of having been given her number by whoever Derek was.

"I'm just calling to see how everything's going," he said, pacing absently back and forth in the room. "Today was really weird, and I wanted to see if you were okay."

"Oh – no, I'm fine," she assured him over the phone. "Trust me when I say it's not the freakiest thing I've ever seen." Sam couldn't help smile at that. "I should be asking about you – I mean, you weren't even supposed to be there today, right? Are you okay?"

"Also not the freakiest thing I've ever seen," Sam said, ignoring how Dean was glancing up from his research and giving him a thumbs-up. He flipped him the finger. "And Marcie's okay?"

"Maggie called to say she was out of surgery an hour ago, but that's the last I heard."

"Right…and how's Maggie?"

"Completely shook up."

"Understandable," Sam said, turning his back on Dean, who was making obnoxious kissing faces at him. "Man, who do you think would have done that to Marcie? Or why? Does Maggie have any enemies?"

"Not really, unless you count her soon-to-be-ex-husband," Sarah said. There was a sudden pause, like white noise, and then she said, "Listen, Jane, that's my other line. It might be Maggie, so I'll talk to you later. I'll be at the gallery tonight if you need to reach me."

"Okay. Great," Sam cleared his throat. "Bye."

She hung up, and Sam let out a sigh. Talking with Sarah again after so long felt strange, not least of all because she had no idea who he was.

When he turned back again, Dean was watching him with a filthy smirk.

"Shut up, jerk. I just got a lead we might want to check out," he said, cutting off the teasing he knew Dean was itching to break out. "Maggie's getting divorced – and at the party Marcie mentioned something about him being in town this week."

"The websites just say temporary separation, not divorce," Dean pointed out. "Isn't that what people say when they intend to get back together?"

"I guess it's being kept quiet," Sam shrugged. "Either way, it makes a case for the ex-husband being the witch. Give me a sec and I'll find out where he's staying." He reached for his laptop, which Dean
made a half-hearted grab for. A split-second later, Sam saw why. "Oh, come on!"

Castiel jerked awake, making a surprised and annoyed sound at the fact his tenuous sleep had been interrupted by Sam's dismayed cry; meanwhile, Sam glared down at the unfortunately familiar homepage for Busty Asian Beauties Dot Com flashing up at him.

Dean just grinned. "What?"

"You're supposed to be researching, not…damn it Dean, we're sitting in the same room as an angel, don't you have any scruples?"

"Ex-angel," Dean reminded him shamelessly. "Besides, it's for everyone's own good. I need to get laid soon or I'm going to have a meltdown. This is…research."

"Why wasn't I born an only child?" Sam grumbled to himself as he closed down the porn site and opened up his anti-virus.

"Because Heaven ordained that you and Dean were meant to be born siblings," Castiel put in, earning a laugh from Dean and an annoyed grunt from Sam.

It wasn't hard to track down where Maggie's husband Donald was staying, and agreeing that Castiel wasn't up to active duty yet in case it turned out that Stark was their witch, Sam and Dean made the short drive across town to the Plaza Hotel.

The receptionist was accommodating enough when they flashed their fake NYPD badges and directed them to one of the larger suites on the eleventh floor.

When Sam knocked, the door to Mr. Stark's suite opened and a blond, blue eyed young woman, barely legal by the looks of it, dressed in a sharp looking pantsuit answered the door. "Yes?"

"I'm Detective Millington, this is Detective de Buhr," Dean said as he hand Sam flashed their badges. "We're with the New York City Police Department. Is Donald Stark here, miss?"

"Uh, one second," she said, eyes wide, and then called over her shoulder. "Don?"

Dean looked away from her, and then waggled his eyes meaningfully at Sam who shot him a disgusted look. Clearly Dean had porn on the brain again.

A man in his late forties appeared from one of the suites, tucking a cellphone into his pocket as he approached the door. He was tall and sharp featured, dressed just as smartly as the woman, like he was headed to a business meeting or something.

"Can I help you ladies?" Stark asked, his eyes performing the familiar appraising flick up and down.

"We're with the New York City Police Department," Sam said, flashing the badge again. "We have a few questions we need to ask you."

Stark's face was a picture of blank confusion. "Concerning what?"

"Are you aware there was an incident at your wife's charity auction this afternoon at twelve-thirty-five?" Sam asked. "A Marcie Ross was poisoned."

The woman's eyes widened, while Stark winced sympathetically. "Yes, I saw on the news." He turned to the girl. "Anne, I'm going to talk to these ladies for a moment. Would you do me a favor and grab me some of those onion blossom things from the restaurant? Been craving those things
"since I got here."

"Oh, of course," she beamed.

"And maybe a coconut muffin too?" he asked, hopeful like.

"Sure thing."

"Grab one for yourself, while you're at it. And hurry on back – you know how things fall apart without you," he told her earnestly. She giggled and left, pushing past Sam and Dean.

Dean sent Sam another meaningful look, which Sam resolutely ignored.

"Best assistant I've had in years," Stark told the brothers in a would-be confidential tone, motioning for them to come in. As he closed the door, he added, "Can we do this quickly? I've got a business dinner with Trump in an hour."

"There's a woman lying in the ICU with severe third degree burns down her esophagus, Mr. Stark," Sam said quietly. "This will take as long as it takes."

Stark's entire demeanor shifted into one of seriousness. "Right. About Marcie...poor girl. No one deserves that." He looked between Sam and Dean, and his expression hardened. "Have you found out anything about how that happened?"

"The crime scene was empty, and the catering company can't explain how a glass of sparkling wine got replaced with acid," Dean said meaningfully.

"Ah," Stark said, pursing his lips. "And if the NYPD is involved, I assume you think there's a would-be-murderer out there."

"It's looking that way, yes."

"And you're coming to me because...?"

"We believe the intended target was your wife," Sam said, carefully watching Stark's reaction.

Either he was really good at faking it, or the mixture of worry and anger were genuine. "What? Why?"

"A witness at the crime scene said the beverage was initially meant for her, and that her assistant drank it by accident," Sam said. "Mr. Stark, have you ever heard of anyone using the name QueenBeeStark? Perhaps through email or...?"

Stark shook his head. "Honestly, no. Although, Maggie could have changed her email address. She's changed a lot of things in the past year...and that sort of sounds like something she'd come up with."

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, before Sam continued, "Do you know of any enemies that your wife might have?"

"Enemies? No – well, other than me, at the moment," Stark offered a sheepish grin. "I don't know if you've heard, but we're in the midst of a rather...tense period." Dean raised an eyebrow, and Stark suddenly sobered again. "But I would never hurt Maggie. I love her. This separation...it's her idea, but I'm going through with it to make her happy. That's all I want."

"Sure," Dean said, not believing it.
"We are just going through a tough time," Stark maintained firmly. "It's temporary. Sometimes, you know, you grow apart. It's no one's fault."

"And how would you describe the, uh – the issues, between you and your wife?" Sam prompted.

"It's just one of those marital misunderstandings, you know," Stark looked exceedingly uncomfortable now.

"No, I'm sorry, I don't," Sam said, although he had a feeling he understood all-to-well.

Stark's discomfort increased. "It's one of those vague, hard-to-define passages."

Dean was practically grinning. "She caught you cheating, huh?" At Stark's defeated expression, he continued, "I couldn't help but notice, uh, things are kind of cordial between you and your assistant. Pretty good with the ladies there, Mr. Stark? It's a blessing and a curse, isn't it?"

"Ladies…I'm a people person," Stark defended himself, trying to keep his voice friendly despite obvious disquiet, "and I admire dynamic, confident women."

"Define 'admire'," Sam deadpanned.

"Okay, look – " Stark made a dismissive gesture. "It's true, I had a recent…little thing with a business associate, but that's all it was."

"A 'thing'," Dean repeated.

Stark flinched. "Yeah."

"Like a – like a shoe, or a golf club," Sam suggested.

"Right, like a waffle iron," Dean added.

"Yeah ."

Dean snorted. "Yeah – no, see, Don, uh, wives generally think of an affair as something more than a thing."

"Yes, and when Maggie found out about it, she needed some time off, temporarily," Stark stated stiffly, and then peered at them both again. "I'm sorry, but what does all of this have to do with what happened to Marcie Ross?"

"It's standard procedure, Mr. Stark. Everyone we've spoken to about Marcie said she didn't have any enemies, and if our suspicions about your wife being the target of the attack are true, the next course of action is to talk to anyone who might have cause to harm her – or who might have in the past."

"So I cheated on my wife and now you think I'm trying to kill her?" Don raised an eyebrow.

"Happens every day," Dean shrugged.

Stark's jaw clenched, and he stood up. "I think we're done here. If there's anything else you ladies would like to insinuate, have your department contact my lawyer. For now I think you should leave."

"Will do, sir," Dean said. "Just, uh, don't head back to Indiana any time soon."

Stark followed them to door, like he was seconds away from pushing them out himself. Dean jerked the door open and stopped dead, causing Sam to bump into him "What are you…?"
He went silent when he realized what had stopped his brother.

Anne was lying on the hotel carpet in a crumpled heap, blood congealed down her mouth and the front of her clothing, her eyes frozen wide in an expression of anguish and terror. By her feet, the Styrofoam container of food was also covered in blood, which spewed from the cupcake beside it.

"What is it?" Stark asked, pushing past Sam and Dean and stopping in his tracks. "Anne."

Dean was on his knees checking her vitals, barking out to Stark to call an ambulance. Trying to ignore the fact that this was the second Sam had been in this situation today, he reached down and gingerly picked up the cupcake. Whatever was spewing the blood from within looked eerily like a miniature human heart, and as he peeled away the soggy muffin paper he saw that there was a coin stuck to the bottom of the dessert.

"She's gone," Dean said heavily when Sam met his gaze, while Don looked completely distraught. "Whoever's doing this, they're going after people close to the Starks. Which means…"

It felt like the bottom had dropped out of Sam's stomach for a moment.

"Sarah!" he breathed.

They left Donald Stark with the assurance that their colleagues at the NYPD would take his statement and skipped out of the hotel before any of the real authorities could show up. There wasn't much else they could do, not with Sam looking like he might suddenly pull a runner.

As it was, he kept flipping his phone open and trying to call Sarah, only to be dissuaded when there was no one to take the call. The sixth time he did this as they got into the Charger, he glanced at Dean worriedly, "I keep getting her answering machine."

Dean tried to take the lighthearted approach to the situation, if anything to get his brother calmed down. "Should I be more amused by the fact that she didn't change her cell number in the past five years, or that after all that time you actually remember it off by heart?"

"Not funny, Dean," Sam scowled. "She could be hurt. Or dead, for all we know."

"She's probably fine," Dean said. "Didn't you tell me she's just a buyer? That doesn't necessarily mean that she and Maggie are close."

"They looked pretty friendly this morning," Sam grumbled. He groaned, running a hand through his hair in frustration, and then voiced something that had bothered him since running into her. "What's she even doing here? I mean, she sounded really happy with what she was doing in New Paltz –"

"Sam, it's been almost five years," Dean pointed out. "You really expect her to just freeze in time after meeting you? I mean, I know you're charming and all, but Sarah didn't strike me as the pining type."

"That's not – she's not – look, it's just messed up that she's here while we're trying to hunt out some sadistic demon worshipping witch," Sam finally bit out.

Dean nodded in silence, eying his brother knowingly. He hadn't seen Sam so upset about a girl since they had found out that chick he liked in San Francisco was a werewolf. When Sam tried to reach
Sarah asked two more times, he eventually asked, "You gonna tell her?"

"Tell her what?"

"That you're you."

The statement encompassed quite a few things, but Sam still looked aghast. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"It's called being honest. I hear it's good for relationships."

"Ha-ha, like you would even know," Sam retorted. "And there's no relationship."

"I dunno, man, you said it yourself," Dean reminded him. "We never just randomly meet up with people we haven't seen in years, unless there's something going on. Maybe someone out in the universe is telling you to knock off the emo-crap and relax."

"Maybe you haven't noticed, Dean, but we're kind of in the middle of something," Sam retorted. "And in case spending all our time trying to jailbreak Hell isn't on your list of priorities, maybe you should check out the nearest mirror again. Unless you're warming up to your new cup size."

Dean whistled, actually sparing his feminine face a passing glance in the rear-view mirror. "Looks like I'm not the only one that needs to get laid."

Sam made a face and bit back a frustrated groan.

"Cas called while you were pretending to be a teenaged girl," Dean went on. "He says the coin we found by Anne is Romanian Cyrillic, and that it was only used in the mid-fifteenth to the nineteenth century. So, either our witch is a coin collector or --"

"Or there's more than one that we're dealing with," Sam finished. When they had dealt with witches that cursed coins in the past, they tended to use coins from a specific time period; it was almost like a calling card.

"And guess what else?"

"What?"

"Cas also found out that the Starks originally came to the States ten years ago. Guess where from?"

"You're kidding," Sam sat back, trying to put together his thoughts. A moment later, he frowned at Dean. "Cas found all that himself?"

"Apparently 'tedium endured due to a handicap encourages the acquisition of other skills',' Dean said, lowering his voice into a mocking imitation of Cas's. It didn't sound remotely similar, not least of all because Dean's current voice was too high. He went back to his normal tone. "Dude should just learn to jerk off when he's bored."

Sam bitchfaced. "Gross, Dean."

They parked outside the building and took the stairs up, the elevator obviously being too slow for Sam's knight in shining armour routine. The doors to the gallery were locked, but Dean made quick work of them, before following his brother in as back-up.

They were both armed, on the off-chance they were about to come face to face with a witch. Despite what he had said to Sam about the matter, Dean fervently hoped for his brother's sake that Sarah
wasn't actually their mark.

The lights were mostly out in the place, casting sinister shadows on paintings that Dean didn't even have to really look at to categorize as highly overpriced trash. There was one light across the open concept space, leading into some kind of alcove or other room.

Dean nodded at Sam and prepared to cover his brother, who slowly hid his gun and moved forward.

"Sarah?" he called, the female voice echoing with the room's acoustics. "You here? It's Jane. From this afternoon?"

There was a sound of movement from the alcove in the back, and then someone came out. Dean squinted slightly, recognizing the familiar face –

'Damn, she did get hotter,' he thought idly, in the part of his brain that wasn't focussed on the job, 'Go, Sammy.'

"Jane?" Sarah asked, sounding confused but pleased. "What are you doing here?"

"I came by to check on you," Sam said in the soothing voice he used to deal with spooked witnesses in order to gain their trust. "You said on the phone…?"

"Oh, right – sorry, slipped my mind," she shook her head, and her gaze landed on Dean. "Who's this?"

"My sister Erica," Sam told her. "I didn't want to walk here alone at night."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Sarah said, smiling. "I hate having to come by at night, there're all these psychos around. It's why I always…lock…up." Her smile faded, and she was suddenly staring at Sam and Dean in apprehension. "How did you get in here?"

"Uh," Sam shot Dean a panicked look.

"Well –" Dean began, but stopped when Sarah's eyes suddenly went wide at something over Sam's shoulder. He whirled around instantly, a second sooner than his brother, only having time to catch sight of a gorgeous woman with blazing angry eyes stride through the door, before he found himself thrown backward.

"I take it that's Maggie, huh?" he grunted as he tried to get up. Sam raised his gun and took aim at the woman.

"No, don't!" Sarah cried, knocking the hand that held the gun; Sam's shot went wide.

"Look – Sarah, you don't understand – !" Sam was grunting, trying to shove her off without hurting her while Maggie sent Dean careening across the polished floor. "She's a witch –"

Maggie flicked her wrist, and Dean was once again flying across the room. He swore a he collided with Sam, the two of them went headlong into another horribly solid wall.

When he recovered his wits and looked up, he saw Sarah standing over them, now holding Sam's gun.

"Tell me something I don't know," Sarah panted, and the sound of the safety of the gun being unclicked echoed in the empty gallery. "Like who the hell you two are."
To say that Sam was stunned was saying the absolute least.

For a moment as he considered the familiar woman standing in front of him, wielding his own gun with an ease he would never have credited her with. He flashed back to how she had looked five years before: face pale, braided hair astray and eyes wide in terror as she clung to him while he shielded her from that homicidal little girl's spirit.

The memory was gone a second later, replaced with dismay at the realization that he had been right about Sarah being involved in the case. She seemed too comfortable with what Maggie was for this to be a recent discovery, either.

His brain sputtered back online and he thought determinedly of a way to get out of this sudden turn of events, trying not to wince at every scenario which led him to seriously injuring the woman. Even if she was working with the witch – or God forbid was the supplier of demon blood somehow – he didn't want to hurt her.

"Who are you?" Sarah repeated, looking from Sam to Dean and back again.

"Not the ones you should be pointed the gun at, that's for damn sure," Dean spat, eyes flashing angrily. Apparently, Sam wasn't the only one disillusioned with the way things had turned out.

Sarah was cut off by Maggie's annoyed snort as the witch stepped forward, waving her hand with intent. Sam and Dean found themselves hauled upward and pushed tightly against the nearest wall, their feet dangling about a foot off the ground. The hard edge of a portrait dug into Sam's back, and there was an uncomfortable pressure on his windpipe.

"You're already skating on thin ice, missy," Maggie sneered at Dean, "You're lucky I don't have you coughing up your lungs yet. I hate nosy little hunters like you."

"Hunters?" Sarah queried, her grip on the gun loosening somewhat. She eyed Maggie beseechingly. "That's what they are?" She glanced to them and back. "That means they couldn't have been the ones that did that to Marcie."

"Not necessarily," Maggie scowled, showing no sign of releasing them. Instead, she increased whatever magical force was keeping them immobilized. "They're sneaky little toads..."

"Hey, we had nothing to do with that," Sam panted out in protest.

"You're wasting your breath," Dean bit out at him, glaring at Sarah. "And you – I thought you were supposed to be cool."

"Why would you think that?" Sarah wanted to know. "I've never met you before in my life."

"Sam told us," Sam said, deciding on a gamble that might at least put her off her guard. Dean made a pissed-off noise beside him, but Sam ignored him. His decision seemed to be the right one, at any rate, because Sarah started to lower the gun.

"Sam?" she repeated, surprise lacing her words. "Not Sam Winchester? You know him?"

"Intimately," Sam said, which wasn't a lie, really. There was a minute narrowing of her eyes and a look like suspicion, and he thought through what that had sounded like and winced, before
amending, "We're cousins."

He winced again, because that didn't sound much better.

"They're lying," Maggie interjected conversationally.

"He told you about me?" Sarah wanted to know, lingering suspicion in the question.

"He said you helped him and his brother with a haunted painting a few years ago, up in New Paltz," Sam mumbled with effort, the pressure keeping him pinned to the wall distracting him slightly from watching her features. "He said you took it real well." He flinched as another burst of invisible power pressed him more tightly to the wall, "Then again, if you're hanging out with witches, maybe he was wrong."

"Racist," Maggie muttered.

Sarah frowned at him and said, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know she cursed her ex-husband's secretary," Sam argued. "Anne? She choked to death on her own blood a few hours ago —"

He groaned as Maggie made a squeezing motion with her fist, and began to cut off his oxygen supply in earnest. Beside him, Dean made a startled croak which convinced Sam the witch had done the same thing to him as well.

Sarah was facing her friend. "Is that true?"

Maggie made a scoffing sound, but when Sarah raised an eyebrow at her, she then huffed in annoyance. "He started it."

"Maggie!"

Sam's vision was beginning to go spotty.

"You saw what he did to Marcie? It was payback!"

"It's people's lives! Besides, you said you didn't do that anymore."

"I said I didn't do it often," Maggie corrected, "and you weren't complaining last time. Remember? The Tanzanian warlock that cursed you when you outbid him on that Goya?"

"I was throwing up leeches, it wasn't like I could have said anything anyhow —"

"Uh, hello? Choking to death?" Dean gagged.

"Maggie, let them down. Please," Sarah sighed. "There's obviously more going on here than we know."

Maggie looked like she really wanted to ignore Sarah's words. A moment later, though, she adopted a falsely cheery expression and Sam felt the invisible hand on his throat disappear. He hauled in a painful gulp of air just seconds before he felt himself released from his invisible bonds and landed clumsily on his feet.

A second later he and Dean went flying across the room again.

"Was that really necessary?" Sarah was asking as Sam recovered himself, though she sounded kind
of amused. Beside him, Dean was rubbing at his throat and glaring at the two women with a look that promised violence as soon as he figured out how to do it without getting his ass kicked.

"Yes," Maggie was answering without a hint of remorse. She crossed her arms and focused her attention on Sam and Dean, looking expectant. "You've got about two minutes to explain yourselves before I change my mind." A dirty look at Sarah, and then, "Ask me if I'm kidding."

"She's not," Sarah assured them casually.

Sam raised an eyebrow, despite everything a little bit amused by the fact that an ex-auction house worker and a trophy-wife witch were actually playing the good-cop-bad-cop card on him and Dean. Sarah for her part didn't look as though she was working an angle, but seemed genuinely interested in hearing what he had to say. Still, he wasn't going to be taken off guard by her again. He'd done that once already today and it had landed him and Dean in this whole mess.

Then again, going about it the usual way wasn't going to cut it this time. He was going to have to play the cooperative hunter until he and Dean knew more of what was going on. Besides, if he managed the situation right, they might kill two birds with one stone, hunting down Nicki's demon blood supplier and getting a witch to create a spell for them to open a Hell gate.

"We're not going to try anything on Maggie," Sam assured slowly, ignoring Dean's 'speak-for-yourself' snort. "We just want to talk."

To Sam's surprise, Sarah sighed and expertly removed the magazines from the gun, tossing them in one direction and the gun in the opposite. Then she faced him, hand on her hip. "So talk."

"You're down by thirty seconds," Maggie put in.

"We've been trying to track down a witch for a while now – not to kill. We need some help," Sam explained earnestly. "Along the way, though, we got a bit sidetracked by a case. There's someone dealing in demon blood – they've already supplied it to at least one person that we know of. It caused a lot of trouble, so we followed the trail here to see if we could stop it."

Sarah addressed Maggie curiously. "Demon blood? That's actually a thing?"

"A really old thing," Maggie confirmed grudgingly. "Old and dangerous."

"We thought it was a witch or a demon doing it," Sam went on, surprised at the witch's candor. That was new.

"And you followed the trail to me, did you?" Maggie inquired frostily. "Or is this just one of those bang-up jobs you people do where you make the evidence fit whatever crazy conclusion you came up with?"

Dean couldn't suppress a snort. "You're lecturing us on morals? Am I the only one who sees the irony here?"

"Oh, you're about to see a lot more than irony, honey," Maggie threatened.

"Bring it –!"

"Look, all we had to go on was an IP address and a Hotmail username," Sam interrupted quickly, before Dean's mouth got them into more trouble, "and it led us to your gallery. And with what happened at the event this afternoon, and then to your husband's assistant, we –"
"You just jumped to the conclusion that it was me, right?" Maggie returned. "Why would I hurt my
own PA? Do you realize how hard it is to find a personal assistant these days without some kind of
childhood trauma? That was Don."

"Christ, married witches?" Dean groaned.

"Besides," Maggie continued, as though she hadn't heard him, "if the only lead you've got was an IP
address and a – a what was it? A username?"

"QueenBeeStark," Sam revealed grudgingly, because even he could recognize it wasn't a lot to go
on.

"Ugh, I wouldn't socialize with someone who used such a tacky, self-promoting name, let alone use
it myself," Maggie disdained, "I don't even use Hotmail, I have a corporate email account linked to
my charity."

"Right, yeah, that's convincing," Dean sneered, "because you being a witch makes me really want to
trust you."

"Face it – you came in here, guns blazing over something that could have been anyone and –"

"Found you, didn't we?"

"Enough, both of you," Sarah interrupted, just as Sam was about to do the same thing. She focussed
on Sam. "What is it you want?"

"Right now? To stop whatever's been dealing demon blood," Sam said. "It's involved in what
ehappened to Marcie, at least, because the coin we found beside her was covered in the stuff."

"Then whoever's doing it is both monumentally stupid and monumentally insane," Maggie said.
"There's a reason witches don't work with demon blood, not least of all because it's too volatile." She
smiled grimly. "It's sort of one of those 'bite the hand that feeds' kind of substances."

"We think the wine glass was meant for you," Sam said. "I asked you before if you have any
enemies, and you didn't answer."

"Are you serious? Now we're helping the witch?" Dean exploded, at the same time that Maggie
rolled her eyes and said, "Of course I have enemies – I spent the past eight hundred years screwing
with people's lives, why do you think I'm so involved with charity work now?"

"What, you think funding soup kitchens and feeding orphans is going to save your immortal soul?"
Dean deadpanned. He pretended to think, "Oh wait, you sold that already."

"It's insurance," Maggie sniffed.

"It's insane."

In the distance, there was a sound like a door banging open.

"Maggie?" someone called from the entrance hall, and everyone looked up as Don Stark strode into
the room. He seemed to falter for a moment, taking in the four people gathered, and then recognition
set in when his gaze fell on Sam and Dean. "You two!"

Once again, Sam and Dean were thrown backwards, skidding painfully across the floor as Don
waved violently with one hand.
"I'm gonna start wearing fucking body armour," Dean mumbled furiously

"Stay the hell away from my wife!" Don snarled, stalking forward, hand still raised. He glanced aside, and in a normal voice, "Hi Sarah."

"Don," Sarah said in a strained voice.

"Did you get that email I sent you about the terracotta – ow!"

Maggie had stalked over and was smacking him upside the head. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to – ow! – save your – stop that! – life! They're hunters –"

"As usual, you're a decade late and a dollar short," Maggie growled, trying to slap him again even as he moved away. "I'm handling it. I don't need you riding in here in your shiny corvette every time I break a nail. I've been telling you that for eight hundred years!"

"Again with the women's lib," Don rolled his eyes. "You expect me to just sit by while a bunch of hunters go after my wife?"

"Dude, she just killed your assistant," Dean pointed out.

"Shut up, you," Maggie said, reaching out and sending Dean face-first into a painting.

"No, Maggie, that's a fair point," Don drawled. "Another case where you jumped the gun without finding out the whole story."

"The whole story? You tried to kill my PA – and you cheated on me! Humiliated me!"

"That was a long time ago," Don protested.

Sam saw the anger burgeoning on the faces of both witches, and realized they were minutes away from a meltdown that might end up killing everyone in the room. It was clearly time to switch tactics.

"Look, what Don did…we're not saying it's right, but when a relationship cracks, usually both parties have a hand in it," Sam attempted, looking at Sarah for support, but she was shaking her head viciously.

"You're defending him?" Maggie demanded, and then reached out to Sam. He crumpled forward, pain like fire in his veins lacing through him.

"Whoa! Okay, okay!" Dean exclaimed, pulling himself up again. He glared at Sam, a silent 'what the hell are you doing?' in the expression. "Okay, look – n-nobody can defend Don. Right? Uh, totally. But, uh, we get that you feel betrayed…because you were."

"Don't suck up to her," Don said, throwing out an arm and sending Dean up to hit the ceiling and then drop. Sam winced, sure that he heard something crack.

"Okay, okay, look –" he interrupted hurriedly, aware that his plan was completely falling apart. "I don't think Don was lying when he said he regrets the whole cheating thing."

"'Thing'??" Maggie hissed. "Sit down."

She pressed her palm flat and Sam's knees buckled.
"Affair," Sarah put in, wincing at the abuse Sam and Dean were going through. "I'm sure Don regrets the affair, Mags."

"The only thing he regrets is getting caught," Maggie returned, although she didn't make a move to attack Sarah. "It's part of a pattern, okay? Do not make me bring up the Renaissance."

"Oh! Oh!" Don snapped. "You're one to talk! 1492 ring any bells?"

"The man was about to set sail!" Maggie yelled. "He could possibly fall of the edge of the earth. I took pity – so what's your excuse?"

"The Medici chick was me coping! I'd just watched the love of my life waltz off with some big nosed, redheaded –"

"Ugh, this is ridiculous," Maggie groaned, raising her hands in annoyance, although this time it was thankfully free of any magical doozies aimed at Sam and Dean. "This is why I can't talk to you."

She turned on her heel to leave, and then stopped by the entrance of the gallery, staring back menacingly.

"Sarah, I want them all off my property by the time I get back, or you're fired." She then jabbed a finger at the Winchesters. "And if I ever see you two again, I'm going to boil your entrails in front of you."

She didn't even spare Don a parting remark, instead disappearing out the door in a huff.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"That actually…went better than expected," Don volunteered after a moment.

"She's actually really nice once you get to know her," Sarah said after another moment, shrugging helplessly.

Dean shot her a disbelieving look, not quite in the forgiving mood just yet. "Yeah, I'll bet."

"Hey, watch it," Don snapped. "That's my wife you're talking about."

"Soon to be ex-wife," Dean reminded him.

Don's eyes narrowed and he raised his hand threateningly. "She's not the only one who can boil entrails, you know."

Dean snorted. "Buddy, I spent forty years in Hell. You don't scare me."

Sam nudged him roughly, giving him a warning look, and Dean rolled his eyes. It was highly unlikely Don knew anything about the apocalyptic shit-storm that had been the Winchesters destiny, why Sam was bothering to be so overly-cautious about revealing information like that, he didn't know.

Still, he dropped the matter and fixed Don with a cold look. "Why do you even care, anyway? I mean, you tried to poison her."
"I did not!"

"We found the coin," Sam said. "It wasn't hers."

"I don't use coins," Don replied, with the same contemptuous tone of voice that Maggie had used when she denied using Hotmail. Dean rolled his eyes again. It was just their luck that they had stumbled upon the witch-version of the Cleavers. "That's Maggie's thing. She likes the plausible deniability that comes with them. Me? I like to get my hands dirty."

"Wow, is it such a mystery why we don't trust you?" Dean asked sarcastically, and then said to Sarah, "And you're friends with these people?"

Sarah pursed her lips and crossed her arms at him, obviously unimpressed with his line of questioning. Dean didn't care, he was still stung by the fact that his judgement of her had been so off.

"So, wait," Sam cut in, his eyes narrowed in the familiar thinking expression that not even a feminine face could change. "Maggie went after your assistant because you had gone after hers…but if you're saying you didn't –"

"– which we're not saying we believe," Dean put in helpfully.

"– Then that means there's another witch out there, targeting your wife. Either trying to kill her, or maybe trying to pit the two of you against each other so you can destroy each other," Sam finished.

"Met any witches from the fifteenth century?" Dean asked. "Maybe someone who uses an Italian aikido?"

"Aquile," Sam corrected.

"Whatever," Dean remained unconcerned. "Maybe someone working with demon blood?"

"Maggie said demon blood is too dangerous to work with," Sarah pointed out helpfully.

"It is," Don agreed. "It's too potent. It completely magnifies the spells so much that they backfire more often than not. So whoever's using it is not terribly concerned with surviving to cast their next spell, or…"

"Or?" Dean and Sam prompted.

"Or they're extremely powerful," Don concluded. "They could be sworn to a demon that's particularly high up on the food chain."

"Which one's more likely?" Sam asked.

"The first. As far as I know, there are very few demons more powerful than the one Maggie and I are beholden to," Don said, smirking ruefully.

"And that is…?" Dean promoted.

"Oh, right, like I'm going to tell you?" Don scoffed. "My luck, you'd get some harebrained idea about summoning that bastard down here. We're not exactly on speaking terms this century, and I like it that way."

"Then how are you able to do your witchy crap, if you're not in bed with a demon?" Dean wanted to know, ignoring Sam's eye twitch at his wording. Served him right; as far as Dean was concerned, he had 'I told you so' rights for eternity on that one.
"Not every demon has a thing for mindless devotion," Don explained, "If that were the case, they'd possess those pretty-boys from Twilight and get their worshippers that way. Some just want a natural disaster committed in their names every few years. It's kind of a quality over quantity thing." He shrugged. "The point is: I don't need to be under the hairy eyeball of a demon right now. That thing's like the mother-in-law from Hell. Literally."

Dean mouthed wordlessly for a second, staring at Don, and then at Sarah, who didn't look at all surprised by this information.

"Our lives are weird," he said after a moment of processing all of that.

"You're only getting that now?" Sam snorted.

Dean ignored him, scrubbing his hand down his face in exasperation as his thoughts raced. The evening was obviously not going to progress in any way that made sense, and as much as he really wanted to start knocking off the self-satisfied asshole and his wife on principle, he was also very aware that right now, they needed his help. From the way Sam inclined his head just so, he was thinking along the same lines.

"Ok, look, we'll make you a deal," Dean said after a pause.

Don raised an eyebrow. "Oh, this I've got to hear."

"We'll help you figure out who's trying to off you and your wife. We'll help you stop them. And instead of us ganking you sons of bitches like I really, really want to, you're gonna do us a favor and we'll leave you alone this time."

"What makes you think I want your help?" Don snorted. "I'd much prefer to kill you here and be done with it. I can find whoever's doing this myself."

"Don," Sarah reprimanded.

"I'm sorry, Sarah, but that's the fact. You know how Maggie and I feel about hunters."

"And you know how I feel about them," Sarah reminded. "I happen to work with a lot of pretty decent ones." She then looked pointedly at Sam and Dean, "And a lot of pretty decent witches. There's no reason you can't all work together."

"Sorry, sweetheart, but this isn't a teambuilding exercise," Dean retorted. "You can't be friends with witches and hunters at the same time. At some point you're going to have to make a choice."

"Maybe, but not today," she told him firmly. She looked at the three of them in turn. "We're all trying to do the same thing here, right? It'd be nice if we could get through it with as little bloodshed as possible."

"And if we don't?" Dean wanted to know.

"Then Don kills you and, and I never speak to him or Maggie again," Sarah replied calmly. "Trust me, they value my friendship more than your lives."

Dean blinked, because, ouch. A glance in Don's direction suggested that was true.

"You've changed," Sam told her quietly.

Sarah gave him an odd look. "What do you mean?"
"Well, from what...Sam said," Sam said, looking a little flustered for a moment. "I mean, he said you were cool with all this stuff, but this is kind of like...Wow."

"I haven't seen your cousin in almost five years," Sarah said, with the remnants of an icy tone that Dean knew all too well. "Five years changes a lot."

"Apparently," Sam agreed quietly.

"Moving right along," Dean cleared his throat and returned his attention to Don again. "I don't care how old you are, hunting is what we do. You might have the patience to sit and wait while more people get killed while this thing tries to get to its intended target, but I don't. So if you want this shit over and done with within the next decade, I think your best bet is helping us out."

Don smirked.

"Much as I'd really like to cut off your head," Dean added after a moment.

"And say I decide to cooperate? What is this favor you want?" Don asked. "What kind of dark magic would a self-righteous little hunter like you want?"

"We need you to write a spell for us," Dean said. "Something infused with enough power that it can open a door."

"A door where?"

"Hell."

Don's eyebrows raised, and his mouth quirked. "Done."

Dean blinked. "O-kay, that was pretty easy."

"Are you kidding?" Don chuckled. "That deal's a no-lose situation for me. We screw up, you die, we don't, you go to Hell. I get to keep sending Sarah Christmas cards. Good odds for me, I'd say."

"Why are you trying to get to Hell?" Sarah wanted to know.

"That's not important right now," Sam said, sounding impatient. Dean could sort of understand why, they had been lingering here for the last ten minutes while there was a pissed off witch on the loose. And Maggie, too. "We need to get working. Now, while we're here, maybe we can get some more clues from that IP address – the gallery has a computer somewhere around here, right?"

"I think Maggie has one in the office upstairs. It's where she does all her finances," Don said, earning expressions of surprise from the brothers. "What? I helped her build up this gallery, before she wanted to roast my lungs."

A rather awkward journey upstairs later, in which Dean spent more time making sure he didn't have his back turned on Don than anything, they made it to a small, neat corner office. It was locked, of course, and neither Sarah or Don had the key. Sam started to pull out his lock pick, but Don simply rolled his eyes, waved and sent the door flying open.

"She's going to be mad at you for breaking the door," Sarah pointed out.

"Add it to the list," Don replied wearily while Sam booted up the PC.

"Who has access to this computer?" he asked a few minutes later as he pulled whatever hacking job he was doing. Dean's skills when it came to computers were less pronounced, and so he left his
brother to it, instead digging into his jeans for his phone. He hadn't checked in on Cas in a while.

"Just Maggie, I would imagine," Sarah said. Then, as an afterthought, she added, "Oh, and Marcie, of course."

"No one else?"

"It's password protected," Sarah said with a shake of her head. "I have to have Maggie sign me in on the few times I've ever needed to check anything out. I'm just a buyer – our business relationship is entirely separate from our friendship."

Dean stared down at his phone, noticing that he had missed seventeen calls and six voicemails, all from Cas's new cellphone. Before he could check his voicemail, it vibrated again. He flipped it open. "Cas?"

"I have been calling you several times over the last hour," Cas said without preamble, sounding annoyed. "Why haven't you picked up?"

"My phone was on vibrate. Didn't hear it."

"Why was it on vibrate?"

"We were sneaking onto private property, I had to turn it down."

"And did that somehow render you incapable of checking your messages?"

"Been kind of busy, dude."

"What is the point of procuring a phone for me if you are not going to answer when I call you from it?" the ex-angel wanted to know, sounding frustrated.

He wasn't yelling, but his voice was pitched loudly enough that Dean had to hold the phone away from his ear. Don was smirking at him again. "Boyfriend troubles?"

Sam burst out laughing, while Dean glared, and turned his back on the other people in the room. Lowering his voice, he ground out, "Cas is there a reason you're calling, or are you just going to bitch?"

"I have looked into the history of this Don Stark, and outwardly he seems "clean", as you say, but further research shows that he is connected to seven women who have died in the past year."

"Oh really?" Dean said, glancing back at Stark. "Can you text me their names?"

"Of course. Although, you should know, there is little evidence to support he knew these women beyond –" Cas's voice cut out, and then back in, " – and thus not likely."

"What?"

"I said –"

There was the cut of sound again, and Dean gave an annoyed sigh. "Cas, I keep losing you."

"Dean – there is – beeping noise – why is there a beep?"

"It's called call-waiting, dumbass, that's what happens when you give nerdy fanboys your cellphone number even after I told you not to."
"Is this the button I use to check – ?"

The dial tone sounded in his ear.

Sam was looking back at him, amused. "He can figure out how to Google, but he can't figure out call-waiting?"

"I still have trouble with that shit, cut him some slack," Dean said defensively.

It was another quarter of an hour before Cas managed to send the names – apparently Dean was right about Yong being the annoying caller – and Dean couldn't help grin at the misspellings in the words. Cas was still all thumbs when it came to texting, it was kind of cute.

Which, whoa. Just, no.

"These women," Don was saying, thankfully bringing Dean out of whatever disturbing, twilight zone he had briefly entered, looking over the photographs and information Sam had elected to bring up on the computer's browser. "I don't know them – well, obviously, I met them, but those are mostly photo ops. The only one I did know personally was Shelly." He pointed to a voluptuous blond woman with full lips and obviously fake breasts. "She was a realtor I worked with on a project in Indiana. Terrible accident last year, she was skiing and fell in the path of a snow blower."

"You sure it was an accident?" Sam prompted.

"Well, I was before," Don returned. "Given what we know now, though…"

"You know what this looks like, right?" Dean said. "All the victims so far have one thing in common. What looks on paper like a nice, close relationship with Don Stark."

"Well, except Marcie."

The three of them looked over to Sarah. Sam was the first to speak. "What?"

"All these women," Sarah explained, pointing to the photos on the computer. "They've showed up in pictures with Don or worked closely with him. They're all mentioned in news articles with him or having been at the same events. Except Marcie."

Don looked nonplussed, and then thoughtful. "That's true. I've met her a few times in the past when Maggie could stand being in the same building as me, but she's always been painfully shy. We barely exchange two words, and she's always looking at the floor."

"Obviously it was enough interaction for someone to get the right idea," Dean said. "Either Maggie thought so too and is a really good actress, or you've got a stalker on your ass."

"Maybe," Sam said thoughtfully, earning surprised looks from both Dean and Don.

"What do you mean, maybe?" Dean pressed, a little miffed. His theory was just as plausible as some of the stuff Sam came up with.

"Well, look at all of these women that died – Don said earlier he likes confident women, independent women – look at who he's married to," Sam suggested thoughtfully. "And according to all these blurbs on the vics, they were all successful, strong…but then you look at Marcie…"

"She's kind of the opposite of that, isn't she?" Sarah mused, catching on. She looked at Sam, and then Dean. "You don't think she…?"
"It's possible," Sam granted.

"But she's in the hospital," Sarah protested.

"If she's a powerful witch, she's not going to worry too much about a hemorrhaging esophagus for a while," Sam said. "She might even have set the whole thing up from the beginning to ensure she survived, just to keep herself safe. I mean, if I were going to take on two eight-hundred-year-old witches, I'd want all my bases covered."

"But that leaves the million dollar question," Dean said, turning to Don, "What the hell did you do to her that – ?" He trailed off, staring at the spot that had just been occupied by Don Stark. "These guys love to storm off, don't they?"

"I think we should find Marcie before Don does," Sam said carefully. "She could be the witch – but on the off-chance she isn't, and Don finds her?"

"Point taken."

"She's checked out," the tired looking nurse at New York Presbyterian said, checking her computer.

"But she was in the ICU," Sarah said, disbelieving.

"Well, according to this, she's got a clean bill of health and left here a few hours ago," the nurse replied.

"Did she leave herself, or was someone with her?"

"I wasn't on duty, ma'am, I couldn't tell you."

Sam forced a smile. "Thanks for your help."

He and Sarah left the reception area and headed out into the hospital parking lot. As soon as they cleared the doors, Sam dialed Dean's number. His brother picked up on the second ring.

"Marcie's our DB supplier, alright," Dean said, not bothering with a greeting. "There's a body here chained to a chair in a devil's trap. Been dead for a day, I'd say. And I checked her computer? She's spoken to about fifteen different people – all of them sound like spurned women, in my opinion – about transactions for the blood. And you should see her apartment."

"You found an altar?"

"More than that – vats of what I can only imagine is demon blood, couple dead animals and a hell of a lot of pictures of Don and Maggie."

"So she is trying to get rid of them," Sam said, nodding at Sarah meaningfully.

"Not exactly," his brother hedged. "All of the pictures of Don are intact, the pictures of Maggie – well, the pictures of any woman who's had contact with Don in the last year – not so much."

"Full-on Swimfan, then?"

"In a big way," Dean answered. "Listen, I'm going to pick up Cas on the way to meet you. If we've
got a three-way witch-off going on, chances are we're gonna need some of his input on how to make it out with our balls intact."

'Figuratively speaking,' Sam didn't add.

Out loud, he said, "Okay. See you in a few," and hung up.

Sarah was already on her phone, trying to get through to both Don and Maggie. After several attempts and some worried voice messages, she offered him a worried glance. "They never ignore phone calls. Ever."

"It sounds like Marcie went looking for them. Or at least for Maggie."

"She's probably headed for the hotel penthouse. Maggie's been living there for six months now, ever since she left Don."

"We'll head there when D – Erica gets here – unless you're into stealing cars now too," Sam said, his voice colder than he intended.

"And what do we do when we get there?" Sarah challenged, frowning at him. "If Maggie's fine, she's not going to be happy to see you, and I can't promise to be able to keep her from killing you. And if she's not fine, then Marcie's there, and if what Don said is right, she's more powerful anyway. You want to just run in and take your chances, or do you want to come up with some kind of game plan?"

"Any ideas?" Sam returned.

"No," she answered shortly, and they dissolved into uncomfortable silence.

Sam frowned at nothing in particular, and then sighed. He wasn't being completely fair, and he knew it. As Sarah said, it had been years. They had both changed. And beyond that, she didn't even know that he was Sam Winchester, so there was no reason for him to be acting like he'd found out some unsavory secret his girlfriend was keeping from him.

Because she wasn't his girlfriend. He hadn't seen her in years, hadn't thought about her at all, really.

'Crap, what if Dean was right?' he thought suddenly, the thought coming out of left field. He was starting to think irrationally, what if it was some kind of sign that he, well, hadn't let off steam in a while? 'No, screw that. That's Dean-logic. So not applicable.'

In an effort to chase away those thoughts, he elected to break the uncomfortable silence.

"So..." he began, slightly unsure as to where he was going with this. He sensed movement out of the corner of his eye, probably Sarah turning to face him and kept his eyes on the the cars going in and out of the hotel parking lot. "Sam said you worked for your dad's auction house."

"Yes," she answered, the slight inflection at the end of the sentence telling him she knew he was trying to ask her something.

"How do you go from that to...well, being friends with a couple of witches?"

This time Sarah shifted in such an obvious way that Sam couldn't help turning to look at her. She was fixing him with the same shrewd gaze as she had when she asked him that loaded question about American Primitive the first time he met her. Only instead of the heated look of someone who was attracted to him, she seemed calculating.
"How did you become a hunter?" she countered.

Sam shrugged. "Sort of the family business."

"Have you ever tried to get out?" she asked.

"Yeah." He offered a rueful smile. "It didn't take."

She snorted. "Well, that's what it was like for me. After Sam and Dean left, after what I'd seen – I tried to go back to normal. I spent weeks telling myself I'd just gotten spectacularly drunk with my girlfriends and dreamed the whole thing up."

"What changed?" Sam asked tentatively.

"I was just curious – I started looking into all my dad's old files, records on pieces we had sold over the years, where they had ended up. Know what I found?"

"What?"

"Sixteen cursed pieces – and that's only in the last ten years. My family's been in the auction business for generations," she said sadly. "Sixteen pieces that we sold to people who ended up killed or hurt for no reason. And by the time I figured that out, there wasn't anyone I could call or tell. Sam changed his number or something, and I didn't know who else to contact…so I checked it out myself."

"No way," Sam said, part dismayed by such a stupid decision and part impressed.

"Yep. The first time, I made up some stupid story about scouting for an antiques road show so I could get a look at this old Maori warrior mask we'd sold. Turned out the spirit of the warrior was still trapped inside of it and was going around killing and, er, eating people."

Sam stared, fascinated and disgusted at the same time. "Eating? But it was a ghost. Right?"

"I guess while it manifested solidly it didn't matter," Sarah shrugged. "Anyway, I managed to burn the mask and get out of there before the police were called. Since then, I've been tracking down anything my family's auction house has sold and destroyed it if it was cursed. Of course, there are some things I don't know how to destroy. That's where Maggie and Don came in. They get rid of anything I can't."

"How'd that relationship get off the ground?" Sam asked, curious and impressed despite himself.

"I'd built up contacts in this line of work, when my reputation for identifying artefacts became known," Sarah shrugged. "Maggie and Don actually started off as just a business relationship. They hired me to determine the authenticity of a pair of Lhasa fertility idols they were interested in purchasing." She pursed her lips in a rueful smile. "This was when they were still together."

"Ah."

"Anyway, it turned out they were the real thing, so they wired me the money and they weren't cursed, so it was an easy job. I must have impressed them, because they called me again and again – and Maggie started to ask my input on non-magical items, and then we became friends."

"And when did you find out they were witches?"

"Well, I always knew they weren't the average happily married couple on the block," Sarah said with
a smirk. "The things they asked me to authenticate kind of gave it away, but it's only in the last year they told me the truth. Or, well, I kind of found out while Maggie was saving my life."

"Right. Uh. Leeches?"

"So gross," Sarah shuddered at the memory.

There was another silence.

"And it…doesn't bother you that they worship demons and kill people for fun?" Sam asked for a moment. He knew it was a bit hypocritical coming from him, considering his history and the whole Ruby indiscretion, but he was having trouble picturing sweet, good-hearted Sarah associating with witches.

"They don't kill people for fun," she said after a moment, and then sighed, "Look, Jane, I know they're not going to be canonized any time soon, but they do a lot more good than evil these days. I think they're trying to make up for the last eight hundred years."

"What could possibly make up for the chaos they're responsible for?"

"…They saved my father's life."

Which put Sam right in his place, because he had forgiven a lot of things for the sake of his brother's or his father's life. He decided not to reveal that, though, instead asking tentatively, "What does your dad think of all this?"

Sarah laughed then. "He only knows about the legit consulting stuff. I mean, he even hires me sometimes, which is great because I can make sure he's not selling anything bad. As for the supernatural…I don't tell him. He wouldn't understand."

"Right."

"What about yours?" Sarah asked. "You said it's the family business. You hunt with your parents, or is it just you and your sister?"

"Both my parents are dead," Sam confided. "It's just me and Erica. And, well, Cas, but he's a new addition."

"Cas," Sarah repeated. "Is that who called your sister before?"

"Yeah," Sam said, and then grinned wickedly to himself in spite of the lie. "He's her husband."

"Wow," Sarah raised her eyebrows. "It really is a family business to you guys."

They were interrupted when a familiar car drove up, and Sam saw Dean and Cas in the front seats.

"Sarah, Cas – Cas, Sarah," Dean said as Sarah and Sam climbed into the backseat. As he buckled himself up, Sam noticed that Cas was holding onto a cardboard box with several items in it.

"He's her husband?" Sarah whispered innocuously, loud enough that everyone heard though. "But he's so…academic looking."

"Which is really a polite way of saying nerdy," Sam thought to himself, snorting mirthfully as Dean glared at Sam in a way that promised violence later on and Cas just looked confused.

"So, what's our plan now?" Sam changed the subject as they pulled away from the hospital. "We
can't exactly go in there, guns blazing on this one."

"Way ahead of you on that one," Dean said, nodding in Cas's direction. "He's got a plan."

"Witches get their power from demons, therefore if we separate this witch from her power source, we should be able to destroy her," Castiel explained in his usual neutral tone.

"How do we do that?" Sarah wanted to know.

"He knows an anti-witchcraft spell that might work," Dean said.

"Might?" Sam repeated.

"The spell is Akkadian, and the materials needed for it to be successful are by and large extinct," he gestured to the box in his lap, and added, "I have...had to improvise."

Sam suddenly recognized a scrap of black material in the box. It was the blouse he had worn to the function earlier. "Is that my shirt?"

Cas looked down, and then back up at Sam. "The witch bled on it."

"You cut a piece out of my – that was expensive, you know!"

"Shut up and deal with it, you big girl," Dean declared. "That's the only way we're going to be able to make sure the spell doesn't hit the Starks too. Remember? We kind of need them alive."

"If they're not already dead," Sarah said mournfully.

Dean shot her a look in the rear-view mirror, and then nodded at Sam. "Okay, so this is what we're going to do..."

Just because Cas had been the one to come up with the plan, and he happened to have been one of Heaven's finest strategists, didn't mean that Dean liked it. It depended on a lot of different factors going right at the same time, as well as the hope that Dean and Sam wouldn't get themselves killed waiting for everything to happen as calculated.

The key was Cas and Sarah being able to get to the building's water supply in time. On the way over, the ex-angel had created some kind of potion from Marcie's blood and whatever other materials he had cobbled together, which with the right incantation would supposedly bind Marcie's magic. Sarah had called one of her contacts for the building schematics for the Ritz, where Maggie was staying, and would help Cas dump the stuff into the hotel water supply.

Dean was still iffy on trusting Sarah, especially around Cas, injured as he was, but as Sam pointed out while they drove, her goals were exactly the same as theirs right now. He'd even used the puppy-eyes, which meant Dean was agreeing before he even noticed it.

'Kid's fucking dangerous,' Dean thought as he and Sam slipped into Maggie Stark's hotel suite at the Ritz. It had been easy enough to get a master key-card after flashing the concierge their homeland security badges, but Dean knew it was only a matter of time before their luck stopped. Jody Mills might have been manning Bobby's phones while he was...wherever he was, but managers in these swanky places were known for digging deeper than the one phone call.
They heard voices as they crept closer, coming from one of the rooms farther back. As they got
closer, they could make out Don's speech.

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding desperate yet firm. "I really don't remember you, Marcie."

"Marcella!" the woman snarled, and Dean took a chance to glance around the doorframe.

He could only see her from the back, but what he noticed was that Marcie was a waiflike brunette,
dressed like a librarian. The look was at odds with the powerful voice coming from her and the way
she carried herself was anything but helpless.

He glanced at Sam, wanting confirmation that that was her, and Sam nodded grimly.

A second glance revealed Don several feet away from her. He was standing, but from the way his
head was angled back, it looked like he was being held up by an invisible hand.

He seemed to have gotten off lucky.

Behind him, Maggie was pinned to the wall opposite, iron rebar from within the partition impaling
her through her abdomen. Blood seeped through the wound and downward, staining the carpet. She
was still alive, though, her eyes blazing in pain and fury; still she was being kept immobile. Dean
could see the pressure cracks of the wall around her, meaning Marcie was holding her there by her
will alone.

Not a good sign, considering Maggie and Don were supposedly more powerful than the average
witch.

"Marcella," Don agreed, voice tense and sounding like he was in pain. "Listen, I really don't – "

"Florence!" she spat, sounding angry and hurt. "1493. In the home of my uncle, Lorenzo. You told
me your wife was a traitorous whore and…we…you said…"

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then Don muttered, "Oh, shit."

Dean and Sam exchanged identical looks of sympathy.

'Christ, Don, couldn't keep it in your pants?' Dean thought grimly. 'No wonder Maggie wants your
oysters on a tray…although, that explains that old coin…'

"…I looked for you," Marcie said, in a softening voice, pleading like she was trying to make him
understand. "But you had gone – she took you away!" There was a loud groan of pain and the sound
of iron moving, which made Dean think Marcie had just hauled another rebar out of the wall and
through Maggie's body.

"Look, Marcie – Marcella," Don was imploring, "What we had…it was great, really. Wonderful.
You were a…spirited girl." Dean winced, because apparently Don wasn't great at digging himself
out of trouble, "But I was in a bad place – and Maggie and I, we made up. Because I –"

"Don't say that!" Marcie shrieked. "You can't say that! He told me you would stop, that once I found
you, everything would be made right!"

Dean rolled his eyes. Seriously, this was becoming as far-fetched as an episode of Dr. Sexy.

Sam glanced at his watch, and then tilted his head in a 'go ahead' movement.

Dean took a breath, hoping he wasn't about to get his neck broken before their plan could come to
fruition, and dove out from behind the wall. Careful to not hit Maggie or Don, he squeezed the trigger, praying that maybe he'd be able to take the witch by surprise and get a kill shot without her noticing.

The bullets slowed in midair, stopping directly in front of Marcie as she turned around. Her brown eyes flashed at Dean, and she sent him tumbling backward onto a glass end table, his gun falling from his grip.

Sam had already vaulted after her, shooting with intent, and managed to get one bullet to graze her shoulder, before he was thrown up against an antique looking oak cabinet. He crumpled downward and didn't move.

Dean cursed inwardly, because Marcie didn't even look fazed by the injury.

"And what have we here?" she mused, turning away from the other witches to face Sam and Dean. Maggie and Don remained immobilized as before, although Don had begun to murmur something under his breath. "Hunters?"

Dean hauled himself up, trying to ignore the creak in his bones and the rattle of the rib he was sure he had cracked earlier that evening.

"Lady, you ever heard of the saying 'he's just not that into you'?" he asked brazenly. "It's actually a book– no, you know what? I heard it was a movie now."

"You insolent little –" she made a cutting motion with her hand, and Dean winced as he felt a sharp throb in his spine. There was a searing burst of fire within him, and for a moment he thought she had severed his spinal cord. When her expression turned confused, though, he realized she hadn't.

As she turned, Dean saw Don continue muttering, and realized he was speaking some kind of spell. He must have been dampening Marcie's powers.

The witch realized this too, because she waved a hand and Don't mouth suddenly closed with an audible snap. He let out a pain moan, and from the drip of blood coming from the corner of his mouth, Dean figured she'd made him bite into his own tongue.

"No interference, amore mio," she said chidingly. "You and I will have our moment. Let me get rid of the vermin first." She leveled an unkind stare at Maggie. "And the dog."

She returned her attention to Dean, stalking forward like a large cat. She stopped in front of him though, a curious expression on her face, which changed to one of glee.

"Oh, this is beautiful," she breathed, and Dean winced, because her breath smelled like metal and sulphur. It occurred to him suddenly how she was so powerful. Not only had she been selling the stuff on the side, she had been drinking demon blood to increase her powers.

'Great,' he thought desperately.

"I can smell it on you, you know?" she purred at Dean, looking from him to where Sam was still not moving. "The magic on you? It's bound so tightly into you…I wonder what would happen if I unraveled it, hm?" She smiled widely. "I bet all your insides would break apart. And you…" She gazed at Dean with hungry glee in her eyes. "I bet your soul would just…shatter. It's so fragile right now…I've never shattered a soul before."

Dean forced a smirk. "Lady, you don't want to go there."
"Oh, really?" She started to pull the Force-Choke crap on him. "Want to try to tell me why?"

Just then, the sound of a fire alarm going off somewhere shattered the air. The sprinklers on the ceiling of the hotel room came on, spraying everyone with water and (hopefully, if Cas and Sarah had done their job), the materials used for the spell.

Marcie paused for a moment, staring contemptuously at the falling water, and then leveled an unimpressed stare at Dean. "I think I'll start by ripping your veins out of you, one by one. Starting with…"

She made a twisting motion with one finger. Excruciating pain flared all over his body, and Dean tried to scream, but couldn't make a sound over the blood that was suddenly spilling up his throat. His stomach heaved at the pain, and the world spun –

Behind Marcie, Sam suddenly appeared, hobbling to his feet like he had been biding his time.

"Akassūkunūšī akammkunūšī anamdukunūšī," he rattled off determinedly, Cas's tutoring having stuck better with him than with Dean, "ana girra qâmē qâlī kâsî kâšidu ša kaššāpâṭī."

The effect was almost immediate.

Marcie froze, staring down at Dean in horrified rage as he continued to cough up blood and bile. She held her hands to her, as though the answers lay therein, and made the same twisting motion again, trying to finish him off.

Nothing happened.

Dean was dimly aware of Maggie and Don crumbling forward as Marcie's hold on them suddenly vanished, and then Marcie was wailing, "No! NO!"

Dean felt his lungs free up and he could breathe again as she rounded on Sam, who was still chanting.

"Akassūkunūšī akammkunūšī anamdukunūšī ana girra qâmē qâlī kâsî kâšiduša kaššāpâṭī…Akassūkunūšī akammkunūšī anamdukunūšī ana girra qâmē qâlī kâsî kâšiduša kaššāpâṭī…"

"Shut up! Shut up –!" she screamed, and there was a sharp, acrid scent in the air, and as he looked up, he saw that Marcie's entire form had begun to smoke; wherever the spray from above touched her, tiny green flames sprang up.

She tried to go for Sam's throat, but he held her off, and they watched in silence as her skin began to melt and burn off of her body and bones.

Don was crawling over to Maggie, cradling her in his arms. Both of them were drenched in the water, but neither seemed to be affected by it the way Marcie had been. Evidently the witch's blood had tailored the spell exactly the right way. Which was good, considering they had been trying to bind her, not turn her into goop.

"Well," Sam said, after a moment, staring down at the melted skin and bones that had been Marcie, "Cas did say he had to improvise…"
Cas has a human moment.

Of all the new mortal habits he had acquired in falling, Castiel disliked sleep the most. Sleep meant the onset of dreams, which conversely meant surrendering his already spurious human control to the whims of his newly grown subconscious.

He could usually ward it off through brief dozing during the day, stealing moments of sleep that Dean or Sam would wake him from when he stumbled into the grasp of a troubling dream. But there were times, such as this night after the hunt for the witch, when even his carefully limited hours of slumber just couldn't stave off the bone-deep exhaustion. It was then that his mind surrendered to sleep without a fight, because he just didn't have the strength for anything else.

The dreams that plagued him presented themselves in several guises, tormenting him in their own way because his subconscious was, as Dean would say, a dick.

The nonsense dreams were the ones he grudgingly abided. They were harmless beyond the annoyance they caused when he woke, staring at the ceiling of whatever motel or hovel where he and the brothers slept in that night, trying to understand how his brain had created a scenario where a suit-wearing cactus chatted to a duck on a cellular phone.

Those types of dreams annoyed him in the way all illogical thoughts did, in the manner of there being no purpose to them.

Still, he would gladly experience nonsense over of the alternative.

The dreams based on memory which morphed into images meant to frighten, those were the ones he truly loathed. That brand of dream wasn't simply his human brain twisting together his experiences as a mortal, either, although those too were far from pleasant recollections. When memory elected to taunt him, it was with what little his human mind could comprehend of the awe he had seen since his creation.

It wasn't just his own recollections that provided fuel for his subconscious. Jimmy was no longer present in this body, but his memories remained locked within its hippocampus. Much of Castiel's experience in human matters came directly from his reliance on Jimmy's reminiscences. Still, even there, memories existed which he wished he did not have rely on or re-experience during sleep.
cycles.

Jimmy’s experience of wetting himself when forced to give an oral presentation on the Declaration of Independence in the fifth grade was one of them.

As usual, Castiel didn’t immediately realize he had fallen asleep. He could still feel the flat motel pillow beneath his head and the scratch of the comforter, could still hear the rhythmic breathing of Sam and Dean in their respective beds. Yet, in a seamless transition between waking and sleeping, he found his awareness drifting within a dream.

The room was brightly lit and familiar, the lingering smell of dinner not dispersed by the nearby air-freshener or the open windows. The curtains were closed, but shifted within the breeze, and he could practically smell the dusk on the night air. A television was on, depicting one of those ridiculous human dramas that Dean was so fond of, but the hunter was nowhere to be seen.

There was a body tucked next to him, a fact which his brain did not question, and he was inexplicably aware that it belonged to a woman. Her shorter, delicate form was curled into his side in an intimate and familiar manner. Her head on his shoulder, and it occurred to him that he had an arm around her. He could feel the soft texture of her clothing through his own, and the curvature of her shoulders against his wrist. Her hair tickled his face and he thought he could smell some kind of artificial strawberry scent lingering. Where strong scents normally tended to make his mortal stomach roil, this time it did not bother him.

For the first time since falling, outside of brief instances when Sam or Dean reached out to show him comfort, he felt warm and comfortable and safe. It was a shadow of what he had felt once with the Host, but such a welcome relief from the so-far lacklustre experience of being human that he allowed himself to bask in it briefly.

There was a trilling, blaring chime somewhere nearby, breaking the momentary spell of leisure. He turned toward it, his movements lethargic and too unhurried even for mortal slowness; a familiar telephone upon a familiar table, which the woman beside him stood to answer.

As she moved, her hair trailing over her shoulders like silk and a subtle sway to her hips, he recognized her. Amelia Novak looked younger than when he had first encountered her in person, but there was no doubt about her identity. She was a beautiful woman, Jimmy’s memories told him, pointing out her symmetrical features, pale skin, red lips and long lashes; his angelic perception of the human form concurred with assessment, finding beauty in the shape that was his Father’s image.

Castiel realized then that he was sitting in Jimmy Novak’s living room. The familiarity he felt was due to the memories, not his own experience. Even when he had first visited Jimmy before claiming him as a vessel, he had not physically manifested in this house.

It was then that his brain told him that he was dreaming. His usual reaction to that knowledge was to try to break through the prison of sleep before the nightly terrors began, but right now he was too tired. His bones felt sodden and his eyelids seemed to be weighted with lead, and so he had no choice but to be swept back up in the dream.

Amelia-within-the-dream chuckled, and said something in a teasing, chiding voice, before hanging up the phone. She offered him a small smile. "Claire’s staying at a friend's house."

He tilted his head to one side. "Is that a good idea? I mean, it's a school night."

The words were from Jimmy's remembrances, not his own, but he allowed them to escape his lips just the same.
"She's promised that they're working on their solar system project," Amelia assured him, approaching him slowly. "But you know what this means, right?"

There was a strange look in her eyes and an odd curve to her mouth, and Castiel felt his own mimicking the gesture. "We can skip town and head for Vegas like we planned?"

She reached out and smacked him lightly on the shoulder, the gesture playful and free of malice. She continued to watch him with that odd glint in her eyes, eyes crinkled with mirth while her pupils dilating slightly. Before he could react, she was straddling his lap and leaning in, her lips brushing his right ear. "We could have some fun."

He exhaled in surprise, the sensations of pleasing warmth and comfort at the familiar embrace marred by the knowledge that real or not, this was the wife of the man whose body he had stolen. He had no right to take comfort in it, whether subconsciously or not.

"Amelia…" he began, his words coming out with surprising difficulty. It felt like his brain and his mouth were disconnected.

"Shhh," she pressed a finger to his lips with one hand, while the other began to undo her blouse. At the first glimpse of cleavage, he felt warmth creep up the back of his neck and his ears.

"We shouldn't —" he tried again, willing himself to move her away from him, but his body was held immobile beneath hers and his eyes remained fastened on the work of her hand.

The kiss, when it came, was surprisingly demanding despite the softness of her lips, and yet he experienced it from an oddly distant standpoint. He dimly registered a pleasant pressure and the corresponding spread of warmth throughout the rest of his body, but it felt just as dampened as sensations always had when he experienced it through his grace.

'Perhaps the fact that this is a dream diminishes the impression,' he thought idly as the imagined version of Jimmy's wife finished unbuttoning her blouse and shrugged out of it, leaving her sitting in his lap in nothing but her pants and brassiere.

He once again tried to protest, but found himself distracted by the push of her breasts against his chest and the sudden sensation of her tongue breaching his mouth. His breath hitched in surprise, and the warmth that had been steadily spreading through his body began to pool in one place below his waist.

Castiel knew enough about human physiology to recognize the signs of arousal, but he had never experienced them himself, even the night that Dean brought him to a den of iniquity. This was the closest, this dream, and it felt confusing and not quite right. Muted, somehow, like he was still experiencing it through Jimmy's memory and not personally.

She moved forward with a rolling motion, and he held back a groan at the unfamiliar spark of something that went through him. While he attempted to categorize the sensation, he felt her fingers fumbling at his own shirt, undoing the buttons there with increasing impatience until the cold air of the living room hit his skin.

He gasped, and she was on him again. He could feel the slow drag of her tongue as it traced a path down the shell of his ear, making him shudder, then down his jaw and below, dipping into the hollow of his throat. His eyes shut as fingers dragged down his chest, and he had to bite his lips to keep from making a noise when that tongue flicked at one of his nipples.

And then the warmth moved away. "Are you okay?"
Castiel's eyes shot open and he stared in startled shock at the person that asked that, because it wasn't Amelia Novak's voice.

"D-Dean?" his tongue tripped over the word, and there was an infuriating crack in his voice.

"S'my name," Dean whispered, feminine voice low and laden with something unspoken. His green eyes crackled heatedly and his mouth was tugged into the familiar, sly smile that he only ever directed at Sam or Castiel. Only right now, instead of good-natured fun, there was something more primal hidden in it.

"Where did...? Why are you...?" Castiel wasn't sure if it was the thrall of the dream that was curbing his ability to speak, or the heated gaze that Dean had pinned on him. Whatever the reason, his mind remained too confused, and his body too warm and heavy, to worry about this sudden incoherence.

Dean's form remained in its current female incarnation, rendered the way Castiel knew it from the few glimpses he had caught over the past week when Dean forgot to cover up. Evidently they had been enough to allow Castiel's brain to make an accurate catalogue of it, and he discovered he was unable to look away from the upwards swell of Dean's breasts.

Unlike when observing Amelia, Castiel found himself breathless at the sight of Dean, like some part of him had been waiting for that all along. Female or male, Dean was beautiful to him, down to the last freckle. Castiel was filled for a fleeting moment with rage toward the pagan monstrosity that had destroyed the body he had reconstructed, and then with regret that he would never again see the radiant shine of Dean's soul.

Curiously enough, Dean was wearing the amulet Castiel had returned to him after the Winchesters' ill-fated trip to Heaven. It rested comfortably in the subtle dip of cleavage between them, and for a moment Castiel wondered what Dean had actually done with it.

Those thoughts were lost, though, when Dean expertly maneuvered Castiel's shirt off of him and then bunched it up, throwing it somewhere over his shoulder to be forgotten.

"Never properly thanked you...for what you did," Dean whispered, raising Castiel's right hand to cup one of his breasts. "For everything."

While Castiel was sure that he had perceived a similar scene in one of those erotic displays that he had walked in on the hunter viewing more than once in the past two years, his body didn't seem to care. It didn't matter that Dean had never actually done this to him, or that Castiel had never consciously entertained any wanton thought towards his charge.

And when Dean suddenly surged forward, clamping his hips down tightly on either side of Castiel's and ground downward, rubbing roughly against the growing hardness in his lap, Castiel couldn't help the shocked moan that tore from his throat.

It was difficult to catalogue the sharp mixture of pain and pleasure that radiated outward like an electrical current through his nerves. The sensation was far from muted, and he realized dimly that it was because this was his own experience and not a remnant of Jimmy.

"Seem to recall makin' you a promise a while back," Dean murmured, shifting his weight to one side. Before Castiel could protest, he found himself being pushed, and he was suddenly lying backward on the couch, with Dean leaning over him. "And now that you're human...well, it'd be a shame for you to die a virgin."
The kiss, this time, was more than just the lingering memory of another man kissing his wife. This was different, a myriad of sensations pulled together from what Castiel knew of human intimacy and what he knew of Dean. Half-formed thoughts and observations on how Dean smelled, how his skin and cells had felt as Castiel stitched him back together, how he tipped his head when kissing one of his many lovers...

Castiel couldn't breathe, but instead of a cloying discomfort of being without oxygen, he felt buoyed up on an unknown feeling. His hands twitched, like they wanted to grasp hold of something, but he truly had no idea what, and so they remained immobile beside him as Dean traced the roof of Castiel's mouth with his tongue.

When Dean pulled away, he was no longer in his borrowed form, but looked down at Castiel in the body Castiel had rebuilt. The hard planes of his chest were smooth, slightly sweat-sheened, and there was a flush across his cheeks and down his neck that Castiel didn't think had anything to do with the temperature in the room.

"Dean," Castiel said, the word a statement and a question and a plea all in one.

Dean's wide grin became more predatory, and he chuckled low in his throat. The sound made the hair on the back of Castiel's neck stand up, and something within him constricted –

And then Dean was once again a solid weight on top of him – warm skin pressed against his, heady scent of gun oil and leather surrounding him, amulet digging into Castiel's own chest – muttering words in his ear. Castiel couldn't understand them, but didn't care, because he felt teeth nipping at the corner of his jaw and scraping down his neck, across his collarbone, and he had never felt this before but he had seen it and, unknowingly, wanted.

He inhaled sharply and bucked upward as Dean worked a hand into his pants, curling his fingers around the length of him.

"Relax, Cas," Dean breathed into his ear, and Castiel shuddered –

Castiel gasped and opened his eyes, his body trembling as he awoke, staring up at the motel ceiling in breathless horror. For several seconds, his brain reeled from the sudden change in scenery, the dream falling away from him as realization and wakefulness took over.

He jerked his head to the left, both relieved and ashamed to find that the Winchesters were indeed still in the room. They slept deeply, unaware of his distress. They had probably believed he would remain awake as was his habit, and so neither had tried to stay awake for him.

In the bed closest to the door, Dean slept on his stomach with one hand beneath his pillow, likely clutching the demon-killing knife in his sleep.

Castiel swallowed and tried to sit up, and held back a whimper as the movement caused the ratty motel cover to pull across the hardness that remained between his legs. It seemed the arousal incurred by the dream would not fade as quickly.

Carefully and quietly, praying to an absent Father that neither Sam nor Dean would awaken to see him, he crept into the ensuite bathroom and locked himself in.

The onslaught of light when he turned it on made him dizzy for a moment, seeing stars, but eventually that faded. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, took in the wide eyes whose pupils remained dilated, and the way his shoulders shook with his rushed breathing. Then his attention moved downward, to the telling bulge in his borrowed sweatpants.
'Dreams are not reality,' he told himself, echoing Sam's words to him the first night he had experienced the ravages of his own subconscious. 'It's just this brain mixing thoughts and memories up due to the events of the last few days. It means nothing.'

The look in his reflection's eyes as he tried to will away the uncomfortable erection, though, suggested otherwise.

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A frantic banging on the door wrenched Dean out of the first restful sleep he had had in weeks, propelling him to his feet with one hand grasping for the demon-killing knife. His eyes flitted to Sam and Cas, noting that Sam was already reaching for the gun by his bedside, while Cas was dazedly rising from the chair where he had likely spent the night.

Dean was across the room in seconds, approaching the door with caution in case there might be an angry hunter with a sawed-off on the other side, then chanced a glimpse through the motel door peephole.

Upon recognizing the figure outside, he groaned and rolled his eyes, reaching for the lock.

"Dude, it's six in the morning," he grumbled as he hauled open the door, "tell me why I shouldn't just shoot you right –"

"You lied to me!" Professor Yong cried as he barged into the room, messenger bag flapping and cheeks flushed with color. Dean wasn't sure if that was from his agitation or the sweater-vest he was wearing; most likely the former, considering it wasn't terribly warm outside. The hotel room was another story, so hot and stuffy that Dean had slept in nothing but a bra and boxers the night before. He'd probably have gone to bed shirtless, if he hadn't been sharing space with his baby brother and an ex-angel.

"Sure, come right in," Dean told Yong dryly, closing the door behind him. Sam and Cas both relaxed incrementally, but remained standing.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Yong continued to rant, bow-tie absurdly askew and waving something in his right hand accusingly. "This isn't something I want to find out from – if I had known what kind of baggage you guys had – I should never have –"

"Whoa, whoa, Professor, calm down," Sam said, now out of bed and crossing the room. He had his concerned, damage-control look on his face and his hands were held open in a pacifying gesture.
"What's this all about?"

"You have those!" Yong said, pointing at Sam's chest.

"Tits?" Dean couldn't resist asking, earning twin dirty looks from Sam and Yong.

"No – the tattoos," Yong snapped, nodding at Sam's where it peeked out from beneath the collar of his overlarge shirt, and then at Dean's.


"And your name is Sam," Yong accused, tone frosty, making Sam's eyes widen fractionally. The professor pointed at Cas without looking away, "and his name is Castiel – and – and he was an angel. And if he pulled you –" the finger now jabbed at Dean, " – out of Hell, then…then you're Dean. From the books."

"From the…?" Dean trailed off, and then understanding set in when he noticed exactly what it was that Yong was waving around at them; the familiar black spine of a paperback. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh, for Chrissakes…"

"I mean, obviously I'm missing something, but that's…too much to be a coincidence," Yong continued, his voice sounding like he was edging towards hysteria. "But why do you look – like that? And why would you want to go to Hell again? Sam's right there, so the brother story is obviously false – and where is the Impala?"

"Oh, sure, make it sound like I abandoned her on purpose," Dean snapped, at the same time that Sam remarked sourly, "I thought Chuck said he wasn't going to publish those anymore."

Yong's eyes widened, and he looked like he was trying to decide whether to burst into tears out of panic or elation. "So…it's true then. I mean, I thought, there was an off chance…but you're really…?"

"Let me see that," Sam said, not waiting to be offered the book and instead grabbing it from Yong's outstretched hand. Cas wandered over as well, cocking his head at the paperback with mild interest while Sam began to read, "Supernatural: Lazarus Rising – Dean wakes up in a pine box, freed from Hell, and seeks out Sam and Bobby. Their joyful reunion is cut short, however, by whatever raised Dean in the first place." He gave Dean a hard look. "Sounds like the publisher is picking up where the series left off."

"But why?" Dean demanded. "You know what? Screw why. I'm calling Chuck right now and –"

"That is inadvisable," Cas spoke up. "Any contact with the prophet might tip off Raphael to your location."

"The prophet?" Yong squeaked. "Raphael? Like, the archangel?" He looked awed. "So now, not only do you guys have demons after you, but angels too? Oh, man, I was right – why didn't you tell me?!"

'It's a lot worse than that,' Dean wanted to say, but settled for a tart, "You know, you were having less of a freak out when you found out angels were actually real than what you're doing right now. What gives?"

"Because all that stuff that happened in the series – I thought they were made up! But if they're real…I mean, I always thought the books were bullshit. Accurate enough that maybe a hunter had written them, but the plots…" He shook his head. "If stuff like that really happens…"
He didn't seem able to complete the sentence.

"Yeah, well, it's real. It happened. We're over it, moving on," he rattled off.

"And you never answered why you look like –"

"We're moving on," Dean elucidated, not wanting to go into detail.

Yong raised a hand in silent defeat. "No, okay. You look great. Really nice." He laughed nervously, "Although, I'm kind of glad you look the way you do, because, uh, if you looked the way I pictured you in the books I don't think I'd be able to look you in the eye." He attempted to meet Dean's gaze, went beat red, and looked away quickly. "Then again…"

"Just don't tell anyone about us, okay?" Sam cut in as Dean began to consider the pros and cons of stabbing Yong with the demon-killing knife. "This is a temporary thing, but still."

"Who am I going to tell?" Yong squeaked. "I don't know if you've noticed, but people who help you tend to die. And I mean, I don't want to die, but…you guys are the closest thing I've got to finding my father, so…"

There was a tense pause, and then Dean spoke up stiffly, "You'd better have had a smarter reason to come barging in here than just bringing up those books."

"Uh, yeah, actually," Yong said, sounding sheepish. "Jane – I mean, Sam emailed me yesterday to say you had probably gotten hold of a spell to jumpstart the ritual?"

"We don't physically have it yet," Sam said. "There was an incident the other day which kind of…delayed things, but we've been told we'll have it by today or tomorrow."

'Don needs to recharge his batteries after dealing with the stalker witch,' Dean thought in amusement. 'Assuming he'll even have batteries after Maggie's done with him…'

"That's still farther along than we were," Yong said optimistically, and reached into his bag. "I brought along my dad's journal to see if we could maybe parse the rest of the ritual. Now that we've actually got a chance…" He trailed off, and then turned hopeful eyes on Cas. "A lot of it's actually written in Jeju dialect, which I'm not great at deciphering. Could you…?"

'Bullshit,' Dean thought immediately, considering Yong had been perfectly capable of reading the thing when it was just him and Sam.

He was about to point this out, but Cas was already moving across the room and Dean's attention was drawn instead to his friend's jerky, uncomfortable movements. Cas ignored Dean's inquiring gaze, which was slightly weird, but after a second Dean decided Cas was probably just tired.

Yong laid his father's journal out on the table atop the research the brothers had been doing since arriving in New York, pushing aside a few pages that had fallen out with repeated use.

"In theory, we have the spell accounted for," Cas said gravely, "but according to this we will need a keystone –"

"A what?" Sam interrupted, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and ambling over closer. He had pulled on a sweater, although that was probably more modesty than actual cold.

"Picture the spell as being the actual door into Hell, but there's a lock on it," Yong explained, sounding excited. "The keystone is what helps you open it and go through – or, at least that's what I
think the notes say. Could be something to do with soup."

"No, that comparison is sound," Cas assured him quietly. "When my garrison rescued Dean from Hell, we made use of something similar."

Which, okay, new information.

"Okay, so where do we find one of those?" Dean wanted to know. "I'm guessing we can't just pick up a rock up off the side of the road, huh?"

"A key to Hell would have to be forged in Hell, or in Hell-like conditions," Cas mused thoughtfully, leaning over Yong's and Dean's shoulders. "Consistency varies according to each plane or dimension; I would imagine here on earth, a stone similar in nature to obsidian might suffice."

Sam said something to that and Yong answered, but the actual gist of the conversation momentarily passed Dean by, because he found himself slightly distracted by Cas's close presence. It was a fact which he should have been used to. Except it was different, because for the first time, he noticed that Cas smelled – good; like coffee and fresh cut grass and something else –

'And I am putting way to much thought into that,' he rebuked himself, trying to derail those thoughts by concentrating on the discussion.

" – we'll have to come back to that one," Sam was saying, "What else?"

Yong flipped through a few dog-eared pages. "Well, there's a list of ritual items; most of them are pretty expensive, though –"

"Expensive we can deal with, as long as they exist," Sam assured him. "Go on."

"Right – uh, then you're going to need a guide. You can't just waltz into a Hell dimension and not know where you're going," Yong said.

"That makes sense," Sam put in. "If you look at all the literature on katabasis, all of them have some kind of directions or guide to follow."

"Yes, Dante and Virgil, Herakles and the gods," Yong agreed. Conversationally, he asked, "There's no actual map, but do you know anyone dead who might help you?"

"Who did your father contact?" Sam wanted to know.

"I think I saw something written several pages back," Cas said, and reached over Dean and Yong.

Yet again, Dean could smell him. It was really, really weird, because Cas had never had a scent before. There had always been that lingering trace of burnt ozone and cold that Dean imagined all angels smelled like, but nothing personal.

Maybe it wasn't personal, a small part of his brain mused. It could be that he was just smelling Jimmy's scent, although when he thought about it, he hadn't really noticed this particular smell when he'd had occasion to meet the guy.

"Hey Cas, is Jimmy dead?"

Dean's question was met with silence, and when he looked up three sets of eyes were on him: Yong and Sam seemed slightly thrown-off, but Cas only tilted his head to one side.

"His soul passed on to Heaven when Raphael slew me," he answered slowly, an inquiring note in
his words. Yong made a strangled noise at that revelation.

"Oh," Dean said, unsure of why there was an odd sense of relief at knowing that. "Cool." This time both Cas and Sam looked at him like he was crazy, and he mentally reviewed what he'd just said. "Oh – no, I meant. It's a good thing he's not suffering? And you know, maybe he could be our guide?"

"I would not feel...comfortable, requesting Jimmy's help in this, considering all that he has already given," Cas said after a moment of thought, and then added, "Besides, I believe ideally, a soul from the realm we are seeking to enter would be more suitable. It would not need the same protection as we would when we travel."

"Which brings us to the most important part of this entire thing," Yong spoke up hurriedly, while Sam shot Dean a 'what the hell?' look. "'The Protection of Death'. None of the other stuff matters unless you can get that, because as far as I know, only the souls of the dead can enter the Afterlife. And usually that means they're not coming back, so you're going to need some kind of supernatural exemption card."

"Bari said we could ask any other death god," Dean suggested. "There's got to be a whole bunch of them."

"There are quite a few deities associated with death," Yong agreed, "More than a few. Death is such a vital rite of passage in any belief system, given our own cultural preoccupation with it, that –"

"Yeah, yeah, everyone thinks Death is great," Dean made a dismissive gesture, "You ask me, the guy needs to get checked for tapeworm, with the amount he eats."

"'He'?

"Met the big guy? Yeah. One time too many," Dean shuddered, remembering being immobilized by the empty eyes of the Great Destroyer. "And before you suggest calling him up, don't. He was pretty clear on not wanting the Cage opened up again."

'And on that note, I've got to find a way to get him his ring back without actually having to see him again,' Dean thought dimly. 'I wonder if he uses FedEx?'

Yong's eyes remained as wide as plates.

"I've obviously missed a whole lot...damn it, and the next book doesn't come out until next month." Dean jabbed a finger at him warningly, lips pursed and Yong cleared his throat awkwardly. "Uh... well, moving on. Heh." He swallowed. "Now that I know they really exist, there are a few pagan gods we can try looking up. I think we'll need Cas – Castiel's know-how there."

Yong sounded uncomfortable trying to use the nickname Dean had given the angel, and Dean tried not to feel too smug about that. Drooling fanboy could suck it.

Dean made a disgusted face at himself. 'No, wait, knowing him he might.'

And, whoa, again, bad imagery!

"...not completely sure about the local psychopomps or even if location is a factor," the professor continued, "but the major religions of the world are pretty obvious choices. Hades, Anubis, Morrigan – there are even gods of other domains sometimes associates with death, like Persephone or Kali –"

"Hey, there's an idea," Sam said. "Then again, she might still be a bit ticked at us for dropping her
off at that truck stop outside Muncie."

"Screw that, we saved her life," Dean pointed out. "And Bari said that's a huge deal. We should –

But what they should do was interrupted by yet another loud pounding on the door. Everyone froze
for a moment, before a muffled voice called out, "Jane? It's Sarah."

Dean shot his brother a lewd look, and Sam quickly shoved the Supernatural book under some of
their laundry.

"Don't say anything to her about who we are," Sam ordered Yong, while Dean strode to the door
and opened it up.

Sarah was standing on the stoop, one hand on her hips and a container with four cups of coffee in the
other.

"Well, damn, if any of that's for me, I might have to kiss you," Dean said slyly.

"I think your husband might object," Sarah replied dryly, striding past Dean and setting her burden
down.

Dean grimaced and replied in a would-be-light tone, "Well, you know how every red-blooded
American guy loves a bit of girl-on-girl in the morning."

Sam shot him a scandalized look, while Cas looked away and murmured, "I am not American."

Sarah blinked, curious, and Sam quickly amended, "He's from Canada."

"Oh," Sarah said, like it explained a lot, and then peered over at Yong. "Sorry, I don't think we've…
if I had known they had company, I would have brought more than four coffees."

"I do not drink it," Cas said while Yong quickly whisked his journal and other materials off the table.

"Sarah, this is Professor Yong from NYCU," Sam introduced, "Yong, this is Sarah Blake. She
works with art and relics." As they shook hands, he turned his attention back to Sarah. "How are
Maggie and Don?"

"Back home and resting, as of last night when I stopped by – and calling off the divorce. Apparently
Don did a hell of a lot of grovelling," Sarah said, while Dean helped himself to one of the paper
cups. "They asked me to give you this. Don said you fulfilled you end of the deal."

She held something up to them, and Dean saw that it was one of those two-inch long flash drives that
secret government agencies were always trying to get their hands on in the movies.

"That's it?" he asked, incredulous at the sight of the small device.

"Yeah."

"I thought it would be, like, on some kind of scroll."

"Witches have computers too," Sarah said, sounding amused. "The magic's been infused into the
words, you just have to read them."

Sam stepped forward and reached for the drive.

"Not so fast," Sarah said, drawing away before he could grab it. "There's a catch."
Sam frowned. "When isn't there?"

"It's spelled so that only I can unlock it for you," Sarah told him, crossing her arms defiantly. "Maggie and Don want to know the reason you're trying to get to Hell."

"Maggie and Don, huh?" Dean repeated snidely, putting down the coffee he had been about to drink. "Why don't I believe that?"

"You can believe what you want. But they told me that opening the gate requires calling upon the demon they serve – meaning it's a one-time thing, and once it's done they're both probably going to be in some hot water," she replied calmly. "So you're not getting it until I know why you want to go there in the first place."

"And what, they asked you to report back?" Sam wanted to know.

"They told me to use my judgement," Sarah stated.

From the mulish gleam in her eyes, arguing with her wasn't going to work. Dean raised an eyebrow at Sam, who nodded slowly.

"Our brother Adam is trapped there," he said. When Yong made an incredulous sound at the back of his throat, he added, "We only met him recently, it turned out our dad had a…thing once, and he…"

"The kid was normal and got mixed up in our shit and ended up in Hell for his trouble," Dean ploughed onward. "So now we're trying to get him out." He glared challengingly at Sarah. "And if that isn't worthy enough, you can take your spell and shove it where the sun don't shine."

Sarah pursed her lips for a moment, and then nodded, handing over the drive.

"What about the spell?" Sam wanted to know.

"I lied," Sarah said easily. "I just wanted to know why you were going through all this trouble – though the part about the demon is true. It's a one-use kind of spell." Then, without waiting for a response or to be invited, she peered over at the research Yong was still clutching, "So what else do you need to pull this thing off?"

Dean grimaced, torn between being angry or once again impressed by her. Deciding it was too early to try to discourage the woman, he picked up the coffee again and instead watched how his brother was taking the new development. Sam was eying Sarah and shaking his head, like he couldn't believe she was real.

'Even after everything, he still likes her,' Dean thought to himself, as Yong filled her in on the requirements for the ritual. Cas watched the exchange warily, like he was trying to understand something. Likely how Sarah had suddenly become part of their little team; when he looked up at Dean, questioning, Dean made a pacifying gesture with his hand. They didn't really need Cas to go all Old Testament on a potential ally, mortal with a dislocated shoulder or not.

Dean was going to have to explain the concept of hunter networking at some point, but right now he was too tired and too invested in the piping hot cup of black coffee to care. Cas appeared to take this as a sign to relax, because he once again joined the conversation.

"It has been quite a while since I interacted with anyone from that particular pantheon, but I believe the ritual will be similar to the one we performed to summon Bari," the ex-angel said. "Although, I don't believe any of us wish to voluntarily sever our hands for the cause, which is unfortunately a requirement."
Dean wrinkled his nose. "Yum."

"Does it have to be a fresh hand?" Sarah asked, earning incredulous looks from Sam and Yong. She shrugged, "Maggie had me purchase a Hand of Glory at an auction down in New Orleans last year, and then decided she didn't need it. It's been rotting away in a curse box, but I can probably buy it off of her at a reduced rate."

"There is no specific requirement that it be newly severed," Cas said after a moment's thought. "When will you be able to procure it?"

"If I head out now, I can probably have it for you guys before noon today," Sarah said.

"That'd be great," Sam said genuinely. "Thanks Sarah. For that, and, you know, the coffee."

"I figured if I was waking you guys up at the butt crack of dawn, I might as well bring offerings," she shrugged. "I know I can't get started without a concentrated hit of caffeine, anyway."

She bid them all a brief farewell and promised to return in a few hours. Yong watched her go with a calculating expression on his face, which suddenly morphed into realization. "Wait a second… Sarah? As in…?"

"Yes," Sam said shortly, "and if you don't want to end up unconscious, you'll stop mentioning the books."

Yong looked away. "Right."

"Summoning Kali requires something additional," Cas said. "Fresh blood."

"Of course it does," Sam said wearily. "That doesn't mean we have to bleed someone out, does it?"

"No – just enough for her to imbibe as part of the rite. Menstrual blood would be ideal."

Sam, Dean and Yong all made identical faces at that.

"Why do you say things I can't unhear?" Dean groaned, and when Cas opened his mouth he went on, "Don't answer that."

"Any alternative?" Sam choked out. "We're fresh out of that."

"Thank God," Dean added, refusing to think of the fact that at some point that might not be the case. 'Just, no. I am getting my body back before then.'

"The blood of a virgin would also suffice," Castiel supposed. "It would be considered pure and untainted."

"Oh, well, good, we've got that covered, right?" Dean said, nudging the ex-angel playfully on his uninjured shoulder.

Cas stared at the spot where Dean's elbow had touched him, and then looked up blankly. "Technically, this body was Jimmy's. It was not cobbled together from nothing, but restored to its previous condition both times that I was resurrected."

"And Jimmy was married," Sam finished, realization tingeing his words. "Crap."

They were silent for a moment, and then the brothers looked at Yong in unison.
The professor noticed their expressions and yelped, "Don't look at me! I'm in a committed relationship with a barista who's a tiger in the sack. And I faint at the sight of blood, anyway."

Dean made a face. "Great."

"You or Sam would fit the requirements," Cas said suddenly, tilting his head like he was sizing them up. "Both your bodies are newly crafted, and in the sense that is important to the spell, you would both be well-suited."

"I thought you said our blood was too precious?" Sam inquired.

"It is too precious to smear on walls where any angel could trace it if they tried, or to leave in a bowl," Cas said, voice almost chiding, "As Kali drinks blood, there would be no remnant of it after the spell was carried out. Also, your blood in particular would satisfy the spell's requirements of a valuable offering."

"Fine, but Sam's going to be our donor today," Dean huffed.

"What? Why me?" Sam demanded.

"Because, asshole, knowing your girlfriend, she's going to find a way how to stick around for the ritual —"

" – she's not my — !"

" – And you had the bright idea to tell her that Cas and I are a thing – a married thing," Dean continued, "and last time I checked, marriage involves sex, which we are not actually having –"

"Thanks for that image," Sam complained while color flooded Cas's cheeks. Probably that angelic modesty thing again. "And it's not like we have to announce out loud that we're using virgin blood in the same room as Sarah. You're just being a dick."

Dean fixed him with a significant stare. "You really want to be the one cutting on me, Sammy? You know the exact amount of pressure to use? What about the right knife? Or do you want to spend the rest of the day haulin' my ass to the ER because you scratched just a little too deep?"

Dean didn't like thinking or talking about Hell. Even though in the context of this conversation it was geared toward trying to remain practical, he especially didn't like the idea of using whatever depraved skills he'd learned down under on his brother. Still, while Sam had told him about some of the stuff he had done while he was hunting on his own, that was limited to torturing demons for information. Dean had long since learned that humans – even if they were only souls – were fragile.

'But if Kali thinks that means she's going to have some kind of pagan lojack on Sam because of this, I'll show her just how fragile gods are,' he thought with a determined frown.

Cas was actually meeting his gaze right now, a silent question there. Dean remembered how unhappy Cas had been when Uriel had wanted him to torture Alistair; obviously the ex-angel was worried about Dean's mental state.

He shook his head, returning the gaze with a shrug of indifference. This was unlike that day in the warehouse. Sam must have followed their silent conversation, because he sighed.

"Fine, I'll do it," he said, before adopting a peevish look and pointing out snidely, "but the next time we need a virgin sacrifice, that's on you."
"Oh, hell no," Dean replied forcefully, recognizing Sam's attempt at lightening the mood for what it was. He allowed himself to grin. "As soon as I can, I'm going to rectify my little virginity problem. Once again, I've been –"

"So help me, Dean, if you say 're-hymenated' once more in this lifetime, I will cockblock you so hard you'll die a virgin," Sam promised him.

'Dean was dead-on,' Sam thought, with the usual annoyance that came from an older sibling being right.

Sarah was just as stubborn to be included as she had been when he first met her. After arriving with the Hand of Glory, she insisted on being around for the actual summoning of Kali, despite both Sam and Dean trying to convince her that it was dangerous and that none of this was her problem anyhow. Nothing could make her budge, and though he was pretty sure physically taking her down would work, Sam didn't really want to resort to that.

'Besides, maybe coming face to face with a Hindu war goddess will make her re-evaluate her life a bit,' he thought hopefully; Kali was freaking scary, and that was before she set herself on fire and brought out all her extra arms.

Toleration to Sarah's presence aside, Dean had practically pushed Yong out of the motel room when the professor casually suggested calling in sick to his afternoon lecture.

"If we live through this, we'll tell you all about it," Dean had insisted, already closing the door behind him as Yong tried to say goodbye to Castiel. "Friggen' fanboy."

"I do not believe that is the proper way to bid a friend farewall," Castiel had commented, although there was a dryness to his speech that Sam had come to recognize as his version of humour.

"Good thing he's not a friend," Dean had muttered, before heading out of the room to check out. They had decided that given Kali's taste for violence, a motel room was probably not the best place to summon her. Sarah had volunteered her loft apartment for the ritual, but Dean had overruled that, deciding on finding an abandoned house or farm outside of the city.

Once they had relocated, Sarah had helped them prepare, as Castiel was still supposed to be taking it easy with his injury. Several times Dean had to physically maneuver him into a sitting position while he, Sam and Sarah moved old furniture around the abandoned living room, ignoring the ex-angels protests about wanting to be useful as he did.

Still, Castiel got his way later when they started to place the ritual items within the cleared space on the floor, as he was the one who knew what he was doing and they didn't.

The dilapidated living room was darkened by closed blinds, and Dean had disconnected the ancient smoke detector in the room, considering with their luck the candles and incense might still set it off. The Hand of Glory was placed in a wide bowl, turned palm-side up to cup a mixture of hibiscus, sandalwood, ganja and water lily petals. Beside the bowl lay a smooth black onyx stone.

Once they finished setting up the makeshift ritual space, Castiel stepped forward and began to intone the quiet incantation, from memory.

Castiel would be the one to speak the invocation summoning Kali, not least of all because his
pronunciation was a lot better than Sam's. Sam was surprised that Sarah hadn't commented on the guy's seemingly limitless knowledge of the occult, but it was possible she was sticking with her first impression of him being an 'academic'.

"Kali Mahamaya," Castiel began to murmur quietly, "hamēm suna…"

The constant stream of Hindi washed over them, and Sam found himself listening in fascination despite being unable to understand any of it. He was so lost in the sound, that Dean had to nudge him to remind him that he also had a part to play in this.

Wincing as the ex-angel expectantly held out a small clay bowl, Sam watched Dean take up the small silver knife and put it to his skin. His brother had an unreadable expression on his face, which Sam knew came from his dislike of the idea of cutting into him; still, Dean knew better than anyone just how much force was needed to get a certain amount of blood, and if Sam trusted anyone to do this, it was Dean.

His brother made quick, careful cuts, which stung but which Sam endured with ease – almost ten years in Hell had increased his tolerance for pain – although he heard a sharp intake of breath from Sarah's direction. Castiel collected the blood that ran down Sam's arms and wrists in the clay bowl, and then placed it on the table they were using as a makeshift altar.

While Sarah handed Sam bandages to staunch the flow of the blood, Castiel dipped the black onyx in the blood and placed it into the bowl with the herbs and Had of Glory. Using one of the candles to light the contents of the bowl on fire, he spoke the last word of the summoning and stepped back.

A horrendous smell of burning flesh and pot filled the room as the contents of the bowl smoldered and smoked. Then, without warning, the entire room trembled and the smoke in the bowl grew in volume, spilling downward and out until it took a vaguely humanoid form.

When it cleared, the familiar figure of a brown skinned, black-eyed woman in red and gold silk stood there. And judging from her expression, she wasn't happy.

"Who are you that you dare to summon me like a dog?" Kali hissed, looking at them each with fury in her eyes; Sam wouldn't have been surprised if there was actual flame burning in her irises. "Give me one good reason why I should not drain the blood from your bodies and bathe in it?"

"Aw, come on, princess, we're old friends, remember?" Dean suggested, and Sam held back a groan at his brother's lack of tact. "Muncie, Indiana ringing any bells?"

Angry eyes narrowed further, but there was a gleam of recognition there. "Michael and Lucifer's receptacles." She narrowed her eyes. "Your forms are different."

"That's a long story," Sam said, eyes flitting to Sarah who was staring at Kali in undisguised awe. Clearly she had never summoned a pagan god before.

"Too bad. I don't have the time to hear it," she said coldly.

Dean suddenly began to choke, grasping at his throat. Sam saw blood begin to leak over his brother's lips, but when he tried to make a move, the same thing happened to him.

'Well this was a great idea,' he couldn't help thinking as he gasped for breath.

Businesslike, Kali turned to Castiel and Sarah, ignoring Sam and Dean's choking. "What excuse do you two have to escape a similar fate?"
"They saved your life," Castiel told her quietly, face carefully blank and holding up a hand to keep Sarah from intervening. "You understand the bond that creates. Killing them would not erase it, and then you would never be free of it."

"Maybe," she said with a terrible smile that Sam could only just make out over his blurring eyes. Blood was running down his nose, now too. "But maybe I'm willing to accept that. I lost family in that godforsaken, rat-infested hole. And it's their fault."

"The angels would just bring them back," Castiel was saying. "They would be put back to the use intended of them by the Host, and then you would become a target again."

"More of a target than I am now?" she snapped. She peered closely at him. "And who are you, that you know so much about the Judeo-Christian tyrants?"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that you have an advantage right now that you are choking to death."

At Castiel's continued stare, Kali let out a huff of breath and snapped her finger.

Instantly, Sam could breathe again, and Dean let out a hushed string of swearing.

'Go, Cas,' Sam thought with a wheeze.

"Lady, if you do this to people who help you, I really don't want to see what you do to people you don't like," Dean rasped, his voice sounding like sandpaper.

"Are you guys okay?" Sarah whispered, speaking for the first time. She continued to stare at Kali, though, like she expected the same thing to happen to her, but Kali was once again focussed on the brothers.

"Why have you brought me here?" Kali demanded then, crossing her arms. "You're taking me away from urgent business in Afghanistan."

"We – uh, we were wondering if we could ask a favor of you," Sam said hesitantly, not liking the way her attention was suddenly sharply focussed on him. "See, we're trying to –"

"We need the Protection of Death," Dean broke in, his impatience obviously winning over caution. "We heard you can do that for us."

Kali blinked, obviously not having expected that. She gazed at Castiel, suspicious, and then back at the brothers. "You seek the Afterlife."

"More like someone in it," Dean corrected. "But yeah."

"And you think I would grant you this most sacred protection?" Kali scoffed. "Others have asked this of me, and I have refused."

"Had they saved your lives?" Sam reminded her.

She pursed her lips, sharp eyes watching him, and he had to force himself not to look away. Eventually it was Kali who broke the link, only to turn to the altar and pick up the clay bowl of blood. Frowning thoughtfully, she brought it to her lips, and Sam ignored the way goosebumps appeared across his back and arms at the knowledge that she was drinking his blood.

She turned back to them, lips stained red.
"Very well," she said, unconcernedly dropping the clay bowl to the ground, where it shattered. "I will grant you this protection, but under one condition. There is something I need you to do for me."

"Hey, lady, you're the one that owes us," Dean protested.

"And you're the ones asking for help, so the terms are mine to dictate," Kali replied, smiling unkindly.

Which was probably the best deal they were going to get that didn't end in them choking up their lungs, so after a quick glance to one another, both Sam and Dean nodded.

"I need you to find someone for me," Kali told them.

"If you ask us to find another damn witch, you can go screw yourself," Dean grumbled, ignoring Sam when he elbowed him.

"I have no use for a whore," Kali said airily. Sarah opened her mouth to object, but Sam managed to catch her eye before she did, and she closed her mouth into a thin line. "The person I seek is of a more distinguished pedigree."

"And you've never heard of Google?" Dean wanted to know.

She ignored him, and Sam tentatively asked, "Exactly…what kind of pedigree are we talking here?"

"The kind that can contain this," Kali replied, pulling something out from beneath her scarf. It was a necklace, he realized, and at the end of it a vial where something bright and smokey swirled… something very familiar…

"Is that…?" Sam asked, eyes widening.

"It is," Castiel spoke up, staring at the object in Kali's hands and then at her with a calculating expression. "Even mortal, I can sense it."

"Wait, what?" Sarah asked, wrenching her gaze from the alluring trinket over to Castiel.

"That's an angel's grace," Dean stated, ignoring her.

"Archangel's, actually," Castiel said. "Gabriel's. But it is not whole."

There was a pause as his words sunk in, and Sarah balked.

"Gabriel's?" she repeated. "The archangel Gabriel? Like, came to Mary and told her she had bun in the oven 'Gabriel'?"

"That's him," Dean put in, "Though we called him 'douchebag.'"

Kali bristled, and Sam quickly asked Castiel, "How do you know? I thought he died – I mean – he said he was dead, in that message he left to us."

"Only Death can truly destroy any being," Kali maintained coolly. "Until he has his say, there is no such thing as oblivion. Loki endures."

"Wait, *Loki*?" Sarah asked. "I'm clearly missing something here."

"Later," Dean cut her off, and faced Kali again. "So you're saying you can resurrect him?"
"Yes."

"Then why the hell didn't you do that before?" he demanded. "We could have used an archangel that actually liked humanity on our side when the shit went down!"

"Because she did not know it was possible," Castiel declared before the goddess could reply. Then, to Sam and Dean's surprise and Sarah's confusion, he tilted his head toward Kali deferentially, "I assume Gabriel left you something of his, something that retained a spark of his essence. Is that how Balthazar found you?"

Kali's eyes flashed in understanding. "Yes."

"Who the hell is Balthazar?" Sarah demanded, while Sam shrugged.

"Don't look at me, I don't know any more than you do right now," he said, "though I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Balthazar is his brother."

'Possibly the one who's been hiding Bobby,' he thought.

"You are the one who sent the angel to track down whatever shards of grace he could," Kali stated, and then looked Castiel over again. "Yet you are mortal."

"Yes, I—"

"Alright, time out, everyone shut up!" Dean declared, waving his arms in a demand of attention. He rounded on Castiel. "Cas, what the fuck is going on here?"

Castiel considered Dean for a second, and then an expression of guilt passed over his features. "I apologize. This was not relevant to your retrieval of your brother, and so I did not think it needed to be mentioned."

"Didn't think…?" Dean trailed off, anger and disbelief warring for control of his face.

"Raphael is the last archangel in Heaven, and has such as been attempting to restart the Apocalypse, as you know," Castiel explained. "With Michael and Lucifer in the Cage, the only one with a chance of stopping Raphael is another archangel."

"But you –" Sam started, but stopped when Castiel gave him a warning look. 'Oh. Right. Talking about how high on the food chain he was in front of Kali is probably not a good idea.'

"So, what, you left orders to find Gabriel with one of your dick brothers?" Dean asked.

"'Brother'?" Sarah spoke up, and Sam could hear frustration beginning to overtake her confusion. He opened his mouth to try to calm the situation, but Dean was ranting again.

"Why didn't you just tell us?! You trust him over us? Her, even?"

"I could rip your tongue out," Kali warned conversationally.

"I have been trying to keep you out of Heaven's affairs as you wished," Castiel explained, sounding annoyed. "And I had not realized that Gabriel would have entrusted anything to a pagan." He looked at Kali again. "Nor did I realize Balthazar would either. When he tracked the remnants of Gabriel's presence to you, his first reaction must have been to try to destroy you. And yet you stand here, with shards of Gabriel's grace intact. You must have been very convincing to persuade one of God's soldiers to leave an archangel's grace in your keeping."
"He seemed a little busy at the time," Kali replied, her tone suggesting she had no intention of revealing what had happened. "Something about a dumpy old hunter running him ragged. I suppose he simply couldn't handle the burden."

Castiel's eyes snapped angrily, and he made an aborted movement like he was going for a sword that was no longer there.

"Not the point, Cas!" Dean put in, his own annoyance effectively diffusing the situation. "This is something we could be helping you with."

"All while avoiding your enemies and trying to enter Hell?" Castiel questioned, and Sam nearly did a double take at the use of sarcasm. Even Dean was caught off guard, if his decision to clamp his mouth shut and glare was anything to go by.

Because unfortunately, Castiel was right.

'One problem at a time,' Sam told himself, checking to see if Sarah's head had exploded from information overload yet. He was just glad their identities hadn't come up yet. He was pretty sure that would be the tipping point.

"Look, whatever's done is done," Sam spoke up. "Let's try to deal with this Gabriel issue first."

"That would be wise, as we are not the only ones trying to find Gabriel's grace," Castiel agreed, grudging. "Or his new vessel."

"Raphael," Sam proposed.

"Yes," Castiel said. "Once he realizes that someone is trying to return Gabriel to Heaven, he will do his best to stop it from happening."

"Ninja turtle boy likes being the only cock of the walk, huh?" Dean posited.

Sam turned to Kali. "Why can't you just teleport up to whoever's sacred enough to contain Gabriel and ask them if they don't mind lending their body out long enough to stop Raphael?"

"If that were even possible, I would have done it already," the goddess sniffed. "This little summoning of yours? Is little more than an extremely powerful form of astral projection or bilocation. Those like me cannot simply appear and disappear on a whim – not since the old days. Which makes it a little hard to track down a vessel."

"Not only that, but only angels know the identity of their respective vessels," Castiel added, "and only they can make it known. The Host knew of you both because Michael and Lucifer were hunting you. But generally, we do not share our vessels' identities because it would be dangerous."

"So how the hell are we supposed to find Gabriel's vessel if no one but him knew where it was?"

"That is problematic," Castiel agreed. "It is possible that we could engage in research to track down the last vessel and then trace his descent, but there would be –" Castiel's eyes shifted out of focus, like he was realizing something, and then he was staring back at Sam and Dean as though something had just occurred to him. "You two."

Dean tensed. "What about us?"

"There was one place where the vessels of all the angels were written down," Castiel said. "The War Scroll."
"The Wa – wait, that thing from 1954?" Sam clarified.

"Yes. You have both seen it."

Sarah's head swivelled around to look at him. He winced, remembering that as an expert in relics, she would know about the missing end section of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"But it got destroyed," Dean said, tensely. Sam knew he didn't like thinking about that particular trip to New York very much.

"It does not matter. You looked upon it. No doubt you would have glimpsed the lineage of Gabriel's vessels, whether by accident or by design."

"That's a great leap in logic, Cas, but I don't remember anything on it except for yours and ours," Dean said. He looked sideways at his brother. "You?"

Sam shook his head, then asked, "Besides, even if I did remember, what's to stop Raphael from just going back in time for it before it's destroyed? Or going back in time to when it was written?"

"The same thing which makes it impossible for any angel to do that," Castiel replied. "The scroll can only be seen by humans. Angels cannot even put their hands on it."

"So why can't they just mindfuck some Joe Schmo human to read it for them?" Dean wanted to know. "Zachariah got those religious fanatics to do his dirty work before."

"That would be impossible. Those scrolls were penned by prophets – God's might protects those scrolls, preventing any angel from gaining its knowledge," Castiel intoned. "Even through the use of…loopholes."

"Oh yeah? How can you be sure?"

"If it were possible, it would have been done already," Castiel said, sounding testy. "Raphael is nothing if not opportunistic."

Dean asked, "Then why do we have to worry about Raphael even finding this vessel?"

"Because while he may not be able to find the vessel immediately, he has the full power of the Host and all its tools at his disposal," Castiel said. "He can track omens, prophecies, convergent timelines – eventually he will find the vessel. I wouldn't be surprised if he has already narrowed down the time of birth and general area."

"So we have to get there first," Sam realized.

"Not only that – we must convince the vessel to take Gabriel's grace into him or her," Castiel said. "Otherwise Raphael will destroy every possible vessel to ensure he remains the only archangel in Heaven."

"Great," Dean sighed. "And how are we doing this again?"

"Well, not to interrupt your little brainstorming session," Kali spoke up, a sinister smile appearing on her lips, "but if you're interested, I may have a way."

Sam and Dean exchanged wary glances, neither of them liking the look on her face.
"Damn it, it's like the ice cream headache from Hell," Dean complained. "She mind-rape me – why didn't she mind-rape you? You totally have the nerd brain and she was lookin' at you, and everything…"

"Probably because I didn't spend the afternoon baiting her," Sam replied as he searched through online profiles. Typing the name 'Jason Williams' into the search engine kept bringing up links to the websites of professional athletes, and so he was hoping that the guy at least used Facebook or some other social media site. Other windows had links to census records and he was toying with the idea of hacking into the social security network.

It figured that even once Kali pulled her weird Vulcan mind-meld thing on Dean and he had rattled off the name they needed with a creepy, vacant expression ("Gabriel…borne by the progeny of Azaziah…Sidney Johnson, who begat Jason Williams…"), she had told them they would have to find him without her.

"If Raphael and his followers are already there, and they sense Gabriel's grace on me, I might as well just bend my neck and wait for them to chop it off," she had told them with a sniff. "Now if you excuse me, I have a flight to book. Call me once you find the vessel."

And after leaving a cellphone number, she had disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Sarah had stood completely still for a long moment, and then looked at Sam and Dean in turn.

"I'm going to…go get rid of that mess," she told them, slowly, like she was trying to keep her voice from wavering. Hesitantly approaching the remnants of the altar, like she was expecting Kali to jump out again and bite her, she took the herbs and the burned Hand of Glory and disappeared.

She stayed away a little longer than it should have taken. Sam had a feeling she was just trying to compose herself, because he didn't hear the telltale sound of a car door slamming or wheels on gravel. Kali wasn't exactly the fluffy bunny of the hunting world, and if Sam had only been a part of that world for five years, he would have needed a moment to figure things out as well.

'Of course, maybe she's just talking herself into getting the hell out of here,' he had thought as he booted up his laptop and started searching for their mysterious vessel. 'It'd be the smart thing to do.'

While he tried to distract himself, Dean and Castiel packed away whatever supplies they had brought inside with them.

"She shouldn't have been here for this," Sam murmured idly as he waited for his browser to load. "We should have made her leave after getting the Hand."

"'We'?" Dean snorted. "You're the one who wouldn't say 'no' when she invited herself along. And she was the one who didn't leave when we told her it would be a lot to handle. This is on you two."

"Then why didn't you step in and say something!" Sam grumbled. "You're not exactly known for keeping your opinion to yourself."

"I was busy trying to stop that nutcase from humping Cas' leg," Dean shot back, ignoring the sharp look of confusion the former angel sent his way. "Besides, wasn't it your cunning plan to have Kali scare the crap out of her enough that she wants to leave? This is a good thing."
"Yeah? And what if she doesn't?"

"Doesn't what?"

"Doesn't leave?" Sam pressed. "Remember last time? Instead of calling the cops on us, she helped us break into a crypt. We're not exactly dealing with some naïve girl next door. What are we going to tell her if she wants answers?"

"Why should we tell her anything?" Dean countered. "We're heading out as soon as you figure out where our vessel friend is. She's not."

Sam paused for a moment. "Maybe she should."

Dean whirled around to stare at him. "What?"

"That is not a good idea," Castiel stated immediately.

"Just… hear me out," Sam said, holding his hands up in a pacifying gesture. "Right now, we need all the help we can get. Yong's already in our corner – Bobby vouched for him, and he's got a personal stake in this," Sam went on. "Not to mention now that he knows who we are, he's probably going to lock himself inside a protective bunker because he thinks people who work with us get killed."

"Because they do," Dean put in.

"But Sarah's not completely on our side," Sam went on. "I mean, she helped us out with the witch and the summoning, because that's just the type of person she is. She helps people. But she also just heard a whole lot of stuff about us, most of it bad –"

"Your fault," Dean interrupted.

"Which might make her less inclined to help us," Sam continued on as though he hadn't heard, "And we need all the help we can get right now. With Bobby out of the game, and Cas grounded –" Castiel folded his arms, looking both regretful and annoyed, "– she could be useful."

Dean licked his lips and fixed Sam with a knowing stare. "You sure this is just about her being useful and not you wanting to bone her?"

"Dean!" Sam hissed. "God! What is wrong with you!"

"What? It's obvious you still have a thing for her," Dean shrugged. "And she strikes me as pretty open-minded, so the girl thing probably wouldn't bother her –"

"She's – that's not the point!" Sam attempted.

"Dude, you need to get laid. Probably more than I do. And right now she's your best option, unless you intend to invest in a pulse-action showerhead in the near future –"

"What the hell!" Sam groaned out loud, pressing the palms of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars. "Damn it, Dean, not everything is about sex!"

"Of course not!" Dean looked momentarily scandalized at the suggestion, and then grinned, "Some stuff's about pie."

"Okay, you know what? Fine, you're right," Sam muttered, looking away. "It's probably best if she stays here. I mean… what would we even tell her anyway?"
"Doesn't matter. We're leaving her here?"

"We've got to tell her something, Dean, especially after what she just saw. Damage control."

"You could always lead with the truth," Dean suggested. "I think we've established that she's pretty good with the weird."

"Yeah, no, obviously," Sam rolled his eyes. "But...how much of the truth?"

His brother sent him an odd look. "Wanna elaborate on that thought?"

"Obviously we'd tell her about the archangels and Lucifer and the Cage and all that, but...what about this?" he gestured at his chest meaningfully.

"She's gonna find out at some point -- in fact, I'd be amazed if she hasn't heard about us through hunter channels," Dean shrugged as he threw a bunch of candles into a box. "Open-minded, remember? I bet she'd understand."

They heard footsteps on the porch outside, and Sam jabbed a finger at his brother. "Don't you say one word to her about --"

"Relax, Samantha, I'll let you be the bearer of that particular batch of bad news," Dean shrugged. "Just make sure I'm around when you tell her. I want to see her face."

"You know, I'm beginning to miss the days of working tech support at Sandover," Sam groused as the sound of the front door opening signified Sarah's return.

"Nah, that uniform made you look like a giant banana."

Sarah's expression was carefully blank as she entered the living room where they had conducted the summoning ritual, and after standing uncertainly for half a second, she sat down heavily on a moth-eaten ottoman and fixed them with an apprehensive look.


"Sarah, we don't have to..."

"Yes we do," she said, swallowing and setting her shoulders. "There's too much about this world I still don't know, and there are angels out there now, too..." She shook her head and leaned forward, a determined set to her brow and her fingers steepled beneath her chin. "So, they're real."

Sam exchanged a look with Dean, who made a 'hands-off' gesture, and then sighed. "Yeah."

"That's kind of...I mean, I knew demons..." she started, then stopped, a perplexed expression on her face, before she tried again. "If angels exist, does that mean...God?"

"Is a dick," Dean put in helpfully. Sam glared at him, and even Castiel offered him a look of resigned disapproval. Considering he was sure God had resurrected him in the graveyard at Stull, the former angel was back to having faith in his absent father. Not that Dean seemed to care about that, because he mirrored their unimpressed looks right back. "What? I'd like to see you argue that point."

"You could be a little more tactful about it," Sam chided.

"We don't have time for tact," Dean shrugged.

"It's okay," Sarah spoke up cautiously. "I'm not really into that stuff. I mean, my mom was, but after
she died…anyway. I've always believed in deism, personally."

"Translation, for those of us who weren't nerdy enough for college?" Dean deadpanned.

"In short, it's the divine watchmaker analogy," Sam explained. "God creates the universe and then steps back to let it run on its own."

"Look how well that turned out," Dean grumbled. "Angels Gone Wild."

"You mean, angels are bad?" Sarah asked.

"No," Castiel told her firmly. "Angels are soldiers. We – they exist to follow God's orders and carry out His will. It is not within our – their nature to ascribe to dichotomies, only to ensure His will is done – and His will is just."

"Oh," she said, nodding as though she got it although Sam could tell she really didn't. She squinted at Castiel. "So, you were an angel?"

"Yes."

"But you're…not. Anymore."

"No."

"And you gave up your…'grace' was it?"

Castiel paused for a moment, glancing at Dean and Sam as though to ask if he had to continue the charade; when they both gave him identical nods, he tilted his head in acquiescence. "…Yes."

"Because you were in love with Erica," Sarah posited cautiously.

Sam noticed Dean flinch and Castiel's eyes suddenly flicker with something almost resembling panic, before he coughed, and said, "I love all my Father's creations, but humanity especially."

Which for some reason sounded almost like a cop-out to Sam, even though he knew it was true. Castiel always looked a little shifty when he attempted to lie, and right now he was sporting that same look.

'Maybe it's lying about being in love with a woman that doesn't technically exist,' Sam mused. 'I mean, he's never been in love, so I guess pretending he is, is weird. Even if it is really Dean."

"But you married her," Sarah pressed. "I mean, you wouldn't have done that if –"

"Can we focus on something other than that right now?" Dean demanded, color rising in his cheeks and eyes shooting invisible daggers Sam's way. "Like the heavenly civil war that we're about to get in the middle of?"

"Yeah," Sarah said, sounding as though she was embarrassed for inquiring into their nonexistent personal life. She shifted uneasily, and then turned her attention on Castiel once again. "So that body – your body – is that a…a vessel?"

"It was."

"You mean it belonged to someone else?" Sarah's eyes widened. "And you just…took it?"

"Jimmy was a pious man whose faith was rewarded," Castiel said, his jaw tightening with something
akin to anger. "He gave his permission for me to use this body. I had every intention of returning it to him before Raphael struck us down. His soul resides in Heaven now, and he is at peace."

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be rude," Sarah said quickly. "It's just…this is a lot to take in. Angels and vessels… I thought I'd gotten a handle on this supernatural stuff because I exorcised a few spirits, but you guys are…" Once again, she trailed off and then looked at Sam and Dean. "And you're both vessels too? To Michael and…" she swallowed, "…Lucifer?"

"Guilty," Dean said easily. "Though you can see we're both archangel and devil free, at the moment." He grinned lazily. "Care to guess who's who? I bet you it'd surprise you."

"That's not funny," Sam snapped.

"It's a little funny," Dean pointed out. "You know, after all the Apocalypse crap, if you sit down and think about it."

"Hold on, wait – the Apocalypse?" Sarah interrupted. "That's what's been going on the last year?"

Sam carefully hid his surprise at that. He hadn't realized that there were hunters out there that didn't know what was going on. He would have expected someone who was friends with two witches to have gotten the memo, but judging by Sarah's completely flabbergasted expression, that discussion had obviously never come up.

'I guess de-ghosting haunted antiques is a far cry from Revelations,' he thought as Dean said, "Got it in one – Lucifer versus Michael, Celebrity Death Match."

"But it's not going on now," Sarah said carefully. "I take it you stopped it."

"More like delayed it until it's actually supposed to happen," Sam corrected.

"How?" Sarah asked, genuinely curious.

"Hail Mary Pass basically," Dean said. "We managed to trick him into the Cage. Along with our pal Mikey. It's a lot more complicated than it sounds, but I figure you want the cliff-notes version of this."

Sarah made a choked noise, and turned her gaze to Sam, looking pained and impressed all at once. "Did you two…?"

"Nah, we didn't angel up and throw down against each other," Dean assured her, skating over the truth of what had happened. As much as Sam wanted to be honest with Sarah, he wasn't ready for her to know everything he had done up to the point where he said 'yes' to Lucifer. He was glad Dean was leaving all that out, even though his brother probably trusted him to reveal it on his own.

'Along with the fact that my body used to be male,' he thought grimly.

There were several moments of silence where she processed the story. Meanwhile Sam, and probably Dean if his expression was anything to go by, relived those tense thirty-six hours. Or, in Sam's case, almost ten years.

"So where does the brother in Hell come into play?" Sarah wanted to know, her tone tentative. "Or was that just a lie?"

"No, that part's true," Dean said grimly. "Know how we said we tricked Lucifer and Michael into the Cage?"
"Yeah."

"The angelic prick that is Michael went and shanghaied Adam before we could stop him."

"That's what you meant when you say he got caught up in your lives," Sarah murmured, sympathy and understanding flooding her words. "Did he...die?"

"No, pretty sure he's still alive," Dean said tightly. "He's just trapped in Hell, in a Cage with Michael and Lucifer."

"And that's why you're going through all of this?"

"He's family," Dean shrugged.

Sarah shook her head, and then exhaled lowly. "Wow."

"Yeah," Sam agreed.

"So if you're vessels and you deal with angels all the time, why can't you just get one of your angel friends to help you free him?"

"Freeing a soul from the Pit requires the concentrated force of the Host," Castiel broke in, "which we do not have the luxury of now. And breaking into the Cage without freeing Michael and Lucifer requires something that is no longer in my power to give. As for 'friends', there are few angels whom would be trustworthy enough to call upon. Even then, they would not likely venture into Hell of their own volition for one mortal soul. The last time such a thing happened, we perceived it to be God's command."

"'We'?' Sarah repeated. "You've been to Hell? Holy –" She swallowed, looking sheepish, then cleared her throat, and asked, "Who was important enough to get rescued from Hell?"

There was a long silence in the room, where both Sam and Castiel's gazes went to Dean, who tensed and kept a determinedly blank expression. Sarah followed their attention, and her jaw went completely slack. "No way – you were dead?"

"Temporarily," Dean said stiffly. "And no, it wasn't because I killed babies or talked at the movies." He waved his hand, impatient and understandably reluctant to talk about that period of time. "Moving on."

But Sarah continued to stare in awe. "But you were important enough that God –"

"Hey, it's not what you think," Dean snapped defensively. "It was just Michael wanting his vessel topside, okay? Don't go thinking I'm some kind of...holy something or other."

"Your soul –" Castiel began.

"If you start waxing poetry about my soul again, I will beat you," Dean warned. "Screwy shoulder or not."

Castiel made a face that Sam might have described as a pout if he didn't know the ex-angel so well, and said mutinously, "You killed the Whore of Babylon. Only a true servant of God could have –"

"You know what? I've got a car to pack," Dean said, throwing up his hands and standing. "Call me when you guys stop gossiping about how I'm about to be canonized or some shit."

He stomped out.
"And that would be D – Erica exercising her remarkable capacity for denial until she pulls something," Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair distractedly. Castiel looked torn, like he wanted nothing more than to follow Dean, but something was keeping him back. To Sam's surprise, he remained behind with them.

'Now that's weird,' Sam thought. Castiel was practically Dean's shadow since they had rescued him from Detroit, and all of a sudden he was discovering a sense of individuality?

"Okay," Sarah interrupted Sam's thoughts. "So, the angels aren't going to want to help. Or, some of them. Didn't you say there was another one? Balthazar?"

"Yes," Castiel sad, "he is an ally, but he is leading the angels who resist Raphael at the moment. I am…worried, though, that his capabilities are being stretched too thin."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

"Balthazar's ability to help is severely limited," Castiel lamented. "I already overstepped when I asked to have him seek out Gabriel's grace…" He clenched his good fist. "Much as it goes against all that I am to say it, it is fortunate that he encountered Kali and that she proved amenable to taking up the task. It was…commendable, for a pagan."

"Right, scary goddess lady," Sarah put in, perking up a little. "Didn't she call Gabriel 'Loki'?"

"Gabriel was in 'witness protection', as he put it," Sam explained.

Sarah blinked.

"Witness protection," she echoed, incredulous.

"Yeah. He got tired of the angelic in-fighting and decided to run away and pretend to be a pagan for a millennium or two," Sam clarified. "Oh, and apparently he and Kali had a thing."

"So that's why she wants to bring him back."

"I guess," Sam agreed. "I'm still a bit confused about that, because she was kind of pissed at him the last time they were together."

"I feel like I've fallen into an episode of Passions," Sarah confided.

"You do not appear overcome by lust," Castiel observed.

"Pop-culture reference, Cas," Sam corrected because Dean wasn't there to do it, while Sarah appeared bemused.

"One last question," she pronounced.

"I don't believe you," Sam told her plainly, earning a small smile from her. He ignored the way his stomach did a little flip at the sight.

"Should have asked this at the beginning – why does Gabriel – or any angel for that matter – need a vessel?" Sarah wanted to know. "You guys are all powerful, right? Don't you have your own bodies?"

"Our true forms are harmful to mortals, and when we walk on earth we must take human form," Castiel explained.
"Okay, I get that – but this whole Apocalypse thing. If Michael and Lucifer were going to battle it out, why did they need bodies to do it?"

"Because it was prophesied," Castiel said.

"But why?"

Castiel stared at Sarah as though she was speaking some language that he didn't understand, and Sam quickly spoke up, "I'm guessing whoever made the prophecy had a reason, but Cas wouldn't know, right?"

"It was, as you say, above my pay grade," Castiel agreed hesitantly.

"Is it prophesied that Gabriel needs a body? Or is that just Kali wanting her boyfriend back?" Sarah wanted to know, which honestly, hadn't even occurred to Sam to think.

"Not entirely," Castiel allowed. "With his grace scattered, Gabriel will be unable to reform by himself within the next few billion years. A receptacle is required to contain his grace, as more than a few shards in one place will be noticeable. Raphael's forces could find and take it from Kali at any time, right now."

"And finding a vessel helps, how?" Sam asked.

"If we find the vessel and the vessel agrees to take the shards in, the grace will be safe. The body will provide a place for Gabriel to become whole again."

"But what about the person? The vessel?" Sarah asked. "Do they just…disappear?"

"The souls of vessels remain in the same body, usually. However, in this circumstance, I would imagine that it will be a long while before this vessel cedes control of himself even if he agrees," Castiel said. "Not with so little of Gabriel's grace within him. If we are unlucky, it will take his entire mortal life or longer time before Gabriel is made whole."

"You're kidding me," Sam choked, because he did not want this war in Heaven taking the rest of a mortal lifetime, least of all because it meant he and Dean might be stuck as women forever.

"No. Once he is found, we will need to ensure his protection," Castiel went on. "Obviously it is my hope that our allies will be able to track down Gabriel's grace faster than a mortal lifetime."

"I see," Sarah said, for lack of anything else to say.

Castiel nodded, and an uncomfortable silence passed over them, fraught with Sarah trying to process everything and Sam trying to talk himself into revealing the last little bit of information he had been holding back. He shifted uncomfortably, opening his mouth several times to speak up, and closing it just as abruptly when he couldn't find the words.

Castiel observed him with vague interest, training his clear blue eyes on him curiously. Sam started to feel a little bit like a goldfish being watched by a really invested kid.

"Hey, Cas, why don't you go check on Erica?" Sam suggested, smiling encouragingly. "Make sure she isn't angsting all over the car."

"That sounds unpleasant," Castiel frowned, although he rose to do just that.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Sam exhaled and turned to Sarah. "There's something else."
"I figured," she nodded. "Does it have anything to do with what Kali said? About how you and your sister don't always look like this?"

"Yeah," Sam said, and then swallowed. This was it – the perfect opening to admit the truth to Sarah. But right now, she was looking at him like a friend and without a hint of discomfort. That would go away when she found out that he was a guy she had slept with a few years before, only now with magically grown breasts and a vagina.

Or worse, she would be pissed off because he hadn't told her the minute he ran into her at Maggie Stark's gallery. Jess used to get unjustifiably mad at little stuff like that, which he had learned to live with, and now that his own brain was thinking on different wavelengths, he could sort of see that side of the story.

Didn't mean he wanted to experience the fallout, though.

"It's sort of a spell. We're kind of in our own…witness protection program," Sam explained hesitantly, completely waffling out. "There are a lot of people not too happy with our role in the Apocalypse right now –"

"But that wasn't your fault!"

"Try telling them that," Sam shrugged. "It never works."

"That sucks."

"Tell me about it."

"So how do you two normally look?"

"Uhm…bigger," Sam managed, his mind drawing a blank both at how much he should actually tell her and how to describe himself. He'd never really given it any thought before. "Shorter hair…kinda the same as now, only different."

Sarah laughed at this. "What, you don't have any pictures of yourself?"

"Not here," Sam told her. "We got rid of all our old IDs and pictures after the change, just in case."

"But you're going to turn back, right?"

"Eventually," Sam said. 'I hope.'

"Well, I hope it's sooner rather than later, because I'd hate to get to know you, then have you go away and come back a completely different person."

"I'm the same person," Sam protested quickly. "Just my looks are different. If I were to change back…you'd know."

'Or not,' he thought ruefully, considering their current situation.

"Is there anything else I should know?" Sarah asked.

The moment hung there between them, telling Sam it was time to confess.

"…Not really," he finally muttered.

"Good," she said decisively.
They were quiet for a spell, listening to the muffled sound of arguing out front – Cas was probably trying to convince Dean of the purity of his soul or something – before Sam spoke up again. "So are you...okay?"

"I'm processing," Sarah replied. "It'll take a bit."

"Oh," Sam looked away.

There must have been something in his tone, because Sarah asked, "Why?"

Sam frowned to himself as he thought about how he was going to answer her. Dean and Cas were right to have objections, but Sam couldn't shake the niggling feeling he had that it would be a bad idea to leave Sarah behind.

What was to say the forces of Heaven and Hell wouldn't decide to go after every person the Winchesters had ever met before Dean made his deal in an attempt to find them? Neither side was exactly known for their forgiving nature. A more immediate concern was the fact that Sarah was admitted friends with a bunch of witches and who knew what else. He doubted she would outright tell anyone anything about him and Dean, but even a small slip might cause problems. He was still wary of the Starks knowing that he and Dean had their bodies altered.

"Jane?" Sarah prompted, and Sam glanced up.

'Dean's going to kill me,' he thought as he made up his mind.

"This is the worst idea you've had in a long time," Dean muttered, drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel while they waited for Sarah to come out of her apartment. "We're burning daylight here."

"You've said that already," Sam answered with forced patience. "Six times in the last hour."

After Sarah and Sam had come out of the abandoned farmhouse, Sam had announced that Sarah was going to be coming along with them, all the while giving Dean meaningful looks that begged him not to argue. Despite the rush they were in Dean had decided to hear his brother out.

At the moment, though, he was sorely tempted to just peel away from the apartment before Sarah could return with her things.

"I too am somewhat confused," Cas agreed from the shotgun. "I thought you had agreed that leaving her behind would be in everyone's best interests."

"Well, I thought about it and I don't think it is," Sam grimaced, a petulant tone in his voice. "And I already told you why."

"Using Bobby being AWOL is still grasping at straws," Dean shot back.

"Dean, this is a huge pile of crap we've landed in, and we need all the help we can get."

"What the hell, Sammy, this is just our average Wednesday," Dean protested. "Bringing her along, she's just going to get in the way – or worse, get hurt."

"Who's to say she won't get hurt just for having some kind of connection to us?" Sam argued. "It's
happened before, with Mom's people – all of them were killed because a demon decided it wanted to tie up loose ends."

"So, what, now you want to go find every person we've ever helped and make sure they don't have some kind of supernatural target on their forehead?" Dean snapped, "Or is it just the chicks you've slept with who haven't died yet?" Sam recoiled so violently it made the car move, and Dean saw the pain in his brother's expression through the rear-view mirror. He sighed, knowing he had just crossed a line, and rubbed his temple. "Dude, look, I didn't mean…"

"It's fine," Sam replied tightly, in a way Dean knew he wasn't fine with but was letting go in the interest of keeping the peace between them. "And no, that's not what I'm saying. It's just, she's here, now, and she does have connections, and we do need the help, so we should take advantage of it. Damn it, Dean, there are angels so determined to get to us that we changed our bodies – so, barging into this vessel's life and hoping Godzilla and Mothra don't notice? It just seems kind of sloppy. And as good an ally as Castiel is, what if they recognize him?"

"Not every angel in the Host has seen my vessel," Cas offered helpfully.

"But some have," Sam insisted. "And I doubt they're all friends with you. It's too much to hang a 'maybe' on."

Dean gritted his teeth. "We've made due with a lot less."

"Okay, what about having to keep our identities secret?" Sam pressed. "No offense, Cas, but you're not the most convincing when we're trying to pull a con – not yet, at least. And you're injured. If someone recognizes you, they'll definitely take advantage of that."

Dean turned around and fixed him with a sour glare. "What are you getting at?"

"Wouldn't it be a better option to have an extra set of eyes and hands?" Sam suggested. "It'd keep us from splitting our focus and then messing up the entire thing."

What he didn't say was that Cas screwing up a job was the least troubling thing that could happen. They both knew that if any angel that was loyal to Raphael found out Cas was alive – or worse, that he was human – they'd be in a whole other kind of trouble. Dean remembered how the angels had hunted down Anna after her defection. Cas's reasons for falling wouldn't be enough to sway those douchebags into leniency, and they all knew it.

"As much as I dislike this logic based on the premise that I am no more than an invalid, Sam makes an interesting point," Cas allowed after a second's thought. Clearly he was on the same page as they were. "Coupled with the other arguments, perhaps it would be best to bring her along."

"Whoa, hold on – best for her or best for us?" Dean wanted to know. "We're not exactly going to Candyland, here, and your brothers are dicks. She could get hurt – You don't want that, do you, Sam?"

"Of course not!" Sam insisted. "But at least we can protect her if she's in the same place as us."

Dean could see from both his brother and the ex-angel's expressions that they were in agreement on this, and he cursed the fact that he was in the minority on this one. One of the few things he disliked about Cas being along was that he tended to side with Sam on a lot of things, which left Dean as the odd man out.

"Sarah hears you talking about her like that, she's going to kick your ass," Dean pointed out moodily, giving in without actually saying so out loud. "She wasn't too impressed with the knight in shining
armor act last time."

The woman in question seemed to notice the tension in the car when she returned with an old backpack, because she remained quiet as they head up the northbound I-95. On their way to Sarah's apartment, Sam had managed to narrow down their options as being primarily on the east coast, and after another hour's work he managed to discover the location of the vessel Dean had been mind-raped into revealing.

He shuddered at the memory of the phantom, cold claws going through his brain and decided that the next time they were stupid enough to contact a pagan god for help, someone else was getting their brain violated.

Sam had managed to pinpoint Jason Williams whereabouts using Facebook profiles ("What the hell is a face-book?" "Seriously? Can you come live in the twenty-first century please?" "Bite me.") and the social security network, and had discovered he was an eighteen year old student at Brookline High School in Boston.

Dean wasn't too pleased with the idea of going to some kid and informing him that the future of Heaven, and furthermore, the world rested on his shoulders, but the way Cas told it, this kid was still getting a better deal than any other vessel usually got.

And the knowledge that somewhere in the Pit, an innocent kid not much older than Jason was being flayed and burned over and over helped to desensitize him a little bit. Whether he'd actually be able to do anything about it when they came face to face with the teen, he didn't know, but for now, heading to Boston was at least doing something.

"They've got job openings at the school," Sam announced after an hour of uncomfortable silence filled only by Dean flipping through the channels trying to find some decent music. Not for the first time did he mourn the loss of the Impala and hold onto the vain hope that his tapes hadn't been destroyed in the fire.

Cas was asleep in the shotgun, twitching every now and then and murmuring incomprehensible words, while Sarah sent out a bunch of texts that probably explained to her usual clients why she wasn't going to be around for a while.

"Yeah? Well, you get to be the gym teacher this time, those shorts were way too short to be legal," Dean said. "And with my ass? I'm surprised I wasn't hauled off to jail."

"Just remember that your ass was bigger then," Sam told him sourly.

"Don't be a bitch."

"Jerk."

"Anyway," Sarah interrupted, leaning over to Sam and tugging his Treo out of his hands. "It says here that they're looking for substitute teachers for Art and English, which I guess settles who's going undercover."

"Wait, what?" Sam blinked, surprised.

"Do you know enough about art to be able to teach it?" Sarah inquired meaningfully. "I don't think so. And Castiel is injured, which won't look good in an interview, and Erica doesn't strike me as someone who's going to be able to explain literature to a bunch of bored teens."

"Hey, I read," Dean protested.
"Skin mags don't count," Sam muttered, quiet enough that Sarah didn't hear him but with him sitting directly behind Dean, it was easily audible.

Dean glared.

"Jane and I can handle this, and we can get close to this boy," Sarah said. "Just to make sure he's alright. And you and Castiel can check out his home life, maybe talk to his parents to get an idea of how he's going to react to all of this. I mean, we can't just barge into his life, right?"

"It's worked before," Dean muttered.

The rest of the three hour trip dissolved into a discussion of logistics and strategies, which Dean was more than happy to allow Sam to deal with. His brother had the patience to deal with Sarah, although Dean was pretty sure that was some version of foreplay.

Of course, if he had said that out loud, Sam would have decked him.

For a moment, Dean considered doing just that. It was almost worth it for the look on both their faces.

In the end, he decided to be the cool older brother and not to give into the temptation to tease. For now, at least.

They reached Boston in good time, although it took them a while to find anywhere to stay.

"Damn it, have either of you seen one motel since we got here?" Dean demanded, annoyed as they passed yet another picturesque looking bed and breakfast, probably run by some kindly old couple.

"It's Boston, what do you expect?" Sarah asked. "Their tourism industry is based on charming B&Bs and inns. Plus we're in the early days of their on-season. I'll be surprised if we even find anywhere that has room for us right now."

After an extra hour of driving around, they did finally find a small inn off the side of the highway. By that time, Dean was practically grinding his teeth in annoyance, and Sarah volunteered to get their rooms.

"Because if you go to reception now, they'll turn you away on principle," she told him as she got out of the car. "Hey Castiel, why don't you come with me? You look a little green."

"I do not enjoy driving," Cas admitted, unbuckling his seatbelt and following her out of the car.

After startling himself awake, the ex-angel had spent the rest of the drive curled tensely into the front-passenger seat, back to Dean. It bothered him, but Dean knew better than to ask about it while Sarah was around. Hell, he wasn't comfortable asking about it with Sam in the car either.

"Don't worry, buddy, we're going to fix that," Dean told him easily. "Soon as we get a better ride than this one. You'll see, we'll make a driver out of you."

Even as Sarah led him away, Cas's expression remained doubtful.

"She's got a point," Sam said, and Dean could hear the quirk of his lips as he grinned at Dean. "You kind of suck with people when you're in a mood."

"Oh, yeah, you're smug now," Dean deadpanned, glancing around to pin Sam with an unimpressed look, "but I'm still not one hundred percent on board with her being here. Plus, I notice you still
haven't 'fessed up to her yet about who we are."

Sam pursed his lips. "I tried. I was going to. And then I just…"

"Pussied out?" Dean finished for him. "Telling her's not that big a deal."

"Yeah, it is," Sam protested.

"It's really not."

"Dean, once I tell her that, then I have to tell her other things. She's going to want to know more about the past five years," Sam muttered uncomfortably. "How we got to where we are. And not the cliff-notes version, either. And…on the off chance that she isn't majorly pissed that we've been keeping this from her, I kind of like her remembering me as 'me' and not as the demon-blood-junkie-vessel-of-Satan."

"But you are," Dean pointed out. "Or, you were. You can't change the past, Sammy. You just gotta deal with it."

"I'm glad you're so Zen about this, but it's not really about you. Okay, you went to Hell and you tortured souls – I'm not trying to devalue that, but Dean –"

" – sure sounds like it," Dean said quietly, reigning in the urge to punch Sam.

" – but you were in Hell because you sacrificed yourself for me. You did something so _selfless_, and in the end, I trusted a demon over you – I betrayed you and started the Apocalypse and I said 'yes' to the Devil, and he would have destroyed _everything_," Sam blurt out. "And I'm the reason Adam's still down there being torn apart, all because you're so invested in me that your guardian angel gave up his wings to get me out. Because he thought me being down there would be worse for you than Adam – when in reality, it's exactly what I deserve."

Dean exhaled a silent curse. The outburst was not entirely unexpected – to be honest, he had been awaiting his little brother's mental freak-out since the day Sam showed up at Lisa's house. Things had been so messy and busy lately, though, and they had been so concentrated first on finding Cas, and then on finding Adam, that Sam hadn't really had a chance to process things.

Seeing Sarah again and dealing with the fact that he obviously still liked her had probably put enough stress on the kid that his resolve was cracking.

'Girly hormones don't help, I guess,' Dean thought.

"Okay, listen up," he ordered, glancing back to the inn entrance to make sure they still had a time.

"'Cause we don't have a lot of time for me to say this before they get back."

"What - ?"

"Adam is down there because Dad was a prick and didn't tell us about him. If we had known, we would have taught the kid – we would have protected him and kept him from saying yes to Michael. Then the dickless wonder wouldn't have piggy-backed into Hell with you. So that? That's not your fault."

"Dean –"

"And Cas trading his grace for you? Okay, that might have been inspired by the fact me and him are buds and we have that 'profound bond' you like to make fun of – hauling a person out of Hell does
that," Dean allowed, "But he never would have done that if you were really the fuck-up you think you are. If Cas thought there was even the remotest chance you weren't worth being saved, he wouldn't have gotten you out. Even for me."

"But – !"

"And guess what, moron?" Dean went on, cutting his brother's protests off again, "He's responsible for you being out of the Cage now, too; which means you've got a connection with him, just like me. He's been on my ass for two years about not thinking I deserve to be saved, and so help me, I will get him on your ass about it too if that means you knock off with the emo-shit, got it?"

Sam was quiet for a moment, but Dean knew his brother well enough to know it wasn't an acquiescing silence. Sam needed some time to think this over and let it marinate a bit before he agreed that Dean was right and the smartest older brother ever. So instead of dwelling on whatever chick-moment they were on the verge of, he went on, "Now about Sarah? You've got to tell her."

"It's going to come out at some point," Dean reminded him. "You've already lucked out about her not putting two and two together yet, but she's smart. Sooner or later, one of us is going to slip up. I'm actually amazed Cas hasn't already." He heard the sound of footsteps approaching and straightened himself back up in the driver's seat. "Now grow a pair."

They climbed out of the car, and Dean resolutely ignored the grateful look his brother sent his way.

"We're all set," Sarah said as they started unloading their things from the trunk. "You and Cas have the room on the first floor, and Jane and I are just upstairs."

"Wait, what?" Dean blinked.

"They only had a few rooms left," Sarah said, and then smiled kindly. "I bet it's been a while since you and Cas had some alone time. I can keep Jane occupied for a few hours." She turned to Sam and said, "Come on."

She didn't see the panicked look that Sam sent Dean, or the equally uncomfortable look Cas had on his face.

"She was very insistent," the ex-angel said quietly when Dean glared at him expectantly.

"I'm getting that," Dean groused. "Well, it's not like we can do anything about it right now. And maybe something good will come of this."

Cas glanced questioningly at him. "Good?"

"Yeah, maybe Sam will get laid," Dean joked, hoisting his duffel over his shoulder and grabbing Cas's as well. "Come on."

"I find that highly unlikely, given his reluctance to inform Sarah of his identity," Cas reasoned, following Dean into the inn and down the hallway that led to their room. "I may not be well-schooled in the rules of courtship, but I believe honesty is a component, yes?"

Dean snorted. "Dude, if that were true, I wouldn't have gotten half the amount of sex I've had. Girls let themselves see what they want, and if they want to see you as a stunt driver for Fast and the Furious instead of a homeless dude that hasn't shaved in a few days, they will."
"I see," Castiel said, his voice flat. "And these lies for the purpose of sexual relations appeal to you?"

"It's the only way to go," Dean agreed, opening up the door and walking into the room.

He stopped short as he got in there.

"Oh, hell no," Dean said, staring at the lone queen that took up most of the room. "I'm going to kill Sam."

"Why?" Cas asked, peering around Dean. "Oh." He cleared his throat. "I suppose, because he told Sarah that we are married, and she inferred…"

He trailed off, and Dean shot Cas a sharp look; he was surprised to see the troubled expression on the former angel's face. It was gone a moment later, as Cas shook his head slightly.

"There is no need for your discomfort," he told Dean, not looking at him and instead walking into the room with his duffel. "I will likely not sleep, anyhow. I managed to rest in the car."

"If you're telling me you're going to spend the night sitting in the chair looking at me sleep, you've got another thing coming," Dean snapped. "That's one thing when Sam's in the room too, but if it's just me that's creepy, dude."

"But –"

"We'll figure something out," Dean promised him, "but right now, I need to shower and we need to get some food." He grinned at Cas. "How's about testing out your food tolerance on a cheeseburger tonight?"

Cas's puzzling expression disappeared, and an almost shy one took its place. "I believe…that might make me happy."

Dean growled in frustration and thumped his fist angrily at the tiles of the shower.

He had to be doing this wrong – either that, or all women were secretly double jointed – because the position Dean found himself in was far from comfortable or sexy. It was also doing absolutely zilch to help him bleed off the tension that had been coiling in the pit of his stomach for the past four days.

It didn't help that this particular shower was the size of a British telephone box.

Warm water ran down his back and shoulders as he tried to maneuver himself into a better standing position, one foot on the faucet and weight balanced on the other. He made a face, because this didn't feel right either, and there was no way in hell he was doing this if he wasn't comfortable.

The whole point to this was to relax, but his brain kept getting in the way and his wrists wouldn't fucking bend that way!

'What. The. Hell.' he thought again, glaring down in the direction of the borrowed vagina – which he couldn't see because the borrowed tits were in the way. 'I've done this, like, a million times. Maybe not on me, but still. The mechanics aren't different, seriously!'

In the days following his transformation, he had been understandably upset at the literal loss of his manhood and hadn't paid too much attention to the new modifications to his body in any capacity.
that wasn’t to complain. But once that wore off (mostly), he hadn’t managed to hold back to curiosity at how things down there would feel.

He had already, occasionally, in the privacy of the shower, dipped his hand between his legs and sought out that little nub he knew drove women wild. And the sharp quiver of pleasure that it sent sparking unexpectedly through his body had been somewhat reassuring as well. But he had always backed off relatively quickly, because it felt too much like if he enjoyed anything in this body, it meant accepting it.

But in the past days, he had been so on edge, that his hands had wandered in that direction more often. And while gently teasing the sensitive flesh in that area – and yes, he was being a child about avoiding using actual names for things, because it meant accepting that they were attached to him – was more than gratifying, he hadn't gone all the way yet. So to speak.

Dean had done a lot of kinky shit, and he was game to try anything at least once, but getting his brain to shut up long enough to actually do anything right now was becoming a problem.

He tried leaning back against the tiles and continued to rub the small bundle of nerves in a slow, circular motion; a few failed first attempts had told him he was way too sensitive down there to try anything faster. As it was, the sensations shooting up through his nervous system and the heat moving through him felt good, but incomplete somehow. He needed something else.

'Need more room, is what,' he winced, once again trying to crook his fingers properly without twisting his wrist. How did women do this? He had never missed his dick more than he did right now, if only for the beautiful simplicity of jerking off. 'Of course, bunking with Cas means all those options are off the table.'

He smirked idly, momentarily amusing himself by imagining Cas's shell-shocked expression if he were to ever walk in on Dean sprawled on the bed, legs spread and fingers working the way they were now. Oddly enough, imaginary Cas's expression didn't stay shell-shocked; in Dean's mind's eye, it morphed into the same intense, penetrating stare that Cas had always fixed on him when he was still an angel.

There was a sudden strong pulse of pleasure that washed over him, making his hips jerk and he bit his lip, because that image was –

Dean froze in mid-motion, his hands immediately stilling as he realized what he was doing.

'Oh, fuck, no.'

He had the water turned off and a towel wrapped around himself so quickly, he was surprised he didn't slip as he hastened out of the shower. He busied himself with wrapping his hair up in the too-small extra towel and tried to banish whatever thoughts he had just been having. It was made all the harder because of the feeling of discontent that came from not getting off.

The mirror in the room was foggy, and he swiped a hand across it, revealing flushed cheeks and a panicked expression. He formed the latter into a glare aimed at his reflection, daring the woman he saw there to challenge him.

"Just because I'm stuck in this body, does not mean I'm into dudes," he hissed quietly in an attempt to reassure himself. "Especially not that one!"

He turned before his girl-brain could convince him that his reflection was giving him a knowing stare, and stalked out of the bathroom.
The curtains were shut, but ass o'clock in the morning still shone through the heavy red cloth, bathing the room in a pinkish hue. There was also an odd sound coming from the other side of the bed.

Cautious, because he really didn't want to get caught unaware while wearing nothing but a towel, he crept forward and peeked around the bed.

The sound was coming from the thick pallet of blankets on the floor beside it, and Dean relaxed momentarily. Weird sex-freak-out aside, Cas was the last thing on the long list of shit that Dean had to be afraid of.

Dean had made the nest of blankets up for himself the night before, arguing that Cas wasn't used to having to bunk out on floors the way Dean and Sam were. Cas had reasoned, once again, that he would likely spend most of the night awake and it was needless for Dean to miss out on sleep on his behalf. Eventually Dean had given in, but not without ensuring the pallet was at least comfortable.

Which it had appeared to be; Dean had noticed when he walked past it on the way to the bathroom earlier, Cas had been completely wound up in the blankets, sleeping like the dead.

'Except he's not right now,' Dean realized with a frown as he neared the thrashing figure that was Cas.

The ex-angel was writhing and mumbling something in his sleep, eyes closed in a frown and sweat beading on his forehead. He really seemed to be in distress, and Dean reached out to him, before pausing. He had just been thinking about the guy in the shower…while he was touching himself. Hell, he still had the remnants of that hot, shivery feeling running through him. How was he supposed to look Cas in the eye?

The ex-angel suddenly let out what sounded suspiciously like a whimper, and Dean's hesitation vanished. He clasped Cas gently on his right shoulder. "Cas, wake up."

"Dean," Cas groaned as his eyes shot open and, whoa, the hot shivery feeling that suddenly moved through Dean and settled somewhere behind his pelvis? Totally not caused by Cas's sleep-laden slur; it had to be the heating vent Dean was crouched next to.

Which was off.

He swallowed, attempting to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. 'Christ, I need my body back.' Out loud, he croaked, "You okay?"

Awareness seeped into Cas's eyes, which were oddly distended, and he sat up abruptly and pointedly faced away from Dean. "I am alright."

"Apparently you're not," Dean replied, trying to ignore the way his friend's body language actually kind of hurt. "Cas, man, I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on."

"Your…bath sheet is slipping," Cas hedged, still not looking at him, and Dean mumbled a curse under his breath as he reached down to adjust it before he accidentally offered the ex-angel a peep show. While he was distracted, though, Cas maneuvered up and around him, and by the time Dean managed to readjust the towel, Cas had slammed the door behind him.

"Sooner or later you're gonna have to tell me what's going on!" he said loudly, and when he didn't get a response, he grumbled and set about looking for his clothes.

Cas had been acting off all week, and Dean didn't want to admit it, but it was making him worry.
The former angel was having more trouble sleeping, and the past few times he had awoken from whatever he was dreaming, he had either clammed up and refused to talk about it, or locked himself in the bathroom if they were in a motel.

And sure, everyone needed to be alone with their thoughts sometimes, and when you were sharing room with more than one person, the bathroom was sometimes the only refuge – as Dean had discovered. But it was getting ridiculous now.

Cas would make excuses, assurances that he was fine, but Dean had seen the freaked-out looks the ex-angel had been casting him.

Cas was anything but fine.

'Still, I'm sure he'll tell me when he's ready,' Dean told himself. Cas wasn't exactly known for bottling up his thoughts; on the contrary, he was annoyingly candid. Eventually his inexperience with suppressing human emotion was going to win out.

Deciding it was early enough that Sam and Sarah probably hadn't left for the job yet, Dean threw on some jeans, a bra and a Henley and headed upstairs to their shared room.

They had been in Boston for a day and a half now, working together to create a convincing cover story and doing recon. It wouldn't do to go after this Jason kid without knowing all the angles. It was too important that they get this right.

Sam opened up several seconds after Dean knocked, blinking the bleary stare of someone who had just gotten up.

"Have a good night?" Dean leered.

"Very funny," Sam said, adopting his usual unimpressed bitchface. "What about you and Cas?"

"Wore him out," Dean joked good-naturedly.

Sam bitchfaced and moved aside. "Thanks for the visual."

"What can I say? Ask and ye shall receive – whoa."

Sam and Sarah's room – which had two beds, Dean was annoyed to learn – looked as though a tornado had hit it. Although it was clear that Sarah was not around, from the look of the clothes and toiletry items strewn clear across the room, it seemed rooming with a girl didn't necessarily mean rooming with a neat-freak.

Dean fingered a lacy pink bra that definitely didn't belong to his brother and raised an eyebrow.

"Things went that good, huh?"

"Nothing happened," Sam hissed, snatching the bra and tossing it across the room. "We both passed out around ten trying to finish all our supporting documentation. We're just lucky the school's in such a fix, or I don't think we'd be getting in as subs."

"I'll bet," Dean said, "So where is lover-girl, anyway?"

"Dean..." Sam gave him a long-suffering look, and Dean raised his hands in surrender. "She went for a jog. She said it helps her de-stress before a job."

"I'm surprised she didn't ask you to go with her."
"She did. I'm just, uh, not feeling it today," Sam said, sounding evasive.

"I can see why," Dean said, poking at a bunch of candy wrappers on the bureau. He snorted, "Dude, I know we're basically trying to rebuild the guy that used to be the Trickster, but if your plan was to use candy as bait, you kind of messed up."

"It was late and I needed a sugar fix," Sam defended. "Those Mini Egg things are like crack, I swear."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Next you'll be telling me you want to go shopping for some shoes."

"Dean, you watch Dr. Sexy."

"And you watch All My Children. For shame, Sammy."

"Hey, you know what? I've got work to get to," Sam grumbled. "Why don't you go be a bitch to Cas? He actually tolerates it."

"Can't. Guy's locked in the bathroom."

"Again?" Sam asked, worry replacing his annoyance. "Another nightmare?"

"I guess – maybe? I dunno, he's has been weird lately."

"Weirder than usual, you mean."

"Yeah – I think we're gonna have to talk to him about the not sleeping thing," Dean frowned. "He can't even get through an hour long cat-nap without waking up moaning and groaning." He shuddered. "I'd hate to see what his subconscious has been putting him through."

Sam shrugged. "If it's something serious, we could always look into finding a psychic who can help him through it. Maybe if we get a hold of this Balthazar guy we can convince him to put some mental blocks on Cas."

"I guess," Dean said, not liking the idea of someone dicking around in Cas's head, even if it was one of his brothers. Especially not if it was one of his brothers.

"But we could be getting ahead of ourselves," Sam suddenly said thoughtfully. "It might be something really normal."

"Like what?"

Sam focused an unimpressed look on him. "He's been a human for almost a month now, Dean. A human guy."

Dean stared.

Then blinked.

'Oh. Oh!"

"No way," he said immediately. "There's just no…I don't think Cas even knows how to…you know…"

"His body's human – and even when he was an angel, it had cravings – remember Famine?" Sam pointed out. "Obviously the stress caused by the change and all of his nightmares is beginning to go
away, leaving room for…other things."

"I guess," Dean said vaguely. To be honest, he was a little surprised at the concept of Cas being, well, horny. It didn't jive with the image in his head of the emotionless warrior of Heaven he had come to know. He had never really considered Cas to be a sexual being, not after that disastrous brothel visit back in September. But suddenly, it looked like another trip might be in order.

For whatever reason, the idea didn't sit well with him.

Sam was frowning at him, and Dean realized he had missed something his brother had said. "What?"

"I said, 'this is a good thing'," Sam repeated. "Healthy even."


"Very nice. I'll be sure to tell him you said that."

"It's not like he'd get it," Dean rolled his eyes.

His mind flashed back to the dream he had woken Cas from and realized suddenly that it had had nothing to do with nightmares. How could he have been so dense? He'd woken up from his share of racy dreams in the past – and if he had never had one before and been woken up by Sam or Cas? Yeah, he could see wanting to escape in order to get rid of the evidence.

An idea occurred to him.

"You know what this means, right?" Dean grinned. "You have to give him the speech."

"The speech?" Sam repeated. His eyes widened in realization, and he stood up abruptly, hands raised into the 'hands-off' position. "No. Hell, no. That is not happening."

"Hey, I already had to give it once, it's your turn," Dean retorted. "Be the responsible older brother."

"Jimmy was older than either of us and Cas remembers time before the Neanderthals," Sam protested. "And he's not my brother."

"He might as well be, for all he's done for us."

"Okay, yeah, point, but…but he's your angel!"

"He's not an angel and he – he is not my anything," Dean retorted, color flooding his cheeks. "You're the one with more tact, anyway."

"And Cas is one of the few people on this planet that don't care about tact," Sam countered. "I mean it, Dean, this one's on you."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Play you for it."

Sam rolled his eyes. "You'll play scissors, as usual, and I'll win. Now go deal with your horny ex-angel."

"Sam," Dean said warningly, raising his hands into the usual rock-paper-scissors position.

Sam sighed and held out his hands as well.
They counted out the strikes and then threw down, and Dean cursed.

"Seriously?" Sam smirked.

"I had a strategy," Dean protested as he stalked back out the door.

"Make sure you tell him about the importance of locking the door," Sam called after him.

'I've faced down a horde of zombies and a town full of the Croatoan virus. This should be easy,' Sam coached himself, swallowing back his nerves.

Of course, in all of those cases he had had a sawed off at the ready and wasn't wearing pantyhose and heels that he had spent a good part of the day before learning how to walk in. He'd lied to Sarah and told her that it was because he never needed to wear them while hunting, and after she had finished laughing at him, she had helped him out.

Still feeling ridiculous, he cleared his throat.

"Good morning everyone," he said in a voice he hoped was carrying to the back of the room and over the hubbub of thirty teenagers chatting with one another. He had to repeat himself several times at increasing volumes before the kids finally got the message, and then he offered a wan smile. "Thanks. Okay, so, I'm Miss McVie, and I'll be subbing for the next little while."

'And God, I hope it's no more than a day.'

Only ten out of the thirty kids in the class were actually listening to him, the others either plugged into their mp3 players or texting. If he were really a teacher he would have been annoyed at that, but as it was, he just wanted to get through the day with relative ease.

He turned to write his name on the board, the way he remembered several teachers in his high school do.

Having more or less witnessed Dean's exploits in the public school system, Sam knew to expect some trouble. The first rolled up ball of paper bouncing off the back of his head, he ignored, hoping that if they saw him not react to it, they would stop. If he remembered his psychology classes properly, teenagers just wanted to get a reaction.

That logic held for about ten minutes before the second paper bounce off his forehead while he was going over the attendance, and his mind flashed hopefully to the butterfly knife he had tucked into his skirt (and hadn't that been a joy sneaking past the school metal detectors?)

Instead of giving in to the impulse toward violence, he remained calm, catching the third paper projectile with a snapping motion in his hand. He stared out at the class, unblinking in what he hoped was his best impression of Castiel.

"Next person who throws something at me writes a thousand word essay summarizing Boston tax law," he said in a deadly serious voice, hauling out the first boring topic he could think of. "And it'll be handwritten."

That got a few groans, but another ten students suddenly sat up straighter.

Sam offered them a tight smile and went on, "So, according to the note Mrs. Ross left, you're
supposed to use this period to review for the end of year exams. It also says if you don't want to do that, you should be working on the final drafts of your Fitzgerald essays. This is individual work, so the only time you should be talking is if you need to ask me a question."

An instruction which bit him in the ass about ten minutes later, when a line of students had formed up to his desk (he had had to sit down, because the heels were killing his feet), bombarding him with a barrage of one-on-one conversations ranging from avoiding comma splices to football players trying to flirt with him.

'Must find this Jason kid, and fast,' he thought as he grit his teeth through another teenaged boy’s veiled attempt to look down his shirt.

By the time the bell rang to signify recess, Sam was more than pleased to get out of the classroom—although, in his haste he put his foot down wrong and he suddenly found himself on his ass on the floor while a bunch of kids laughed at him.

Two girls scrambled to help him up while every teenaged boy walking by tried to get a look under his skirt, and Sam thanked his lucky stars that Dean hadn't been around to see that particular move.

If Sam had ever entertained the notion of becoming a teacher back when he was worried law school might now pan out, he emphatically let go of it right then.

He wandered out into the hallway, more careful this time. He had volunteered for supervision duty, which probably meant he had to keep the kids from killing each other in the fifteen minutes of proscribed freedom they got before lunch, but really he was trying to find the vessel.

The hallways were completely packed with a sea of teens in their various social cliques, and Sam felt just as out of place in these hallways as he had in every single school Dad had enrolled him in growing up. He had always hated navigating through the community minefield of the corridors, preferring the library or study hall.

Dean had always mocked him for that, but then again, Dean had preferred the broom closets and the boiler rooms, so where did he get off judging?

It was as he was making yet another careful round of the hallway that he caught sight of his target.

Jason Williams was standing about thirty feet away, separated from Sam by a section of lockers and the kids that loitered around them. Sam knew it was him, because he had looked up the kid's social profile.

Jason's Facebook photos hadn't been very revealing, as he seemed to prefer posting amusing pictures and witty sayings rather than pictures of himself. Even his profile picture showed some shadowy photo, but eventually Sam had managed to find a clear enough shot.

Staring at the boy now, Sam was again struck by the similarities to Gabriel's old vessel.

The kid looked a little older than his eighteen years, the same height and build as the former vessel, similar hair and eye color. They even had the same impish twist to their mouths, which Sam thought was impressive, considering Gabriel had probably used the same vessel for thousands of years. Apparently, certain traits had remained within that bloodline.

Sam's attention to Jason was drawn when he noticed movement behind the boy. At first he tensed, thinking it might be someone going for Jason, but the solid wall of three strapping girls who probably played field hockey headed instead for the redheaded girl in glasses who had the locker across from Jason's. They assumed a familiar looking flanking position.
Even among the hubbub and separated by bodies, if Sam focussed he could hear snatches of conversation.

" – heard you had a Carrie moment at Gwen's party –"

" – just leave me alone –"

" – of all nights to wear a white shirt, huh – ?"

" – knock it off – !"

Sam frowned, already starting over there. If there was one thing thirty-five or so schools had instilled in him, it was a hatred of bullying.

Ostensibly, Jason was ignoring the commotion going on in back of him, reaching deep into his backpack for something. As Sam neared, he saw that it was a can of soda, which the kid considered, and then promptly began to shake up.

Businesslike expression on his face, Jason turned toward the three teens whose backs were still toward him and held the can of pop out at an angle, cracking open the lid at just the right angle that the fizzy drink came shooting out like a miniature geyser, dousing the three girls' hair and bookbags before they even realized what was happening.

Shrieks of anger and disgust emanated from the girls, who rounded on him. Sam was closer now, able to better hear what was being said, but there were still about half a dozen backpack wearing kids hemming him in, and his heels were making his progress slow.

"What the hell, Williams?!!" the center girl snarled, glaring down at the emptying pop-can in his hands.

"Oh, how clumsy of me," Jason intoned, eyes wide with feigned innocence. The redheaded girl shot Jason a grateful look, and then disappeared. "I honestly had no idea that shaking up carbonated drinks would do that. Mea culpa."

"Don't be a smart ass!" the girl spat.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he replied. "Just like you wouldn't dream of bugging Danielle anymore about what was obviously just some bad luck."

"Why? You like her?" the girl's tone was mocking.

"You like not having photos of you giving Coach Thompson a lap dance hitting Facebook?" he replied easily, to which the girl's face turned a sick shade of pale. "Can you say, 'blackmail'?"

"Can you say 'slow, painful death'?" the girl growled, looking to her left and right for support from her friends, who seemed unsurprised by the information and were already looming over Jason. It said something that all three were taller than him.

Jason smirked. "'Slow, painful death'."

"I mean it, Williams, you upload any of that shit and I swear the mouse clicking will be the last sound you ever hear," the girl snarled.

Which was the exact moment where Sam finally made it to the little group. "What's going on here?"

Jason adopted a wide smile and a high, cheerful voice. "We were slacking off, Miss. And before
that? We were smoking!"

Sam's lip twitched at that, and he eyed the trio. "I think you girls might want to go have a discussion with the vice principal about the school's anti-bullying policy."

He wasn't even sure this school had one, but he wanted them gone right now. If he wasn't on such a time limit, he'd hunt the three of them down and explain exactly what kind of crap could happen to people who bullied others in school. The memory of Dirk McGregor was still fresh in his mind.

"But Miss – !"

"Now," he ordered, infusing his tone with the same command Dad had always used on him.

The trio sent Jason a look that promised him hell the next time they saw him, and trounced off.

"You didn't have to do that," Jason said, his grin having faded and a sullen glare taking its place. "The situation was totally under control."

"Last time I checked, beating up girls isn't something you should be boasting about," Sam deadpanned. "Or blackmailing them."

"Are you kidding?" Jason said, eyes wide. "Those She-Hulks in hockey kilts could murder me! If I managed to stay conscious long enough to run away, I'd still leave this place as a legend."

Sam sighed. "Listen…you're Jason, right?"

"Last time I checked, though I've been considering changing my name to the Great Orgasmo," he waggled his eyebrows.

'And that's the dick we've been looking for,' Sam thought with an inner groan.

"Jason, I think you and I need to have a chat about proper ways of dealing with aggression," Sam told him firmly.

"Hey, they got their just desserts, why do I get to be punished for it?" Jason demanded.

"You're not being punished, I just need to talk to –"

The bell rang, cutting Sam off, and Jason perked up.

"Listen, it's been lovely, teach, but if I miss any more math, Mr. Grey is going to flunk me and then my mother's gonna make me join the army," he said, backing away. He mimed two pistols with his fingers. "Catch you later, okay? And then we can continue this little…thing."

In an instant, hundreds of students hurrying to their next classes separated them.

"Damn it," Sam growled under his breath.

"Well, that went well," an amused voice said, and Sam turned around to see Sarah standing behind him, coffee cup in hand. It smelled really good, and Sam was tempted to grab a sip from it before he remembered that that was a couple thing to do, and they weren't a couple. "So, how's your day been?"

Sam scowled.

"The man who invented high heels – and it was a man, because no woman would ever be self-
loathing enough to come up with them – should be dragged through a desert of cacti and then shot – not killed, just wounded, and be forced to crawl after someone holding a glass of water just out of reach,” he informed her.

Sarah stared at him. "Wow. That good, huh?"

"I forgot how much I hated high school," Sam sighed. "The learning part was okay, but all the rest… just sucked."

"Tell me about it – I spent four years with people calling me Sara Lee. It was tough."

Sam frowned. "Why's that so bad?"

"Because I was about twenty pounds overweight," she answered. "They used to joke that you could shut me up by stuffing cakes in my mouth. Which happened on occasion."

"I stand corrected – that sucks."

"Oh, not always," Sarah smiled. "They were usually pretty good cakes."

They exchanged a warm look, and then Sam cleared his throat. "Well, you look great today – I mean, you always look – I mean –"

"I know what you mean," Sarah laughed, and Sam felt suitably mortified. He was grateful when she changed the subject, nodding in the direction Jason was wandering away in. "What was that all about?"

"I forgot how much teenagers don't trust teachers," Sam said ruefully. "Which is funny, because after dealing with D – Erica growing up, you'd think I'd expect it."

"It's really not that hard, you just have to find some common ground," Sarah told him cheerily. "For example, I know that Jason is a huge fan of Kung Fu movies and graphic novels. He hates Chinese food, doesn't really have many friends here because nobody 'gets him', he accidentally set the science lab on fire last week because he was 'bored' and is only sticking in school so that he can get a diploma so he can get a job to help support his step-mother and half-sister."

Sam stared. "You got all of that in one morning?"

"We bonded over art," Sarah said. "He's a very talented comic artist."

"No way he told you all of that."

"Well, not all of it," Sarah admitted. "I spoke to his guidance councillor before class started, and she told me the stuff about his family."

This time Sam laughed. "Sneaky. Did you happen to find out where his next class is?"

"You know, I actually did," Sarah said, mock thoughtful.

Sam grinned, glad that they might finally be able to make some headway. Glancing up to see if Jason was still in the hallway, he saw something that made his blood run cold instead.

Jason was still there, but he wasn't alone. He was talking to a tall blond woman wearing a pantsuit. She could have been a teacher, or maybe an administrator, but the stiff way she held herself, almost like she was not used to her body, suggested she was neither. Sam recognized the posture from having watched Castiel for two years.
She said something to the boy, gesturing somewhere unseen, and Jason's face fell. He nodded quickly, and the woman gestured again. As she moved, the lights in the hallway flickered and in the brief moment where things became too bright, Sam saw the huge shadowy wings splayed out against the lockers.

A second later, they were gone.

"No way our luck can be that bad," Sam murmured, even as the woman motioned for Jason to follow her. As they turned the corner, he saw the telling gleam of silver that his imagination suggested was an angel blade. 'Apparently, it can.'

"Go get the car," Sam ordered Sarah, already walking quickly after Jason and the angel. "And the hex bags."

"Jane –?"

"Just do it!" Sam ordered, and took off at a run and hoping he wasn't seconds away from tripping over his heels again.

"I do not understand. Sam said that I could remove this," Cas complained, gesturing at the much abused sling.

"And I'm saying, tough it out for another few hours," Dean replied. "I have a plan."

"Fewer words are more ominous."

Dean snorted. "Look at you, workin' the sarcasm. Makes a guy proud. Next we'll have to work on your cursing, because seriously? I haven't forgotten the 'assbutt' thing."

Dean and Cas were wandering down the sidewalk of the suburban neighborhood where Jason Williams lived with his family. They had spent the morning scoping out the diner where his mother worked from the coffee-shop across the street, and when she had left, Dean decided to head her off near her own house.

"What is the point of speaking to this woman?" Cas asked yet again. "She is not part of Gabriel's line. She has nothing to do with this endeavor."

"She's the kid's mother for all intents and purposes, I'd say that means she's got something to do with it," Dean retorted. "We're going to try to convince her son to take Gabriel's grace into him and effectively erase the guy out of existence."

"He will not be erased –"

"I know that, and you know that, but that's how she's gonna see it if we go with the truth," Dean explained. "I need to get a read on her before I can decide what we're going to tell her. And him, provided Sam ever makes contact with the kid."

"Sam has not yet contacted you?"

"No."

"And what of Sarah?" Cas asked, and then frowned. "I still question the wisdom in allowing her to
"Take a look in the mirror, buddy, you're not at full capacity right now either," Dean said lightly, automatically defending Sam even when he didn't completely support him. "Besides, she's one of the few people who doesn't want us dead right now."

"Possibly because you have not been honest with your identities."

"Hey, that's Sam's job, not ours."

"You keep saying that, however I do not understand the logic," Cas admitted.

Dean rolled his eyes, glancing toward the house where the Williams family lived. At some point, Mrs. Williams was going to arrive, and that's when he and Cas would make their move.

"A few years ago, Sam and Sarah had a thing."

"An object?"

"No, a…they had a one-night stand," Dean amended, and when Cas continued to look blank, "Sex."

"Ah."

"Yeah. So they have history together. And it must have left some kind of lasting impression, because Sam still likes her. There's still a connection there, I guess."

"And because they have a history it is his responsibility to inform of the truth concerning your transformation," Cas intoned slowly, like he was trying to understand.

"Yeah," Dean said.

Cas made a face. "I believe this will be yet another human custom that I fail to see the point of."

"Yeah, well, we do weird things," Dean said airily, his brother's words from earlier that morning suddenly coming back to him.

He studied the ex-angel's still confused face, and after another cursory glance at the Williams house and still not seeing their mark, decided now was as good a time as any to bite the bullet.

"So…Cas," Dean began, and then winced, because that sounded completely lame.

His friend raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes?"

His eyes were doing that scrutinizing gaze thing, and Dean had to look away because it reminded him too much of what he had been thinking about in the shower that morning. Mental territory he did not want to retrace.

"Uh, so, this morning," Dean went on, "you were kind of…agitated. Sounded like you were having one hell of a dream."

"It is nothing," Cas said tonelessly. "I allowed myself to fall asleep when I should not have. I apologize if I was curt with you."

"What? Hey, no, that's not—" Dean cursed inwardly, because this was going about as awkwardly as he had thought it would. He sighed with resignation. 'Oh, hell, might as well get right down to it.'

"It's just, that didn't look like your usual nightmare thrashing."
Cas stiffened. "I do not wish to talk about this."

"Yeah, well, neither do I, but seeing as Sam's a wuss and I doubt Gabriel was the kind of older brother to explain this to you, I guess you're stuck with me."

"I am not an infant, Dean," Cas said coolly. "I understand the physiological implications of what my vessel's...what my brain is communicating to me."

"Yeah, not talking about your upstairs brain right now, unfortunately," Dean said through gritted teeth, and then took another breath to calm himself down. "Okay, this isn't working out like...let's try another angle." He forcibly held Cas's gaze. "First of all, you have to get over this 'not-sleeping' thing. You're a human now, which means you've got to deal with human needs. As shitty as nightmares are, sleep is one of those needs. So give up that battle, dude, because it's one you're not going to win."

Cas looked mutinous, but didn't say anything, so Dean took it as a sign that he should continue.

"On that note, there are loads of other ways to cope with your subconscious beating you around, and it looks like, er, you sort of found one of them," Dean blathered, trying not to pay too much attention to his own words.

"I do not understand what you're referring to," Cas said, evasive.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Morning wood ain't something to be afraid of, Cas. In fact, you should be afraid if nothing were happening down there."

He gestured vaguely in the direction of Cas's crotch; by now both they were both red in the face.

"Dean, I do not wish to --"

"Just shut up and let me finish so that we can never have this conversation again, okay?" Dean ground out. "You've been dealing with this alone, right?"

"Of course," Cas said stiffly. "Having anyone else around would be distracting."

"'Distracting'?" Dean repeated, momentarily puzzled. And then, knowing he was going to regret it, he asked, "What exactly are you doing?"

"I simply sit quietly until it goes away," Cas said, perplexed.

"You --? Sweet mother of -- ! Are you kidding me?" Dean gaped. "That's not what you're supposed to do!"

"I understand that it is common for human males to use manual stimulation to eradicate an unwanted erection, but the idea is distasteful to me," Cas said primly. "Like all biological responses, this one only requires patience and strength of will to deal with, although I thank you for your concern."

"Dude, no! Your subconscious wants to get laid, not to engage in a full-on Ghandi in our bathroom every morning," Dean groaned, scrubbing his hand down his face. "Those dreams of yours? They're telling you exactly what your body wants right now."

"No they are not!" Cas said, sounding panicked for some reason. Once again he refused to look at Dean, which was getting annoying.

"There's nothing wrong with dreams and fantasies," Dean assured him. "Hell, I've got some
awesome ones involving Carmen Electra, Denise Richards and a cherry pie – but that's all they are, man. Fantasies. They don't mean anything."

"Dean –"

"It's all your imagination trying to give you a happy," Dean said, clapping Cas on his right shoulder. "You don't have to worry about that, because they never happen in real life. Okay?"

"I…yes," Cas said, looking down at his feet. Dean could have sworn he saw a flash of disappointment cross his friend's face. For a moment, he debated with giving in to his curiosity and asking what he had dreamed, but he stopped himself. There was an unwritten rule about asking another guy what he liked to fantasize about to take the edge off; unless Cas volunteered, Dean didn't want to know.

Even then, he didn't want to know.

He coughed. "So, we good?"

"Yes, I believe so," Cas said, carefully.

"Awesome. Let's go to work then, she just walked around the corner," Dean said, grabbing on to Cas's good arm and hauling him forward. "Act natural."

"H-how does one act 'natural'?” Cas asked, sounding a little breathless as Dean pulled him farther in the direction of Mrs. Williams.

"Ugh, never mind," Dean said, pasting a false smile on his face as they walked, all the while trying to ignore the fact that he was once again close enough to smell Cas's unique scent. "Just keep acting like we're married."

"I –"

"In about six seconds we'll be within stepping distance from her, and I'm gonna pretend to faint," Dean said out of the corner of his mouth. "If she asks what happened, just say I have low blood sugar, okay?"

"What - ?" Cas began, but cut off as Dean suddenly crumpled forward.

As he hit the sidewalk painfully, he thought, 'Damn it, he could have at least tried to catch.'

"Dean!" Cas exclaimed, and Dean mentally rolled his eyes, glad that at least Sarah wasn't around and hoping the woman had heard 'Jean'.

"Oh my gosh, is she alright?” he heard her exclaim, and squinting out from beneath his lids he saw Mrs. Williams run forward.

"Low…blood sugar," Cas explained, sounding confused enough that Dean cracked an eye open to glare at him.

'Real convincing,' he thought sarcastically, and rather than let Cas take point on this one, he let out a moan. "What happened?"

"Hey, are you okay?" Mrs. Williams asked. "You fainted – do you need me to call an ambulance?"

"No," Dean moaned, "just need somewhere to sit down. Maybe something to drink."
"Oh – of course! Come with me," the woman said, motioning for them to follow her. When Cas tried to help move him, Mrs. Williams stopped him. "Oh, no, let me – I wouldn't want to jostle your arm."

'That was easy,' Dean thought as he pretended to allow her to help him into her home. 'Good thing I'm not someone coming after her with bad intent…'

The Williams house was small and quaint, but with the second-hand quality that suggested they weren't well-off people. Dean recognized the atmosphere from the one that he had grown up in, although the home was considerably cleaner than the motels his family had shacked up in.

"I'm Donna, by the way," the woman said as she motioned for Dean to take a seat on a small couch.

"Jean," he replied, sticking with what she might have heard, "And this is Cas."

"I am her husband," Cas added helpfully, and Dean held back a curse, because of course the angel would choose now to be forthcoming with a cover story.

"We just moved in down the street and took a walk," Dean went on, forcing his voice to remain muddled. He tried to joke. "Well, he took a walk. I took a fall."

"If it helps, welcome to the neighborhood," Donna said, moving around the kitchen in a hurry. "Any preferences? We've got OJ, Apple or…or soda? There's actually tons of sugary drinks here, my son's got a major sweet-tooth."

'I'd kill for a beer,' Dean wanted to say, but instead murmured, "OJ sounds good."

Within seconds, Donna had pressed two glasses forward, one for Dean and one for Cas.

"Are these your kids?" Dean asked as he took a sip of the citrus drink, gesturing to the photographs on a nearby table. They showed a small brown haired girl resembling Donna and a teenager that was the spitting image of Gabriel's old vessel.

"Yeah," Donna said, smiling fondly. "I love that photo. It's the first one we took together after…well, after their father died." Her expression sobered. "Jason took it really hard. I mean, he'd already lost his mom when he was seven, and then losing his dad…"

"So, you're his step-mom?"

"Legally," Donna said. "But I practically raised him after I married his dad. Richard worked a lot, was never really home. I think Jason resented it, because he was acting out in school for a while. Things got horrible after his dad died, and he actually ran away for a few weeks this year."

"But things got better?" Dean prompted.

"Yeah, almost overnight," Donna admitted. "It was this past April. He just…completely stepped up the plate. The phone calls from school stopped, he started filling out job applications, he started really spending time with his sister again..." She gave a shuddering sigh. "I think he must have had some kind of scare. I have no idea what it was, and I'm glad nothing horrible happened to him – but I am so grateful." She swallowed, a fierce look in her eyes. "My boy's meant for greater things."

"Sounds like it," Dean agreed tightly.

"Oh, listen to me," Donna shook her head and rubbed her hands nervously. "You're having a medical emergency, and I'm rambling."
"No, I feel a lot better," Dean assured her. "Like I said. Low blood-sugar. It's a curse."

"Still, I shouldn't have gotten so personal…"

"Family's important," Dean told her seriously.

They chatted for a while longer, before Donna said she had some errands to run before picking up her daughter.

"Don't be a stranger," she told Dean and Cas as she walked them to the door. "Say 'hi' next time you're in this part of the neighborhood."

"We will," Dean assured her, and then led Cas away by the hand.

As soon as they rounded the corner, he let go of the ex-angel and put a socially acceptable distance between them.

"I still think that was a waste of our time," Cas remarked.

"I don't," Dean replied, frowning pensively.

"We did not learn anything we did not already know, besides the fact that this woman and the vessel are not blood related," Cas pointed out.

Dean raised an eyebrow at him. "Clearly you need to work on your listening skills, dude."

"Why?"

"She said this Jason kid started turning his life around in April, right?"

"Yes?"

"So what happened in April?"

"I have no idea," Cas answered. "Your arbitrary human divisions of time meant nothing to me until a few weeks ago."

"'Scuse me for being the lowly earthling, Spock," Dean rolled his eyes. "I do not understand that reference."

Dean sighed. He was going to have to set Cas up with a Netflix account or something.

"Coincidentally – and I'm saying that with irony, because I don't actually believe in coincidences –" Dean said, " – that's around the same time Gabe grew a pair and stood up to big brother."

Cas was quiet for a moment, and then nodded. "You are right. Given the circumstances, coincidence is highly unlikely. You believe there is a link?"

"Knowing Gabriel? I'd say 'yeah'," Dean said grimly.

The corridors were emptying quickly.
"This is ridiculous," Sam thought to himself as he hurried onward, his progress slowed by the unfamiliar shoes. As he saw Jason and the mysterious angel move around yet another corner, he made an executive decision to ditch the heels and go barefoot. His cover didn't matter anymore now that the forces of Heaven were involved.

They hadn't counted on any angels showing up so quickly, and there was no time to figure out if said angel was on their side or to come up with a plan in case it wasn't. Still, Sam's mind raced to figure out some way to get Jason and himself out of this alive. All he really had to rely on right now was the element of surprise the Enochian sigils on his ribs provided and the assurances of a pagan god that her transformation magic would hide him.

"Hell of a way to test it out," he thought as he rounded the corner and found a windowed classroom door close. Fear that he was going to be too late crept up on him, and he practically skidded down the waxed floor in his haste to get there. At the same time, he brought his knife out and sliced into the palm of his hand.

Honestly, he had no idea how he still had any blood left in his veins with the amount he had been losing lately. He drew a rough sigil into his palm, wincing at the idea that this might be in vain. It had worked the night he and Dean had encountered Raphael, and he could only hope it would again.

Through the door, he could hear a muffled, "Hey, I thought you said we were going to see Principal Steward?"

Looking through the classroom door window, he saw that the woman was already reaching out with the customary two-fingered angel salute. She was too far away for the banishing to work.

"Element of surprise it is," he decided and threw himself at the door, causing it to fly open and bang against the wall. It had the desired effect of drawing the attention of both the angel and the boy.

"Jason, get away from her," he ordered, striding forward.

"What?" the kid began, but his eyes widened in surprise. The angel was letting her sword slip farther down in her grasp. Sam's suspicion about the glinting metal object had been correct.

"You are interfering," the angel said, making an opening motion with her hand. It sent Sam flying into the nearby chalkboard, pinning him there. She cocked her head to one side, a perversion of the gesture Castiel often used, and then frowned. "And you are invisible. Yet not." She stepped forward, Jason momentarily forgotten. "Something shields you."

Sam gritted his teeth as she got closer, peering at him like she was trying to see into his soul. Maybe she was. She had long since come into his range, if only he could press his palm against the wall he could be able to send her packing. He knew the sigils on his ribs were good, but eventually she was going to clue into them soon – maybe even etch them out one by one.

"Tell me why a lowly human would need such protection, and I will allow you to walk away," she said.

"Unlikely," he thought, but said, "And the boy?"

"No," she replied. "He will be dealt with, not that it is your concern."

"No deal," Sam bit out. She gazed at him for a second, and then her eyes fell down to his palm. He felt the blood dripping from his fingers to the floor. She reached out, cold hands grasping him by the wrist so hard that he felt the bones grind together.
He groaned out in pain as she considered the bleeding gash, before passing a finger over it. Instantly, the skin and tissue healed itself, although she left his wrist untended. She smiled unpleasantly at him.

"Your little banishing spell won't work now, girl," she said quietly, looking Sam deeply in the eye. "I will give you one last chance to explain who you are and what you are doing here before I find out myself. It will be... unpleasant."

But she was already reaching for Sam's forehead, like she was going to suck the thoughts out of his brain. He tried to jerk back, but her power immobilized him –

The lights began to flicker and there was the sputter of electricity. The angel looked up in shock, staring around.

"What? No –!"

There was a brilliant explosion of light that Sam had to shut his eyes against, and then the angel's hold was broken. He fell to the floor, jarring his now swelling wrist, and looked around to find that the angel was gone.

The reason for that was several yards away, kneeling on the linoleum, hands bloody.

Jason was staring down at the roughly drawn angel banishing sigil in front of him; a discarded, bloody pocket-knife lay beside it.

"Holy shit," the kid whispered, eyes wide with an expression that Sam had seen once before on a mortal Anna when she had done much the same thing. "Holy shit, that should never have worked." His head shot up and he pinned Sam with a terrified stare. "What the hell is going on?!"

It was exactly what Sam wanted to know, because he had not expected this.

There was no time to dwell on it, though; the banishing was only a temporary solution.

Sam staggered to his feet, focussing all of his attention on the terrified teenager before him. "Come on, Jason, we need to get out of here. She'll be back."

Jason was on his feet in an instant, looking around for an escape. "No way, lady – I'm not going anywhere with you. You're not even a teacher, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Sam told him, deciding to stick with honesty. After what Jason had just seen, he would probably appreciate it more. "What I am is someone who wants to help." He nodded at Jason's hands. "First of all, bandaging you up before you bleed to death. After that we can talk more."

Jason shook his head. "Nuh-uh. I go anywhere with you, my family never sees me again."

"You stay here, your family never sees you again," Sam told him plainly. "With me you stand a chance." At Jason's distrustful look, he sighed, "Look, I'd like this to be your choice, but we need to get out of here before anyone notices what's happened. If that means I've got to knock you out, I'll do it. Broken wrist or not."

"I could take you," Jason said, uncertainly.

"You can try," Sam told him.

There was another long moment of staring, and then Jason swallowed and nodded.
"Come on," Sam said. "I've got a car waiting in the lot."

The abandoned warehouse on the industrial side of town was dark and hostile looking, but Dean had squatted in worse.

As soon as Sam had called to say that he and Sarah had found Jason – found and abducted, technically – Dean had made the executive decision not to bring him back to the inn where they were staying. With an angel on the kid's ass, anywhere with people was probably a bad idea.

He had seen a few likely looking places on their drive into town, and so when the call came in, he told Sam to drive them to a warehouse just off the highway. Then he and Cas grabbed a cab and met them there.

Gabriel's vessel was a kid that looked eerily like him, so much so that Dean would have been tempted to clock the guy one if he hadn't looked so completely freaked out. He was pale and silent when Sam gave the hasty introductions, a defiant expression on his face. While Sam hurriedly explained what had happened at the school, Sarah worked on his injured wrist, setting up a temporary brace.

'Good thing she knows some first-aid, 'cause we don't have time for a hospital right now,' Dean thought. 'This hasn't been a good month for injuries.'

The kid's hands, now swathed in bandages from the Charger's First-Aid kit, were shaking when Sam got to the part about how he inexplicably banished the angel. Taking pity on him, Dean reached into his jacket for his flask of Hunter's Helper, which the kid accepted gratefully.

"So how did you know to use the sigil?" Dean asked.

"Because the guy told me to," Jason replied after taking a sip from the flask, grimacing, and handing it back.

"Who told you?" Dean asked, shooting Sam and Cas a meaningful look.

"I don't know, just this…this guy," Jason said with a shrug, picking at the bandages on his palms. "It was a month or so ago, and I was…I was at the park on Juniper Street, sleeping off…" He looked at them warily for a second. "You guys really aren't teachers, right?"

"No," Dean assured him.

"Right, well, I was coming down from this seriously bad trip," Jason went on, shaking his head. "I figured I needed to sober up before heading home. My mom…” He trailed off, gave another shrug and refused to meet their gazes. "Anyway. I drifted off or something, because I was suddenly waking up and there was this guy next to me on the bench. Just sitting there, watching me and suckin' on a lollipop. It was fucking creepy, is what it was."

"Be glad that's all he did to you," Dean thought he heard Sam say, too low for the kid to hear. Sarah shot him a curious look, but didn't make any attempt to interrupt the story.

"So, I freak out, I'm trying to get up and get away as fast as possible, but he just looks at me and…I can't move."
"He paralyzed you?" Sam asked.

Jason made a face, and then said, "No, it was like…his eyes, man, they were fucking intense. I just…felt like I didn't want to move, like he knew everything about me and if I moved, he was gonna see more." He shuddered. "It was messed up."

"The sigil?" Dean prompted.

"Yeah, yeah…right," Jason looked for the flask hopefully, and Dean was tempted to give him another hit but thought better of it; getting the kid shit-faced while they were dealing with an angel problem wasn't a good idea. He shook his head and put away the flask. "So, he reaches over – and is totally in my personal space like you wouldn't believe – and smacks me in the head, and suddenly I'm completely sober. It's like…I wasn't even craving anything anymore. I was just…completely fine. And then he starts talking – and the stuff he says…"

The kid's eyes were suddenly bright, and his jaw was set in a way that Dean recognized as trying to hold himself together.

"What did he say?" Sam said gently, in the caring, sympathetic voice that people were just helpless against.

Jason cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably, before replying, "He said…he said my dad hadn't left me because he wanted to, and it was more than he could say about some fathers. He told me trying to deal with it the way I was doing only worked so long. That I needed to get my ass in gear, or one day some flannel wearing douchebags were going call me on my shit and I wasn't going to like it."

Sam and Dean looked at each other.

"Then he said he was about to do something really stupid to make up for some things he'd done, and then he leaned over, and handed me this piece of paper…it had that symbol on it," Jason went on. "He said I needed to memorize it, because one day someone might come for me and I'd need to know. Just in case." He frowned. "He said he wanted to have all of his bases covered."

There was quiet as everyone processed this.

"Well, congratulations, little man, you've been slapped by an angel," Dean finally said, his tone wry.

"What?" Jason asked, eyes round.

"The guy on that bench with you was the archangel Gabriel," Sam explained. "And the woman who came after you today was an agent of Raphael, another archangel."

Jason stared, and then started to get up. "Yeah…okay, where's the exit? No offense, but I'm gonna back away, slowly…"

"Kid, I wish we were crazy. It'd actually make more sense than some of the things we've seen," Dean said quietly. "But it's the truth. You saw what that sigil did, so you know we're on the level."

"No, I don't," the kid said frantically. "For all I know, that chick was S.H.I.E.L.D and you guys are HYDRA, and you're trying to mess me up."

Dean rolled his eyes. "You would be a Marvel-fan."

Jason's expression turned dark. "Got a problem with that, grandma?"
"One word, chump – Batman."

"Hey!" Sam interjected, frowning at both of them. "Can we focus?"

"Heaven is in disarray," Cas spoke up, looking directly at Jason. "The one in charge right now is Raphael, who wishes nothing more than to put an end to everything. There's no one powerful enough to stand up to him that we can turn to. Except Gabriel."

"That's great," Jason ground out. "So why don't you go find him and leave me alone?"

"Even if we did, the forces of Heaven would not," Cas replied quietly. "I would imagine that right now, one of their prime directives is to find and destroy you."

Jason took in the serious faces trained on him, and shook his head, laughing nervously. "Okay, say for a second I pretend you're telling me the truth – why the hell would angels be after me?"

"Because you are the vessel of Gabriel," Cas answered firmly. "Raphael seeks to ensure that he never returns to Heaven by destroying his vessel: you."

"Vessel?" the kid repeated. "The hell is that?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Sam said. "Your body's basically a container. It has the strength to hold an angel – archangel, technically."

"Sure…" Jason said, raising an eyebrow. "Because that makes total sense. So tell me this – if I'm a vessel, who was this Gabriel guy wearing when he showed up in the park?"

"A distant ancestor of yours," Cas explained. "Likely one born in Judea over two thousand years ago."

"So why can't he keep that one?"

"Because he was killed and his body discarded," Cas told him. "You are the last vessel of the angel Gabriel on this planet. As you can imagine, that makes you rather important."

"Yeah, but if he's dead – ?"

"A friend of ours has begun collecting shards of his grace to bring him back," Sam explained. "It's dangerous to collect the grace without anywhere to store it. Which is where you would come in, if you agreed."

There was another lingering silence as the kid processes what they were asking him.

"No," Jason said, shaking his head. "No freaking way. I'm not – I'm not going to become a – an incubator for an angel! That's so many degrees of wrong!"

"You have little choice," Cas replied firmly. "The angels will keep coming after you no matter what. And if you think they will stop at infringing on your life, think of the lives of your loved ones. Angels are strategic. They will go after your weakness."

"What are you, some kind of angel expert?" the kid demanded, sulkily.

"You could say that," Cas allowed.

"Look, kid, believe it or not, we know what you're going through," Dean said helpfully. "S – see, Jane and me? Exact same boat. Destiny decided we were supposed to be angel condoms. Only, in
our case? The game plan was to destroy the world."

"The guy who you'd be carrying around?" Sam added, "He's the only archangel we've ever met that actually wants to keep this planet spinning."

"Well, the only one whose grace is still accessible," Dean pointed out. He eyed Cas. "Dude, if you were still all full of grace…"

"I am aware," Cas replied shortly, in a tone that was fast becoming the Castiel equivalent of Sam's bitchface. Dean wasn't sure whether he should resent it or not, considering it finally meant that Cas was displaying emotion.

Jason turned his gaze on Cas, tense. "You? You were an archangel?"

"For little more than an hour," Cas granted. "It was necessary to give up that power at the time."

"Why?" Jason demanded. "Why couldn't you have kept it? Then you wouldn't have to be here telling me I've got to give up…everything."

"I did it to save my family," Cas said. "Surely you can understand that?"

Both Dean and Sam sent Cas surprised yet pleased looks. Dean had known the angel considered them his friends, but anything more than that? It was oddly heartwarming, in a Family-Channel-Special sort of way.

The moment was broken by the sudden, faint chime emanating from Jason's pocket. The kid took it out and flipped it open, staring at the screen uncomprehendingly. "It's my mom. She says she heard about me leaving school. I need to go home right now."

"Yeah, well, sorry kiddo, but that's not happening any time soon," Dean told him. "Not until we've got a better game plan – what?"

Jason was staring up at them, his face drawn and an odd, guarded look on his features. "My mom doesn't text." He held up the phone, showing the message. "And if she does…it's usually really long sentences. Like, she spends forever on them."

The text on screen was full of misspelled words and abbreviations, looking rather like how Cas's texts to Dean and Sam looked.

"We're too late, then," Cas said, sparing the briefest of glances to the message. "I told you that once they realized you've been hidden, the angels would go for your weakness." He drew his mouth into a thin line. "They have made their move, against your family."

"What?!" Jason demanded, jumping up again. "Then we have to go –"

"Sit down," Dean said, roughly pushing the kid back into his seat. "Going for them now would be suicide."

"Fine," Jason glowered. "Then give me that grace stuff. Angel me up."

"It is not that easy," Cas told him. "Even if Kali arrived here this instant, the shards of Gabriel's grace that she has are too little to make much of a change. If you were to take it in to yourself now, you would still be no match for those who hunt you."

"They'd probably kill you and then scatter the grace again," Sam pointed out.
"I don't care! That's my mom we're talking about!" Jason snapped. "And probably my sister too! You can't expect me to just sit here while they're being held by the people who want to kill me. Who says they won't just kill them to make a point? It's the number one plot point of every comic book out there."

"This ain't a comic book, kid," Dean retorted. "We've got to have a plan before we can just waltz in."

He didn't need Sam's expression to understand the irony of those words coming from his mouth.

"We should not be dancing anywhere," Cas said, frowning. "The most prudent course of action would be to take the boy and flee."

"Hey! Watch who you're calling 'boy'! I'm eighteen!" Jason snapped, and Dean rolled his eyes. Damn, but teenage guys were predictable. "And are you deaf? I'm not going anywhere without my mom and my sister."

"You'd be putting them in danger," Sam told him gently. "The angels will keep looking for you, and they'll go through them. Trust us on this one."

"Raphael's forces will not rest until you are dead," Castiel confirmed.

"Not…not necessarily."

Everyone looked over at Sarah, who was frowning and staring into the middle distance. Dean had almost forgotten that she was there, given her silence, but judging from the set of her jaw and wrinkle in her brow, she had been doing more than just sitting there and listening.

"Care to share with the class?" Dean inquired, mock-politely.

"Okay, so those slivers of grace aren't enough to make him as strong as Gabriel, right?" Sarah asked, earning a hesitant nod from Cas. "But maybe we can use them some other way?"

Sam shifted uncomfortably, willing the pain meds he had swallowed to take away some more of the sting in his wrist. His discomfort was not aided by the fact that he and Dean were currently crouching within a crawl space in the warehouse, surrounded by hex bags and protective sigils to keep their presence a secret.

Across the warehouse floor, Cas was similarly hidden, although his placement was temporary – something Dean had bitched about but eventually given in once Sam and Cas talked him around.

In the middle of the open-space, Sarah stood with a nervous but determined looking Jason.

"Ready when you are," she told him, her voice echoing with the building's acoustics; Sam could hear the encouragement and assurance in her tone. This was the part he hadn't liked. Sarah had no business confronting the angels, but they needed someone nonthreatening and not magically protected to back the kid up and help get his family to safety.

If that part of the plan worked, anyhow.

From the crawlspace, Sam saw Jason nod jerkily and look to his cellphone. There was the silent clicking sound of him texting, probably sending some generic message about hanging out with a
friend. There was a chime, likely him being asked his location, which he gave.

He hadn't even put his phone down when the air rippled with the sound of feathers and the angel from that morning stood there.

"Hello, Jason," the woman said, her voice just as high and cold as before. There was a pause, and she looked at Sarah. "You are not the woman I saw before. The shielded one. Where is she?"

"Around," Sarah said stiffly, and Sam was proud at how her voice didn't even shake. Experience had taught the Winchesters that lying to angels wasn't a good idea, although lying with the truth still tended to work.

"This is not your business," the angel said quietly. "It would be wise if you left."

"Where's my mom?" Jason demanded, breathless. He actually did sound nervous, but resolute. "And my sister."

"They are unharmed."

"I want to see them."

There was a snapping noise, and the fluttering of wings. Sam chanced a glance outside of his hiding spot and saw two angels in male vessels flanking the female one, each with a captive in hand: a woman and girl about seven years old. Apparently the blond angel wanted this situation to be finished quickly, because she had given in without comment.

When his family caught sight of Jason, they both cried out his name and tried to get away from the angels, but their captors held them fast.

"Let them go!" Jason ordered. "They've got nothing to do with this."

The female angel cocked her head to one side.

"Jason? What's going on?" his mother whispered, panicked, while the sister cried silently.

"Mom, Jenna – everything's gonna be okay," Jason promised, his voice breaking.

"As you can see, your family is unharmed," the angel said. "Cooperate, and they will remain so. Heaven is not unjust in these matters."

"Just…let them leave and I'll do what you want," Jason begged. "They shouldn't…don't make them watch this."

The angel considered this again, and then nodded. She looked at Sarah. "Take them from this place. And don't return, or we will not be so lenient next time."

Sarah made a noise of affirmation.

The angels allowed the woman and the girl to go; the latter ran across the floor to grasp onto Jason, who hugged them briefly before practically pushing them toward Sarah. He murmured encouragements and promises to them, and soon Sarah was leading them out of the building, somehow managing to keep a hold of the Jason's step-mother, who continued to strain towards him.

'She's stronger than when we first met,' Sam thought idly, impressed, before his thoughts jerked back to the current situation.
"Now you will come with us," the angel said, already reaching for Jason.

The kid took an automatic step back just as another voice rang out. "Not so fast."

From out of the shadows where he had been hiding, obscured by hexbags, Castiel appeared. In a fluent movement, he tossed something across the space and flame erupted, creating a circle of Holy Fire around the space where the three angels stood.

Taking that as their cue, Sam and Dean crept out of their spot as well, remaining at the ready the minute Castiel gave the signal.

The female angel made an angry noise, and then hissed, "Castiel."

"Suriel," Castiel said calmly.

"You have fallen far, brother," she sneered. "I don't feel even the lingering echo of your grace any longer."

"There is none to sense," Castiel replied curtly, "although you are welcome to try."

"Why would I waste the energy?" Suriel demanded. She frowned at him. "I cannot sense this form any longer either. You are shielded." Her eyes narrowed. "Is that what your friends are?" She smiled a cruel smile. "Are you all fallen angels? Traitors who have managed to find protection? It is a vain hope, brother. You know how Raphael feels about the fallen ones."

"I would imagine it is the same way he feels about every being with the misfortune of not being created an angel," Castiel answered honestly. "And this is the one you choose to serve? Have you completely forgotten our Father's love of humanity?"

"Father is no longer here," Suriel replied. "His inactivity during the Apocalypse is a testament to that." She folded her arms, a remarkably human gesture. "Not that you have any right to call him your Father any longer. You have taken the grace he granted you and squandered it."

"We are not here to talk about my grace, sister," Castiel reminded her. "Your interest in Gabriel's final vessel suggests you are looking for his."

"As if you are not seeking the same," Suriel bristled.

"If the grace is what Raphael wants, then I propose a trade," Castiel said gravely. "We will give you the shards that we have. In return, you will leave this vessel and his family alone. The boy has no interest in hosting Gabriel."

"Hollow words, brother, you do not have any of Gabriel's grace here," Suriel pointed out.

"No, not here," Castiel allowed. "It would be foolish to…bring all our cards to the table, I believe is the saying?"

"Even if you had it here, it would make no difference," Suriel replied. "My orders are to procure the vessel as well."

Sam frowned at that, because the way she said it implied something more than just destruction. Castiel seemed to notice this too, because he tilted his head to one side, thoughtful.

"That does explain your anomalous behaviour," he said. "You have had ample times to kill this boy, and yet you haven't yet. In the past, you would not have hesitated to strike him down before he saw
"It is not your business."

"It would seem that Raphael is not content simply with the shards of Gabriel's self," Castiel mused. "Perhaps he too is 'covering all his bases'."

Suriel remained stubbornly quiet while Castiel spoke, and Sam had a feeling that the ex-angel was voicing his thoughts for the Winchester's benefit more than his own.

"If Raphael had control of this vessel as well as the grace he is collecting, he could control how long it would take to return Gabriel to his former self…all the while, he could instruct the vessel in his understanding of Father's plan," Castiel realized. "He would gain a readymade ally to restart the Apocalypse." He sighed. "And by withholding the last of that grace, he could keep Gabriel under his control."

"Gabriel squandered his place by consorting with pagans!" Suriel cried. "He gave up his right to an archangel's place in Heaven."

"Be that as it may, sister, I am afraid Raphael's plan will not work out."

"Oh really?" Suriel spat. "And what are you going to do, abomination? You know what difficulties there are in defying an archangel. He's already killed you once."

"True," Castiel allowed, "but you forget that I have helped resist the plans of two archangels. And as to what I can do…" He trailed off, and suddenly whipped around, a silver blade glinting in his hand before he shoved it into Jason's abdomen.

Sam felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, dread and anger warring for supremacy. Beside Sam, Dean jerked and let out a silent curse.

The teenager choked, staring at Cas in horror as the ex-angel hauled the blade out. "But…but you–?"

"I am sorry," Castiel told him quietly, "but Raphael cannot acquire Gabriel's vessel. If you are dead, you cannot give permission either."

Jason's knees gave out and he fell to the ground.

From behind the ring of Holy Fire, Suriel stared dispassionately at Jason's crumpled form, and then looked at Castiel. "That is only a temporary obstacle, brother. And we will still find Gabriel's grace."

"Yes," Castiel agreed. "But not today."

He made a motion with his hands, and Sam and Dean moved into action, flicking open their lighters and igniting the Holy Oil sodden rags within the glass bottles they carried. As soon as there was light, they hurled them at the angels on either side of Suriel.

There were twin shrieks of anger and pain as the angels went up in black, stinking flames. Suriel howled in rage, and glared out at the three of them.

"Your taste in allies has not improved, Castiel," she hissed. "If anything, it has declined. At least the Winchesters were the vessels of the Sons of Light. You consort with human whores now?"

And, okay, ouch, but it was nice to know that whatever mystical transformation Aggie had
performed on them, the angels couldn't even sense who they were when they were in the same room.

"I am sorry that you cannot see the truth, sister," Castiel said, approaching the flaming circle with the still bloody knife and a pouch of sand.

"Go on. What difference does another angel's life make to you?" Suriel spat. "You are already a traitor and a murderer."

Castiel considered her. "I have no intention of killing you."

"If you don't, I will come for you," she promised. "I will dog you until the end of your pathetic human life and then hurl you into the Pit myself."

There was a long silence, and then Sam saw something in the light that looked almost like the ex-angel was smirking.

"So what else is new?" he said conversationally, cleaning the knife he had used to stab Jason. At Suriel's wordless fury, he added, "You will deliver a message to Raphael." He knelt down, drawing the knife across his palm and began to draw the banishing sigil, and then looked up. "Tell him he's still my little bitch."

He emptied the bag of sand along the edge of the circle, extinguishing the flames there. At the exact moment Suriel reached out for Castiel, he pressed his bloody palm against the floor.

Suriel disappeared with a howling shriek and a flash of light.

There was a groan from the floor, and Cas was suddenly down on his knees, shrugging out of his flannel outer-shirt and pressing it to the boy's wound.

"...when did this become the plan?" Dean heard the kid groan weakly as he and Sam hurried out of their hiding spots and toward the prone figure.

"It was always the plan," Dean told him as he dug into his pocket for his cellphone. "We couldn't tell you because you had to be convincing."

"No one's convincing when they're expecting to get stabbed," Sam added.

During the brief period where Cas and Sam had talked Dean into Sarah's plan to use herself and Cas as a guinea pig, they had come up with that last little change.

It was also something Dean hadn't been too keen on.

The kid groaned again. "When I angel up, I'm smiting the shit out of you people."

'If you live that long,' Dean thought grimly. Stomach wounds were notoriously temperamental, even when precisely inflicted. They could kill a man in anywhere from two minutes to thirty minutes, and had been a huge risk on their part.

Dean punched the speed-dial while Sam brought out his own phone; probably calling Sarah to assure her that everything was fine and to have her keep Jason's family away until he was healed.

"Is it done?" a sharp voice demanded in Dean's ear.
"Yeah, they're gone," Dean assured.

"I'm ten minutes away. Will he survive that long?"

"Driving a little faster wouldn't hurt," Dean replied, hanging up.

They had had to make sure Kali was within driving distance before they even attempted this plan. Luckily she had been back in the country since after they summoned her, but no one was really pleased by the rushed nature of the latest events.

Dean came to kneel beside Cas and Jason, trying to read his friend's expression. To be honest, Dean was a pretty proud at how Cas had held up through the entire ordeal; the whole exchange had proven yet again that his nerd angel friend was one bad ass motherfucker, even as a human.

But one thing continued to bother Dean.

"I still think we could have done this differently," Dean muttered.

"The angels had to think Gabriel's vessel a lost cause," Cas told him patiently. "It has bought us time."

"I know," Dean retorted. "But now they're going to be looking for you. Raphael thought you were dead, man, and now he's gonna know you're not."

"It was necessary in order to ensure Gabriel the time to regain some of his grace, so that he can at least defend himself," Cas said. "Although, I do understand your concerns." He frowned. "Perhaps I should take my leave."

"What?" Dean cried before he could completely control himself. "Why?"

"You and Sam would likely have a better chance if I were to depart from you," Cas said reasonably. "Raphael's attentions would then be split, looking for you and looking for me."

"Dude, you wouldn't last five minutes on your own."

Cas frowned. "I have observed enough about humans to interact with them convincingly. And I have taken a bus before, which would fulfill the need for transportation."

"And where are you going to get money for that?" Dean demanded. "Besides, you don't even know how to do your own laundry yet. And you're too trusting, so someone's gonna take advantage of that. Raphael'll pick you up no problem."

"Perhaps you are right," Cas agreed after a moment, though he sounded disgruntled doing so. He looked down at Jason. "Perhaps I will go with Gabriel. He will know more about blending in, and I can be of service aiding him in finding his grace."

"Unless Raphael pulls a Michael and sends your face to every freak of nature preacher out there," Dean pointed out, his mind churning out many different reasons why splitting up was a bad idea. "Then not only are you caught, but they'll catch Gabriel. Then all this was for nothing."

"And I will kill you if that happens," Jason piped up. "In case you forgot? You stabbed me." He pointed at his gut. "Right there."

"Butt out, brat, grown-ups are talking," Dean growled, while Cas went quiet.

"So I either endanger you and Sam, or my brother," the ex-angel finally said, dismayed. "I could
now get you two caught as well."

"Hey, we're used to being on the run – I really hate to say it, but right now Gabe's your best bet for beating Raphael, not us, so let him do his thing," Dean said. "And we're not kicking you out, man. We'll deal, the way we always do."

Cas tilted his head, studying Dean, and then smiled fractionally. "Very well. I will remain with you."

Dean steadily ignored the flare of relief and happiness that warmed his insides at that.

"Good."

"Are you guys going to kiss?" Jason asked. "Because I could do without the sappy chick flick stuff."

"You know, that looks like it might become infected, kid," Dean scowled. "I've got some alcohol here somewhere…"

"No, no, I'm good, shutting up," Jason choked.

There was a banging noise that sounded very much like a door being busted in, and then the sharp *clack-clack* of heels. Kali appeared in the room, a business like expression on her face.

"This is the vessel?" she demanded when she was several feet away, staring down at Jason. "It's broken."

Jason was staring at her in awe. "Who's the MILF?"

"The blow did not pierce any of his vital organs," Cas told her mildly.

"Perhaps," Kali said grudgingly, kneeling down by the teenager as she brought out the vial of grace. The tiny wisps of light within were swirling crazily within it, as though they could sense the presence of the vessel.

"I should do that," Cas said, reaching for the vial. Kali pulled away, and he gave her a pointed look. "Even a sliver of grace has the power to burn the profane on contact. You remain a pagan god, while this body is still a vessel. Unless you wish to be dissolved once that phial opened, I would suggest backing away."

"Great, now there're gods, too?" Jason mumbled sourly, while Kali bristled and relinquished the vial. It occurred to Dean just how invested in this she actually was.

'Huh. Maybe she actually did love the guy,' he thought, though it was a mystery why. Gabriel, dead or alive, was still a douche. Instead of voicing the opinion to Cas, though, he simply told his friend, "Vessel or not, buddy, you're going to have to watch your eyes. Trust me, you really don't want to go through this mortal thing with no peepers."

Cas nodded to show that he was listening, and then leaned over Jason with the vial in his hand. He was murmuring something quietly which Dean couldn't quite make out because he was backing away. Kali did the same, and they all shielded their faces in anticipation.

There was a gasping, choking sound, like someone inhaling or imbibing something quickly and then the tinkle of glass hitting the floor. There was movement – likely Cas getting out of the way – and then a sensation of warmth hitting him in the face.

Dean clenched his eyes tightly shut, aware even through this that the bright light that emanated from
the direction where Cas and Jason lay was not the same brilliance of a full powered angel.

When it was gone, he opened his eyes and stared over to where Jason continued to lie on the ground. For a fleeting second, Dean thought maybe the plan hadn't worked, and all the grace had done was exacerbate the wound.

The kid groaned.

"My brothers keep stabbing me," he mumbled, blinking up at the ceiling. "I'm beginning to resent it." He reached down slowly, pulling at the material of his shirt and revealing to everyone that the fatal wound was gone. He snorted. "It's totally unwarranted, too. I'm not even the black sheep in the family. Off-white, maybe. Grey at the very most."

An expression of cautious relief spread over Cas's face, and within him, Dean felt some tension he hadn't realized he was holding on to let go. It had worked.

"Gabriel?" Cas asked, stepping forward to help his re-angeled brother up.

The kid grinned.

"More like Jason-Plus, right now," he said, and then his gaze fell on Sam and Dean. There was a familiar, mischievous glint in his eyes. "So, it's you two chuckleheads, is it? Gotta say, lovin' the re-model. Ninety-percent less dick."

"You talkin' about you or us now?" Dean retorted, and the kid cracked up laughing.

When he calmed down, the Trickster look had faded and instead was replaced with wide-eyed, childish enthusiasm. "Holy crap, you guys, I feel like I just snorted a line of coke! Only, you know, without the actual drugs! You've gotta try this!" He paused, peered at Sam, and then added, "Well, maybe not you."

"Loki?" Kali asked, her tone cautious and carefully guarded as she too stepped forward.

The kid eyed her for a moment, eyes performing an obvious up and down flick. The Trickster look returned and his grin turned into an all-out leer. "Bonjour, mon amour."

Kali might have been about to smile, but a sudden commotion nearby ruined the moment. Donna was running into the building, Jenna and Sarah at her heels. Apparently Sarah hadn't been able to keep them occupied much longer.

"Jason! Jason, are you okay?" his step-mother cried, pushing past human and pagan-god alike to envelop the teenager into a hug. "What happened? Where are those…those people? And what was that light?"

"Jason, I don't...understand."
"Later," he promised, and motioned for the pagan goddess. "Right now, I want you to meet Kali. She's an old…friend." The look he shot Kali implied something a little stronger than friendship, though. "She's going to drive us home, okay? I just need to talk to these guys first and then we're going home."

Donna still looked monumentally freaked, but folded at Jason's calm and resolute tone.

Kali seemed a little annoyed, but inclined her head once at the kid's gaze. She led Donna and Jenna out of the building. Jason watched them go, and then rolled his shoulders, turning to the Winchesters, Cas and Sarah.

Sarah mostly.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," he said smoothly. "You said your name was Sarah? I'm guessing you're Sammy's girl."

"'Sammy'?" Sarah echoed, and Dean saw his brother pale.

"Yeah, Sammy," Jason grinned. "Or does he always tell you to call him 'Sam' too?" He turned his attention on Sam and Dean, eyebrows raised in a question. At Sam's infinitesimal shake of the head, his eyes widened. "You haven't told her yet?"

"Told me what?" Sarah demanded.

"Not right now," Sam said tightly, the order both at Jason and Sarah.

Taking pity on his brother, Dean jumped in, "So how much do you remember about being Gabriel?"

"About the last hour or so of my life," Jason answered, still watching Sam like he was debating about spilling the beans; eventually he looked away. Sarah was frowning, apparently trying to bore a hole in the side of Sam's head using only her eyes. "Which, I gotta say, was really anticlimactic. Hoisted by my own petard. Lame."

"You might not want to advertise that," Dean pointed out.

Jason snorted, looking at them both in turn again. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you muttonheads pulled this off. I'm going to take a guess, but the Apocalypse – you stopped it?"

"Michael and Lucifer are in the Cage," Dean confirmed. "But there was…a bit of a snag."

His eyes flicked over to Cas, and Jason's eyes tracked it.

"Yeah, I was going to ask how little bro ended up slumming," he said, frowning. "But we're tight on time, so I'll have to drop in for war stories later. I've got to get my mom and Jenna somewhere safe right now. Raphael's not going to fall for this little con very long, and when he figures out that my soul isn't in Heaven where it would be if I actually died, he's going to come looking for me."

"Picturing you with a soul…kinda new territory," Dean remarked.

"I know, right?" Jason grinned.

"You should contact Balthazar," Cas spoke up. "He has hidden an ally of ours before, he will likely do so again."

"Complaining all the way," Jason agreed. "Will do."
He turned to leave, and his shoulders slumped a bit. "Ugh, I can't wait until I get my wings back. I loved to drive, but now that I remember flying…” He sent Cas a look. "How do you deal with it?"

"By remembering that I gave it up for a reason," Cas said quietly.

The former angels shared a look Dean couldn't interpret, and Jason actually offered a real smile for once. "Really? Huh. Well, just use protection, okay, bro? Remember what a hassle the Nephilim were."

This one Dean didn't understand at all, and Cas too had a puzzled look on his face as he asked, "Why does everyone keep bringing that up?"

They watched Gabriel leave, and Sarah rounded on Sam. "What was he talking about? You said you had told me everything. How does he know Sam?"

"Uh," Sam swallowed, not knowing what to answer first.

Dean promptly turned around and started walking away. Much as he had wanted to see Sarah's face when she learned the truth when he had thought it would be humorous, she looked kind of scary right now.

"I'm bushed, what about you?" he asked Cas loudly, and dug out his phone. "What's say we order a pizza and head back to the motel for a well-deserved night-off?"

"We might wish to switch accommodations first," Cas replied reasonably as Dean glanced down at his phone screen and saw that he had missed four phone calls. Flicking to the home screen, he noticed he had several voicemails as well.

'Never a good sign,' he thought with a frown while Sam stuttered through some kind of explanation or another, obviously still trying to keep from giving the big reveal. Dean's stomach clenched when he saw that it was Lisa who was phoning him. 'Something's up.'

He wandered away from the others, pressing his phone to one ear and plugging his finger into the other, waiting for the stupid phone voice to stop chatting and get to the message.

When it finally did, he felt like the air had been crushed from his lungs.

"Dean," Lisa's recorded voice was frantic and it sounded like she had been crying. "Dean, you need to come back – it's Ben – Dean, he's missing."
Balthazar and Bobby discuss a looming threat.

Interlude VI

Bobby felt like an idiot.

The talking board resting on the table in front of him was a last resort. He always felt like a teenaged girl at a sleepover when he tried to use the damn thing, but it had been a week since Balthazar had been able to offer him any new research leads. With the angel off doing God knows what and Crowley's dirty fingers still clinging to his soul, Bobby was desperate for any kind of answers.

He gazed around the cabin again, hoping something might jump out at him or inspire him with a better idea, but nothing did. The place looked a lot more lived in now, since Balthazar brought a few books and belongings from the house in Sioux Falls but it wasn't a large change. The angel had complained about being treated like a pack-horse, but after a few growled reminders that he was welcome to do his own research, the complaints had subsided into resentful glares and snide comments.

Ever since Crowley's visit, Bobby had remained in the small cabin in Montana; neither he nor Balthazar saw any use in carting him off again, not when Crowley could find him anywhere with a mere thought and with the hunter community still lurking around his home in Sioux Falls. The time was better spent on trying to figure out what their respective next moves were.

For his part, Bobby had been trying to come up with a plan to deal with Meg. The demonic bitch unfortunately had the same kind of fortune as the Winchesters – which just went to show that even the bad guys could luck out sometimes – and that called for more than summoning her directly into a Devil's Trap.

As it was, Bobby had other reasons for not pursuing that avenue. He knew that he was supposed to be focussed on trapping her and sending her back to Hell for a talking to by Crowley, but experience taught him that he needed a back-up plan. Something more final. He and the boys had been caught unawares by Meg more times than he liked, and he didn't want it happening again.

'And offing her might be a test for getting rid of Crowley,' Bobby thought with a scowl; as long as the former King of the Crossroads Demons held his contract, Bobby wouldn't be able to relax, tentative truce or not. 'I want a way to end him if he tries to stiff me again.'
With his only angelic ally cut off from Heaven and unable to smite demons, Bobby had busied himself with figuring out a non-angelic means of pulling the feat off. He focussed his investigation on demonology and its related lore, but nothing offered any very specific or effective way to completely destroy a demon.

Some of his research mentioned the Colt, of course, but Bobby knew that was a dead end right now. The boys had lost it the day Ellen and Jo died – he closed his eyes to the wave of grief that memory brought up – and even though Bobby had taken the thing apart and built it back up again, he still didn't have the know-how to make himself one.

As for the demon-killing knife, Bobby had a sick feeling that it would be as effective against Crowley as Dean had said it had been against Lucifer. Especially since Balthazar had suggested that Crowley was more than a demon these days.

'Bastard didn't even have the decency to explain himself about that before flying off,' Bobby thought sourly.

That had been a week ago. It was the longest stretch of time that Bobby had gone without seeing the snarky angel, and as much as he didn't want to admit it, he was beginning to wonder if Balthazar might have run into some trouble of the fatal sort.

'Another thing to ask the spirit world,' he thought, glowering at the board again with unconcealed contempt.

Luckily – or not – he was momentarily saved from doing anything with it when the air behind him rippled. The scent of burnt ozone and the suffocating aftershave that the aforementioned angel seemed to favor filled the air.

"I despise children," he announced loudly, not bothering with a greeting. "Noisy, messy, smelly little bastards without control over their own pharyngeal reflexes." He mimed a shudder and then adopted a more conversational tone, "You should be glad you never procreated."

"I thought you were supposed to love humanity or somethin' to that effect?" Bobby inquired, raising an eyebrow. "Last I checked, kids were part of that."

"As far as I'm concerned, the whole definition of 'human' needs to be reworked," Balthazar grumbled, striding across the room and seizing a dusty tumbler from the ramshackle kitchenette cupboard.

Bobby took a seat at the table and peered over at the angel. "I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say your sudden hatred for kids's one of the reason's you been gone so long?"

"Why, Robert, you noticed my absence? I'm touched," Balthazar said, reaching for the bottle of aged whiskey Bobby had found in the cupboard two days before and pouring himself a generous portion. He tossed it back in one shot and then glanced over at Bobby. "And the answer is yes. Gabriel's back in the game."

"Gabriel?" Bobby repeated, confused; he had a feeling the statement wasn't as much of a non sequitur as it seemed. Quickly, his mind flipped through everything he knew about the archangel, the most useful of which came from what the boys had told him and not his own biblical research. "Wasn't he – ?"

"Dead? Only mostly," Balthazar replied blithely. "Right now he's going around as a snot-nosed teenager. And while he's slutting about with a pagan to find the remnants of his grace, I've been
asked to play bloody Harriet Tubman to his vessel's kin."

Bobby paused to parse that and raised an eyebrow. "I didn't take Gabriel for the nostalgic type."

"Well, he's not exactly Gabriel per se," Balthazar replied, pouring himself another generous tumbler full of whiskey. "Not yet, anyhow. But there's enough of the pretentious prick in him that he thinks he can order me about like some kind of angelic shuttle service. And then the ponce's brat sister has the gall to vomit on my shoes. How's that for gratitude?"

Bobby's lip twitched, because the imagined look of Balthazar's absolute scandalized expression of outrage was too amusing not to enjoy.

The angel noticed the gesture and rolled his eyes. "Yes, ha-ha, very droll. I tell you, if I had known that this is what Castiel's promise would entail, it's a different answer he would have gotten."

"So Gabriel's human family is in hiding now too?" Bobby asked.

"So to speak – unfortunately they're not as adept at surviving on their own as you are, old man," Balthazar said, inclining his head to the fridge that Bobby had stocked with game when it became apparent the angel would be a while. "Considering their lack of resourcefulness, I had to stick them with your woman for the time being."

"My what?" That brought Bobby up short, and he stared for a full fifteen seconds trying to suss out who Balthazar was talking about before it hit him. "Are you talkin' about Sherriff Mills?"

"Who else would I be talking about?" Balthazar snorted. "The bint is nothing if not determined to make sure you're alright. She seemed itching to mother someone, so I set Gabriel's human pets up with her. It'll keep her busy." He rummaged in the pocket of his slacks for a moment, and then held several sheets of rumpled paper out to Bobby. "Oh, and she asked me to give you these. She was also going on about something to do with phones."

Bobby reached for the sheet wordlessly and turned away from Balthazar to read them.

"Honestly, it's like passing notes in school," the angel scoffed behind him, emptying the last of the alcohol into his glass. "What have I been reduced to?"

The papers, as it turned out, seemed to be a list of messages from hunters that Bobby still trusted, or contacts that he had been dealing with before being kidnapped by the bossy blond angel. It also detailed the expenses for having his house put to right, which Jody had apparently taken upon herself to do.

Bobby had stared blankly at the account, not quite sure what to say. For someone who had arrested him more times than he could count for drunk and disorderly conduct in town, it seemed a real stretch for her.

"I hope you intend to make an honest woman out of her," Balthazar remarked snidely. "She's already cleaned your entire hovel from top to bottom and keeps running the little kiddies off your property. To be honest, I'm not sure which the more tiresome job is."

Bobby scowled, having no intention to get into a discussion about that particular topic with Balthazar. He'd kiss Crowley again before he did. Instead, he pointed out, "Puttin' Gabriel's people up with someone who's connected to me ain't a great idea. They'll be like sittin' ducks for anyone lookin' for 'em."

"Our pool of allies is rather small, in case you forgot, so there are really no other options," Balthazar
reminded him, the sentiment sounding indifferent in his accented drawl. "I don't know if you realize this, old man, but I'm stretched a mite thin these days. What, with avoiding Raphael, trying to save everyone's collective arse and attempting to sniff out any information on archemons – which, I should tell you, isn't as fun or as easy as it sounds –"

"Archdemons?" Bobby interrupted, not completely familiar with the term.

"Caught that, did you?"

"And those are, what, demonic equivalent of archangels?"

"If only," Balthazar elucidated wistfully. "Some rather erroneous mistranslations and a long game of broken telephone over the past millennia led to your so-called scholars confusing archdemons with the first Fallen."

"The first Fallen," Bobby repeated. "You mean, like angels that became human?"

"No. Angels who fall to become human cease to exist when their mortal life ends," Balthazar corrected. At Bobby's strained expression, he added, "A rather bleak finale, I know. It wasn't always that way, either. It used to be that angels who fell to experience mortality went to Hell when their human lives ended. And then upper management realized that they were just handing over super-powered beings like Lilith and Alistair and the like to Lucifer's lot – after that, Death was called in to personally deal with the apostates..."

Bobby startled. "I thought Lilith was human. The first soul that Lucifer…?"

"She was human. She just happened to have been an angel before that," Balthazar informed him. "It's why she became what she did when Lucifer corrupted her human soul. All the angels who followed in her stead were corrupted just the same."

"And those are the first Fallen?"

"Yes and no," Balthazar explained. "They became human first, yeah? But the first Fallen are those members of the Host that sided with Lucifer after he was cast out of Heaven. They fought on his side in the war, and for that were imprisoned in Hell, where they were warped. Most are still in their prisons, but some have escaped over time. Azazel was one of them. Him and his ilk are what humans think of when they hear the term 'archdemon'."

"But they're not...actually archdemons," Bobby said slowly, making sure he was caught up to speed.

"No. At most those of the first Fallen who have escaped their prisons lead the demonic host," Balthazar clarified. "An archdemon is something far worse – more profane even than a cambion or a nephilim."

"In plain English," Bobby requested tartly.

"An archdemon is created through the union of an angel and a demon," Balthazar stated grimly. "They were considered so unholy that the truth of their nature was not even written into your scriptures so as not to offend delicate mortal sensibilities."

A sinking feeling formed in the pit of Bobby's stomach. "And you're interested in these sons-of-bitches because...?"

"Because I believe our favorite demonic extortionist has become one," Balthazar revealed.
Now it felt as though there was a lead weight in Bobby's guts. "How?"

"He got his hands on some grace."

Right about then, Bobby wished he hadn't let Balthazar drink all of his booze. Rather than dwell on that, though, he frowned in thought, pondering the troubling news. "Then why isn't he burned up?"

"If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it's because it was given to him. Negated the potency, so to speak," Balthazar suggested angrily. "I don't have any confirmation on it because the git won't admit to it, but I imagine my moron of a younger brother gave it to him in exchange for getting your not-son out of the Cage."

"Castiel," Bobby stated tonelessly around the lump forming in his throat at the implications of that.

"Who else do you know stupid and desperate enough?"

Balthazar did have a point; Bobby had never seen anyone other than himself or John as dedicated to Dean and Sam as the damned fool trench-coat-wearing angel was.

'But to do something so reckless? No – to tell the truth, I ain't even surprised,' he thought grimly. Out loud, he asked, "Did he know?"

"Know what?"

"That giving his grace to Crowley would…create an archdemon," Bobby clarified.

To his surprise, Balthazar's expression softened somewhat and he sighed.

"Likely not. He wouldn't have done it if that were the case. As far as any angel ever knew, the only archdemons in existence were born – physically – of a carnal union between angel and demon. Since the last one was gotten rid of, there's been a rather strict policy on either side about doing the dirty with one another." He made a face. "Not that any of us would ever consider that ever again, because…just, ugh." He shuddered. "It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it – me, not this vessel."

Bobby ignored Balthazar's theatrics. "Then how did Crowley go from being a regular demon to climbing the corporate ladder?"

"If I had to guess, it would seem carnal union is not needed. By accepting Castiel's grace, it was diffused and Crowley could take it into himself," Balthazar postulated. "It became a part of him, warped and twisted."

"But you still sensed it there in him. That's how you figured it out."

"Unfortunately."

There was a long, tense silence.

"Well, if that's really the case, we're gonna have a lot more trouble on our hands once the bastard finally finishes cleaning up the Pit," Bobby said decisively. "Cause I doubt he'll be happy settling with just Hell under his control."

"Raphael's looking like Santa Clause right about now, isn't he?" Balthazar granted, sounding dejected. "So, you can see why I can't stick around. I've got to find out how the archdemons of old were dealt with. That way we can deal with Crowley before he becomes too aware of just what he..."
can do."

The angel was already stepping away, flexing his shoulders in a way that Bobby had come to recognize as a sign he was about to fly off. He stood quickly, the legs of his chair scraping loudly against the floor. "Now hold on one damn minute! What am I supposed to do?"

"Absolutely nothing. You can't fly, darling."

Bobby bristled. "Not about that! In case you've forgotten, there's a demon of the regular sort that we're tryin' to find?"

"Keep trying. Of course, if you wanted to whistle a jaunty tune while you're doing it, I wouldn't be averse," Balthazar drawled, reaching into his breast pocket for something. "I'm sadly still cut off from the family, so my smiting days are behind me."

"Real load of help you are."

Balthazar ignored him. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm exceedingly helpful."

"In your mind, maybe."

"According to Gabriel, demons have a lot more in common with ghosts than you know – but that's all the little snot could remember," Balthazar went on, unconcernedly, finally taking hold of whatever he was looking for. He handed it over to Bobby. "Here, I hope your Phoenician is good."

Bobby took hold of the waxy, fragile roll of parchment. "What's this?"


The scholar in Bobby shuddered in appreciation, and he couldn't help the slightly impressed note in his voice when he asked, "Where did you get this?"

"I went back in time for it – why do you think it took so bloody long for me to come back here? I had to rest and recharge – and then, my idiot of an older brother comes along and dumps a couple of mudfish in my lap. Now if you excuse me, I've still got to check in with the Rebel Alliance before this ungodly day is done."

There was a violent, tearing flap and Bobby was once again alone in the cabin.

He stared at the spot where the angel had been, and then down at the scroll in his hands.

"Balls," Bobby grumbled to the empty space.

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"We have to go."

Sam started at the hard note in his brother's voice. It was the same one Dean used when cops or demons were about to corner them; serious enough that Sam's preoccupation with trying to dodge Sarah's questions suddenly became moot.

"Why?" he asked, even though he was already prepared to head out of the building without an explanation. Castiel had appeared by their side as well, wrapping his bleeding hand with the still unstained part of his flannel shirt. He, too, was watching Dean expectantly.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked, glancing at all three of them in turn. The question was different from the ones she had been assaulting Sam with, like she could tell that there was something not quite right. For a moment, Sam admired how adaptable her mind was to sudden changes in the status quo, before his attention was drawn back to his brother.

Dean's expression was undergoing several subtle changes in front of Sam's eyes, moving from panicked to guilty to angry and back, before he ground out quietly, "It's Ben."

Sam tensed up. He knew what the kid meant to his brother. "What about him?"

"Who's Ben?" Sarah probed.

"I just got a message from Lisa," Dean went on, distractedly dragging his hand down his face and trying to keep his expression from lingering too long in the guise of panic. "The kid's missing."

Sam felt like ice had been poured into his stomach, and barely heard Sarah ask who Lisa was.

"Old girlfriend," Dean answered shortly, automatic, either not noticing or not caring about the look of shock and confusion on her face. Sarah's gaze flitted from Dean to Castiel, like she was trying to figure something out, and then fell on Sam, obviously expecting him to clarify what his brother meant.
Things were happening too fast for Sam to even know what to say to her. He forced himself to triage the problems as they came; right now, Dean's problem was a little higher on the list than Sarah's. "I'm sure he's okay. Has he been missing long? Maybe he just went to a friend's house or something and didn't tell her?"

"She didn't say," Dean said, frustrated, "And I can't even call to ask because..." The worry morphed into blind rage for a second. "Goddamn it." He lashed out, like he was about to throw his phone into the concrete, and was stopped only by Castiel reaching out and steadying his hand.

"That will not help," he said gravely.

"It'll fucking make me feel better," Dean spat, trying to pull free. Castiel's grip remained determined. "If I didn't look like this, I could –"

"If you retained your original form, you could not even go to their aid without endangering them," Castiel told him reasonably. "Now at least you have the option of doing so. That has its own complications, but they are complications we can plan for."

There was a long moment where Castiel and Dean exchanged a look, an entire silent conversation that Sam felt weirdly excluded from, and then Dean nodded. He pulled away from Castiel, this time more gently, and the ex-angel let him go.

"Fine," he said. "Let's go. We've got to pack up our shit and blow this town."

He was already striding toward the exit of the building, and after a pause, Castiel followed him.

"What just happened?" Sarah demanded, and Sam was forcibly reminded of her presence. She was following Dean with her eyes, and then shot Sam another inquisitive look. "Where are we going?"

"Indiana," he said with a sigh, taking one last look around the building to ensure they hadn't left anything behind that the needed, and then starting after Dean.

"Indiana?" she repeated. "But that's a fourteen hour drive!" Her voice rose in confusion and something like frustration. "What's going on, Jane?"

Sam winced, and then replied evasively, "It's complicated."

"Un-complicate it," she ordered.

"Can we please not do this right now?" Sam implored as they exited the building and headed to the corner of the industrial lot where the Charger had been parked.

"No. I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on."

"Then stay here," Dean's voice drifted back, not halting in his stride. "I didn't want you along in the first place."

"Come on –!" Sam protested, while Sarah made an offended sound deep in her throat. Sam had always known his brother wasn't exactly on-board with Sarah's presence, but even panicked he usually had more tact than that.

"This is not the time for this," Castiel murmured quietly, again placing a hand on Dean's shoulder. Dean paused, breathing rapidly, continued to glare at an adamant looking Sarah, then at Sam. Sam shot him a pleading glance, but for once found no sympathy there.
"No, you know what? You're right. This isn't the time," Dean snapped, this time shrugging Castiel's hand away and rounding on Sam. "I faked being cool with this before, not saying anything." Alarm bells began to sound in Sam's head as his brother continued to train angry eyes on him. "I agreed to leave this to you, but dude, for someone who's all about honesty and sharing your wussy girl feelings, you suck at telling the truth."

"Don't – !" Sam tried, but Dean was talking over him, turning back to Sarah.

"You want to know what's going on? Fine. But remember, you asked for it," he went on, meeting Sarah's gaze unflinchingly. "Dicksmack here's been pussy boyed out of telling you for days now."

"Telling me what?" Sarah wanted to know, eyes flicking from him to Sam.

"The truth about who we are."

"Not here," Sam hissed, looking around. "Anyone could –"

"I'm Dean," his brother said, and jabbed a finger at Sam, "and that's Sam. As in Winchester. As in the same guys you met in New Paltz a few years back."

" – hear," Sam finished lamely. He chanced an appraising glance in Sarah's direction.

Her expression didn't change, although there was a subtle clench to her jaw now and her eyes had turned hard. "Yeah, that's a nice try, but I was being serious. Tell me what's going on."

"That's the nitty-gritty of it," Dean said, spreading his arms wide, a wild look in his eyes. "Our lives are screwed up, all of the time, because we're Sam and Dean Winchester – the Universe's butt-monkeys."

"Dean," Castiel objected, reproachful.

"Stop it!" Sarah yelled, twin spots of red appearing on her cheeks. "This isn't funny!"

"Damn straight it's not funny," Dean agreed. "In fact, there are people's lives on the line! My – there's a kid's life on the line – and you want us to drop everything and have a share-and-care session to bring you up to speed."

"Look, what we're trying to say," Sam interjected, still trying to salvage the direction of this conversation, "is that things are complicated. And I wanted to ease you into it, not just blurt it out because it's kind of a lot to take."

Sarah crossed her arms, lips pursed, but her stance couldn't hide the way she had started to go pale, or the way her eyes flitted back and forth between them. "So you're saying…?"

"I am Sam," he sighed, because there wasn't anything else to say. "And that is Dean. And there's a lot we need to tell you, but now really isn't the time. We need to get to Lisa's."

Sarah remained silent for half a second, and then shook her head. Her eyes were bright with anger and frustration, looking exactly like she had looked four years before. "No. Sam and Dean – they're guys. I knew them – I know Sam was a guy – and you're not – you aren't them, because that's just… just…?"

"As crazy as a haunted painting?" Sam offered softly. "Or being best friends with a couple of witches?" Sarah bit her lip and he continued, "A few days ago you didn't know angels were real or that pagan gods existed."
"But this…but you…" she trailed off, gesturing to Sam's body like she couldn't even find the words. Probably she couldn't.

"As emotional as you having an epiphany right now is, we need to hit the road," Dean interrupted, words still laced with anger, but his body language conveyed discomfort. "Now get in the car or don't, but we're leaving here in thirty seconds either way."

Sam thought he caught a kind of pained or panicked expression on Dean's before he turned abruptly and started back toward the car.

The sudden change in mood was odd. Usually Dean would work himself into a much more violent frenzy before tiring himself out.

'Something's up,' Sam thought as Dean threw himself into the car. 'Something more than being worried about Ben and Lisa.'

Castiel hung back a moment, offering Sarah a sympathetic look.

"I am glad you know the truth," he told her genuinely. "We have not known each other long, but you are an ally. I did not enjoy participating in this charade. It was…unpleasant."

He nodded to himself, and joined Dean – in the shotgun, Sam noticed abstractly.

Sarah stared in the car's direction, unseeing, and then looked back at Sam with an undecipherable gleam in her eyes. 'I'm not getting in that car with you.'

"You want to wait around here for that angel to get back?" Sam asked quietly, ignoring the sharp stab at her tone of voice. "Because she knows what you look like now. At least let us bring you back to the inn and get you some protections."

Sarah opened her mouth, maybe to argue, and then pursed her lips. Squaring her shoulders, she marched toward the Charger.

There wasn't much else Sam could do after that but follow, climbing in next to her. He tried not to notice how valiantly she tried to stay as far to her side of the backseat as possible.

The drive was the most awkward of Sam's life. That included the uncomfortable thirty minutes he had spent with Dean in the back of the Impala in 1978 while his father and mother staunchly refused to speak to each other.

"Ten minutes," Dean told them when they pulled into the inn parking lot, barely pausing to turn the engine off before he was hurrying across the lot. His gait was odd, but that's all Sam allowed himself to think of as he climbed out of the Charger's back seat.

He studiously avoided looking at Sarah, while Castiel murmured something about going to see if Dean was alright.

The short walk up the room was tense, and even after Sam let himself into their shared accommodations Sarah remained quiet. It wasn't until he noticed that he was the only one going through their things – haphazardly throwing shirts and bras into whatever bag was closest while he looked for something to make up a hexbag with – that he noticed that she was frozen in the doorway.

Pausing, in his work, he tentatively asked, "Sarah?"

"We were sharing a room," she said dully, not really looking at him. "You…I've been walking
around half-naked in here for two days in front of a guy."

It was kind of a silly thing to focus on, he thought, and perhaps that's why he tried to brush it off as a bit of a joke, "To be fair, it's not like I never saw it before."

He had just a second to wonder when the hell he had started sounding like his brother before she was suddenly in his personal space, eyes cracking furiously.

The slap that followed was more than just a stinging sensation, and he felt his head fly to one side; she had put a decent amount of strength into the blow.

"That's for lying to me," she told him firmly, and then before he could recover she hauled back and punched him in the face. He heard, before he felt, his nose break, and his vision went white for a second. "And that's…for being a dick."

"Holy shit, ow," he wanted to moan, but it came out garbled, sounding more like ,"Hrgh."

Sarah swore, cradling her hand and doing an odd little hop like she was trying to relieve the pain somehow. "Damn it, I always forget how much that hurts…"

Sam tactfully didn't say anything.

As he carefully snapped his nose back into place – Jesus, where had she learned to hit? He was surprised it hadn't shattered – Sarah crossed the room and entered their bathroom. She returned with two small face towels and a businesslike expression on her face. As Sam watched, she opened their mini fridge and hauled out the container of ice he had placed there the day before; standard hunt procedure required there to be lots of ice around.

"You okay?" he finally asked, tentative, as she scooped the ice into the towels.

"You don't get to ask me that," she replied, thrusting one of the ice-laden clothes at him while pressing the other into the bruised knuckles of the hand she'd used to hit him.

Sam took her warning with a grain of salt; it wasn't like he didn't deserve it. Still, he had hoped to have a conversation with her about this, not simply drop the bomb and then move on.

There was a sharp rap against the open door, and they both looked up to see Dean.

"Just paid the late check-out – are you two over your snit?" he wanted to know, striding into the room. He paused at the sight of Sam holding the bloody towel full of ice up to his face. Instead of commenting on it, he eyed Sarah, "I need to talk to you."

"About what?" she asked, stiffly.

"Not about this," Dean retorted coolly, gesturing loosely between her and Sam.

"Can't Castiel help you?" she replied, just as coolly and still glaring at Sam.

"No," Dean said shortly, and there was enough of a discordant note in that answer that Sam finally ceded the staring contest to Sarah and glanced over at his brother. Dean was standing stiffly, uncomfortable and with a frown on his face like he was in pain.

"Dean?" Sam asked, ignoring how relieved he felt not having to use their fake names around Sarah anymore.

His brother was ignoring him.
"Look, I was all for telling you, he's the one who kept chickening out," Dean snapped, staring Sarah down and sounding desperate. "But I need your help right now – you want to yell at me while you're helping, I can take it, but are you coming or not?"

There was a beat.

"Fine," Sarah said finally, grabbing her purse and leaving the room without looking back at Sam. Sam got up to follow, but Dean stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Go help Cas finish packing," he ordered. "Dude hasn't figured out our system yet."

"What's going on?" Sam wanted to know. "Why do you need Sarah?"

"So not your business," Dean replied. At Sam's unimpressed look, Dean added with an irritated sigh, "Look, I promise not to leave your girlfriend in a dumpster. I just need her help with something and we'll be back. Ten minutes tops."

"That's what you said ten minutes ago when you gave us ten minutes to pack," Sam muttered sourly.

"Deal with it," Dean told him unkindly and stalked out as well.

Sam stared at the empty door frame, completely nonplussed over what had just happened.

Dean wanted to die.

And that wasn't just a euphemism for being so embarrassed he would prefer death to what his borrowed body was currently putting him through – he literally wanted to curl up and expire.

He'd endured gunshot wounds that had hurt less than the painful, fiery ache that had ensconced itself in the place below his navel (he was not even going to think the word 'womb', because *fuck no)*.

Beside him, Sarah walked in stony silence. Her presence was clearly due more to her need to get away from Sam than to actually help him, but he intended to exploit that need right now.

He couldn't believe what was happening to him. At the same time, he wondered how he had missed the signs. His temper had been so much shorter than usual, and he'd been so fucking horny the past few days!

That sensation was gone now, replaced by a constant feeling of irritation and a persistent cramping sensation in his pelvic and lower back areas. When it had started that morning he had passed it off as lingering aches and pains from his encounter with the witches in New York, and during the stand-off with the angels he's blamed it on his cramped hiding space.

He'd been able to completely ignore it right up until the point when he'd received Lisa's voicemail.

And hadn't that been a heart-stopper?

The same urgency that filled his veins when Sam was missing, or Cas, had come upon him then, and for one complete moment he'd felt nothing but terror.

He knew Sam had picked up on it, but that that was the extent of his brother's intuition. Sam didn't understand – as far as he knew, Ben was just a kid whose mother Dean happened to like. But after
what Lisa had said to him on their last visit, Dean knew differently. And as much as he had refused to think about it for the past weeks, it was knowledge that kept creeping up on him in his few quiet moments, refusing to disappear.

And then, like the universe was conspiring to make today a crapshoot of a day no matter what he did, he had felt the trickle of wetness in between his thighs while Sam was busy stuttering through his explanations to Sarah.

He'd been momentarily distracted by it, bewildered because the encounter with the bitchy angel had been far from the most traumatising thing to ever happen to him, and Ben being missing may have been frightening, but not enough for him to piss his pants. Dean was the guy who had stared Death in the face – literally – without that happening, so what the hell?

His confusion was probably the reason he had been so short with Sarah; he understood her frustration at being lied to. He had more than enough personal experience with his brother's dishonesty, after all. He probably might have been more willing to have a sit-down discussion about it, Sam-style, if his brain hadn't been entirely focussed on the possibility of Ben being hurt or worse, as well as the growing dampness in his underwear.

By then he'd suspected –no, realized, after he counted backward in his head – what was happening to him.

What followed had been the most uncomfortable drive in his life – right up there with bussing a pissed off Ellen Harvelle and her daughter back to Nebraska or sitting silently while the John and Mary Winchester of 1978 tried to out-silence each other – as he sped back to the inn without any regard for traffic lights or signs. Sam had been so caught up in his drama with Sarah that he hadn't even bitched, and thankfully Cas didn't know any better yet.

Dean had practically thrown himself into the bathroom of his and Cas's room without a word of explanation to his friend, hoping against hope – "Really? Of all fucking times to happen?"

There had been blood smeared in his underwear and across his inner thighs, like he had been stabbed or something, and he had stared at it for a long time – probably longer than the ten minutes he had given Sam and Sarah to get their things together. It had taken just that long to compute what he was seeing. Even then, he hadn't been able to accept it.

His mind had kept flashing back to health class, a lifetime before. In theory, he knew what he had to do. Hell, the commercials on television dealing with feminine hygiene outnumbered sports ads these days, but he hadn't been able to make himself move.

Dean knew the basic rules of upkeep for a female body, both through observation and the last few weeks of literally hands-on experience. But the actual practice of dealing with…God, he couldn't even think the word. It was just too weird to consider in conjunction with himself!

"First breasts and now this,' he had thought as he glared at himself in the mirror, eyeing his borrowed form in distaste, pants still hauled down around his knees. The ache in his abdomen had gotten worse and he had felt a sharp, drying sensation behind his eyes. 'Oh, fuck me, if I start to cry I really will have to kill myself.'

Cas had knocked on the door, then, wanting to know if he was alright, and Dean had forced himself into action. Meticulously, like he was stitching up a fatal wound, he had fit wads of cheap motel toilet paper into his underwear. He had been grateful that he was wearing dark pants for once and not
his jeans as he left the bathroom and told Cas to finish packing without him. He had decided he would change the spoiled underwear when he got back.

Or burn it.

The ex-angel hadn’t been an option to get help from – he would probably spout something biblical or biological, knowing him – and Sam would have just mocked him – ’Until the bitch goes through it himself,’ Dean had thought with vindictive humour – and Sarah –

’Well, she's pissed off as hell, but she's done this before.’

He had watched his eyes narrow in the mirror, and the decision had been made.

Except now that they were nearing the Walgreens a block away from the inn, he couldn’t quite get the words to come out about what he needed. Every time he tried to speak, fresh horror and disgust washed over him.

He hated his body doing things without telling him.

He ignored the way her angry expression took on confused tones as he led her inside the drugstore and the question she was trying to ask as he marched to the aisle he was looking for and then came to a stop.

"Help," he ordered, but his tone sounded feeble and defeated even as he gestured to the rows upon rows of brightly colored plastic packages.

"Help with…?" Sarah asked, and then trailed off as she suddenly made the connection. A look of surprise overtook the combination of stormy anger and confusion. She regarded him carefully. "Really?"

"No, I just felt like taking you on a tour – yes, really," he snapped.

Her eyes went a little wider. "Is this the first time – ?"

"I wouldn't be asking for your help if it wasn't," Dean growled. "You think I want people knowing?"

"Don't jump down my throat, or I won't help," Sarah told him curtly.

"Fine. But can we get it over with? More important things to do today."

"Right," Sarah agreed, crossing her arms. "The thing with this Lisa person."

It was a statement, but there was question there. Dean clenched his fists, exasperated. "You're really gonna leave me hanging here?"

"Considering how tight-lipped you guys have been with me? I think yeah."

Dean glared. "You became a bitch."

"I had to," she retorted, wandering farther into the aisle and motioning for Dean to follow her. Sulking again for another moment, he finally did. She went on, "So, Lisa – is she really an old girlfriend?"

"Sort of," Dean hedged.
"Sort of?" she repeated, raising an eyebrow. Dean pressed his lips together, no intention of playing that far into her hands, and she shrugged, pointing at one particular shelf. "I'd suggest going with pads your first time. Tampons are really uncomfortable. It's like having something shoved up your –"

"Okay – hello, too much info!" Dean protested. "Just stick to the basics, okay?"

"Fine," she said, although Dean was sure he saw the corner of her mouth tug slightly upward.

"You're enjoying this," he accused.

"A little," she replied. After a pause, she asked, "Has your brother gone through this yet?"

Dean didn't comment on the fact that she was avoiding Sam's name, instead shaking his head. "If he has, I don't know about it. Thank God."

"Hm," was all she said, and then grabbed a few different brands of the brightly colored packages. She shoved them into his hands. "These are all basically the same, just different sizes. You don't want anything too big, or you'll feel like you're walking around in a diaper, and anything too small is going to leak."

"What about…they talk about them in the commercials," Dean hedged. "To make them stay put?"

He refused to meet her eyes.

"Wings?" Sarah asked. "Stay away from those. All they do is get adhesive tape stuck to parts of you you'd rather they didn't. Trust me when I say it's not fun to peel off."

Dean stared down at the packages, frozen completely outside of his comfort zone. His panic was probably evident, because Sarah's still closed expression softened somewhat. "Are you okay?"

It was a little sad how tempting it was to want to burst into tears, but thankfully something of his true self was holding strong, because he simply shook his head and made a quick decision about which package of pads he'd be taking. There'd been a fuckload of blood when he looked, so he wasn't taking any chances…

He hesitated again, glancing around, and then cleared his throat. Tentative, he asked, "Can you…?"

He couldn't even form the words.

"Can I…?" she prompted.

"Look, I'll give you the money after," he said hurriedly, avoiding her gaze again, "but could you just…?"

Realization flickered in her eyes. "You want me to buy them for you."

"Well, I can't buy them," Dean maintained. "I've already sunk pretty far having to go trolling for lingerie. But this? I just can't, okay? It's like throwing in the towel. I need to retain some semblance of male pride."

It was a measure of just how bad things were that the look of pity in her eyes didn't piss him off the way it normally would have. Instead, she nodded and took the pads from him, heading for the checkout. While they waited for the cashier to get to them, Dean reached for an economy-sized bag of peanut M&Ms.

"Don't judge," he told her when she shot him a questioning look.
"Sure you don't want some Midol too?"

"Bite me."

They were well on their way back to the inn before Dean decided to throw her a bone, a measure of gratitude for her cooperation.

"It was kind of a weekend thing, like, ten years ago," he told her, keeping his tone casual.

It raised his estimation of her that, like Sam and Cas, she could pick up on the direction of his thinking with ease.

"And Ben?" she prompted.

"Is her kid."

"A kid you really care about."

He met her shrewd look with a frown, wondering how much she suspected, and then shrugged noncommittally.

"So what do you think happened?" she inquired.

"Whatever it was, it was probably my fault," Dean answered before he meant to, and then frowned at her, "and that's all I'm gonna say. I don't do the sharing and caring thing, that's Sam's deal."

"Apparently not," Sarah muttered darkly.

Dean snorted mirthlessly. "Yeah, okay, point. But believe it or not, you're far from the first person he's 'neglected' to be honest with. Though to be fair to me, this little white lie? Really not a big deal on the Apocalyptic scale of things."

"Why? What did he lie to you about?" she asked.

"Oh, no – no way," Dean said defensively. "I ain't opening that can of worms with a ten foot pole. That's between you and Sam and whatever he decides to tell you."

She pouted. "But I'm asking you."

"Just because we might have had a moment back there?" Dean said, jerking his head back at the drugstore, "Does not mean I go giving away the family secrets. All I need today is for him to be bitching at me because I told you stuff he doesn't want you to know yet. You want to know what went down, you talk to him."

"But –"

"No. If Sam's lying about something, it's because he doesn't want you to get hurt," Dean replied. "That's the only reason he ever lies – and yeah, I'm the first person to say his way of doing things tends to screw shit up, but he never does it because he's settin' out to hurt someone."

Sarah went silent for a full minute, before she spoke again, completely changing the subject.

"So, are you and Cas really…?" she trailed off, looking at him sideways.

"What?" Dean asked, but recognizing the speculation being trained on him his eyes widened. In a more panicked tone than he intended, he yelped, "No! Hell, no! That was a cover! He's just – we're
friends."

"Uh-huh," Sarah said, clearly not believing him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you don't really act like friends. I mean, you do, but – there's more to it than that."

"Obviously. The guy pulled me out of Hell, remember?"

"So you're together but not married?"

"No! We're not together!" Dean snapped.

"Could have fooled me," she told him. "I mean, when Ja – your brother," she corrected herself, scowling as she did so, "– said he was your husband, I didn't believe him until I saw the way you guys look at each other."

"Then you're seeing things," Dean grunted.

"I don't think so. Because he looks at you like you're more than friends."

"That's because he's trying to see my soul," Dean rolled his eyes. "I've already had that conversation with him, trust me."

"I don't think it's your soul he wants to see," Sarah remarked.

"Look, sister," Dean rounded on her, "whatever you're thinking? It's not that. Seriously, why does everyone on this planet think I either want to screw my brother or my best friend?"

"Maybe because you come off as kind of butch?" Sarah suggested, and then made a face, "People think you want to sleep with Sam?"

"More people than you know," Dean answered grimly, thinking of Becky Rosen and the creepy online fans like her. "Which is both wrong and impossible. I am strictly into chicks. Who aren't related to me." He clarified firmly. "If you weren't Sam's girl I'd probably have been trying to get into your pants ages ago. Minus the Daddy's-Spoiled-Brat vibe you give off, you're just my type."

He very obviously looked her up and down, objectively enjoying the way her jeans and fitted sweater clung to her form.

"Too bad for you, but you're too much of self-righteous jerk for my tastes," she retorted, pointedly ignoring his stare. Then she made a face. "And why is everyone calling me 'Sam's girl."

"Did you or did you not sleep with him?" Dean asked conversationally.

"That's none of your business!"

"That's a yes," he determined. "Which means you're off-limits. Like I said, if I had got there first, it'd be another story."

"That's…that's so…" she struggled with the words, looking furious.

"Male?" he suggested, hoping he didn't sound as eager out loud as he did in his head.

"Sleazy," she supplied, disgust in her tone.
"To-may-to, to-mah-to," he shrugged. "If you're put off by something like that, you are not going to like what Sam's going to tell you…you know, if he decides to tell you."

Sarah tensed a little, and in a low voice, she asked, "Why?"

Dean stopped walking, and when she noticed, Sarah followed suit. The inn was just in their sights, and he didn't particularly want to continue this discussion when they got there.

"This is not me telling you anything," Dean insisted flatly. "This is me just warning you. Sam – and me – we've both done some serious shit since the last time you met us. And not the usual brand of wrong, either. More than ninety-nine percent of it? Not proud of. But we're getting over it – most of it. Sam's my brother, so what the hell else am I going to do but forgive him? But you ? You've got no reason to."

"But – " she started to protest.

"Not done," he cut her off. "You've got no reason to be sticking around here. What we're trying to do? We're probably going to die doing it. If the past four days haven't given you an example of what we do every day, don't worry, there's more. We haven't even scratched the surface of the shit-storm that is our lives."

"Spit out what you're trying to say, Dean," Sarah told him stiffly.

"I'm saying that if you want to get the hell out of here, I wouldn't blame you. Sam wouldn't blame you," Dean said. "Shit, I'd buy you a damn plane ticket. Go back to New York and hang out with your witch pals." He narrowed his eyes. "Because while Sam's an idiot for not telling you the truth? He's dealing with more than you know, and going emo over you isn't something I need to watch. Truth be told, things are getting kind of crowded around here anyway. So if you're thinking about coming along with us – which I really wouldn't recommend – you'd better be willing to let some shit go. We don't have any more room for family drama in that plastic piece of crap we're driving."

There was a long silence, and Dean snatched the bag that Sarah was carrying.

"Now, if we're done with the chick flick moment?" he said loftily, "I just want to get out of here, pretend I'm not bleeding from the crotch, and hit the road."

He continued on to the inn, not bothering to see if Sarah was following him or not.

Sam was waiting in the room Dean and Cas had shared when Dean returned – alone.

"Where's Sarah?" he demanded, a thousand other questions laden in the one. Dean froze, looking like a deer caught in the headlights, a vaguely guilty and shamed look appearing on his face. "Dean, what did you do?"

"Nothing," Dean said, sidling into the room and trying to surreptitiously hide something behind his back. "She decided she had some stuff to think about – why are you in my room?"

"Giving her space," Sam replied, narrowing his eyes upon the thing Dean was trying to hide. "What's that?"

"Food," Dean said, striding past Sam. Sam caught sight of familiar yellow packaging. "It's gonna be
"a long drive."

"M&Ms aren't food."

"Maybe in Samantha-land," his brother retorted, striding into the bathroom and closing the door after him. Concerned with Sarah, Sam decided he didn't want to know why his brother was bringing the bag of candy in there with him.

"So what did you need her help with?"

"Didn't," Dean's voice was muffled. "I just figured you needed some time to compose yourself. She got you really good. Broken nose?"

Sam winced, both at the memory and the pain as it flared up again. "Yeah."

"You deserved it."

"Shut up."

The room door opened and Castiel appeared.

"I have finished packing the car according to your 'system'," he said, and Sam half-expected him to be using air quotes with the amount of sarcasm the angel had managed to inject into the statement. "Has Dean returned?"

"Yeah, he's in there," Sam replied, nodding his head to the bathroom.

"We should leave as soon as possible," Castiel said. "If Benjamin Braeden is truly in trouble, it is imperative that we pick up the trail immediately."

"Well, yeah," Sam agreed, somewhat surprised by Castiel's fervor. "But there's no telling who could have him. Anyone who's read the Supernatural books could be a suspect. I mean, I'm not naïve enough to believe only the good guys have access to that."

"You make a good point," Castiel allowed, "however I believe the suspect-pool to be narrower."

Dean left the bathroom, an off look on his face, but Sam ignored it in favor of asking, "Is there anyone specific we're thinking of?"

"The probability of the boy having been abducted by the forces of Heaven or Hell is disproportionately high, especially given his status as a vessel for Michael," the ex-angel mused in a tone that suggested he was trying to be helpful. "No amount of protection would hide him indefinitely, as you both know. It is possible someone managed to circumvent it."

"Yeah, but – wait. What?" Sam's confused argument suddenly ground to a halt as he stared at Castiel, his brain looping over what had just been said. "Ben's a vessel?"

Beside him, Dean tensed so visibly his shoulders seemed to shrug inward.

"Of course," Castiel said, appearing surprised at Sam's confusion. But Sam was already staring over at Dean, who had gone white. "Of course," the ex-angel mused in a tone that suggested he was trying to be helpful. "No amount of protection would hide him indefinitely, as you both know. It is possible someone managed to circumvent it."

"Did you know?" Sam asked, breathless at the implications.

Dean refused to meet his gaze, instead muttering, "Sort of."
"Sort of?" Sam hissed. "Don't you think this is something you might have wanted to mention?"

"I was trying not to think about it," Dean admitted. "It was too – look, can we not?"

"No, I think we have to," Sam shot back. "You have a kid and you didn't bother mentioning it? How long have you known?"

"A while," Dean admitted.

"But…but you said Lisa had said he wasn't yours," Sam struggled to make sense of the newest bombshell. "I thought you said…tests?"

"Dude, we lie for a living," Dean said, unimpressed, "I think I can tell when someone's trying to con me. But that was the year my deal was coming due. What right did I have to get involved with a kid when I was about to go to Hell?"

"But – but the last time you were there…" Sam protested.

"She didn't say it in so many words, but yeah, it was kind of implied," Dean shrugged.

Sam gaped, unable to come up with anything to say to that. Implications were running through his mind at a mile a minute; most prevalent among them was the sudden guilt that he had once again taken his brother away from the chance at a normal life – with an actual family! – with his return from the Cage.

Dean was as good at reading him as ever, because a look of fierce assurance formed on his face. "Don't even start, Sam. It was my choice to leave, every time. It had nothing to do with you."

"But –"

"No," Dean said firmly. "No 'what if' games. It's too late for that and all it does it fuck us up in the head."

Sam clamped his mouth shut, although he was far from satisfied with this topic. He knew better than to push Dean right now, not when his brother had that crazy look in his eyes that too closely resembled the way he had been before going to offer himself up to Michael.

'Thank God Cas beat some sense into him that day,' Sam thought, not for the first time.

Out loud, he changed the subject.

"So…Ben's a vessel," Sam murmured, still unable to believe it. "I guess that's why people would be after him." He frowned. "Wait, if he was a vessel, why didn't Heaven go after him during the Apocalypse?"

"He was not the right one," Castiel explained. "The prophecy dealing with the End of Days specified that Michael and Lucifer would inhabit vessels that were brothers to one another. It is why Adam fit the prophecy, but Ben remained safe."

"Well, that's something at least," Dean said, grim, but with audible relief.

There was a hesitant knocking sound on the door. All three of them tensed out of reflex, and Sam moved to answer the door.

Sarah was standing outside of the room, her knapsack slung over her shoulder. When she realized it was Sam opening the door, she pointedly looked away from him and eyed Dean.
"I thought you said you wanted to get on the road?" she asked Dean with forced casualness. "We're going to need to head out if you want to get there by tomorrow morning."

Something passed between them, and Sam felt an irrational jealousy before he tamped it down, remembering that Sarah was angry with him for a reason. If she was anything like Jess had been, he was going to be in the doghouse for a while before she spoke to him again.

But the fact that she was there, after everything, waiting to go with them…

"I don't know why we can't just fly," she went on as Dean and Cas got the last of their things together and left the room.

"Oh sweetheart, I don't do planes," Dean said in forced jovialness as he moved past Sam, closely followed by Castiel.

Irrationally, Sam's heart leapt.

Maybe there was still hope.

"Sammy, can you hear me?" Dean asked, eyes pleading.

"You know, I tried to be nice," he could feel merciless anger coiling up inside him as he moved. The insignificant soul tethered to him tried to stop him, tried to hold him back, but he couldn't quite grab hold. "For Sammy's sake. But you…are such a pain…in my ass."

Lucifer – Sam – was throwing Dean across the windshield of the Impala, which shattered beneath him. Before his brother could recover, Sam's – Lucifer's – hands were clamping around Dean's leg with bone-shattering strength and hauling him off the hood of the car.

Lucifer punched Dean, hard, making him spit up blood. Sam screamed a wordless howl of fear, and anger and hurt, trying to get the Devil to stop –

"Sammy? Are you in there?" Dean murmured, dazed but still determined.

"Oh, he's in here all right," Sam – Lucifer – hissed, punching Dean again. "He's gonna feel the snap of your bones." He lashed out again, causing Dean to fall to the ground. "Every single one." He hauled Dean up again, smiling unpleasantly. "We're gonna take our time."

Again and again he hauled his fist back and ploughed it into his brother's face, relishing in the way muscle and bone gave beneath his. Blood and spit and mucous coated his knuckles, and he paused momentarily to will away the bodily fluids. When he looked up, the swollen and bleeding face was not Dean's.

"Sam, it's okay," Adam choked through a ruined mouth. "I'm here…I'm not gonna leave you…not the way you left me."

Flames flickered at his face and there was a high-pitched screaming noise as Sam brought his hand back up to land the final blow –

Sam jolted awake, only managing to turn his shout of "No!" into a pained groan as the darkened interior of the Charger came into focus. He was breathing rapidly, cold sweat lingering on his neck and down his back.
"Are you okay?"

The question was surprising, not least of all because it came from the person who was supposedly avoiding talking to him and who, the last time he had checked, had been sitting in the backseat.

Sarah's eyes flitted from the road to him and back, a vague hint of concern hidden in her otherwise guarded expression.

Sam didn't answer right away, his faculties momentarily confused by the dream. Instead, he maneuvered himself into a sitting position and glanced in the back.

Dean was huddled in the seat behind him, face pressed toward the window and eyes closed; soft breathing suggested he was asleep. His arms were crossed tightly over his midsection, and he was Practically wrapped up in Dad's jacket, which hung so loosely from Dean's borrowed form that he looked almost childlike in it.

Beside him, Castiel was gazing out at the passing darkness with a thoughtful look on his face.

A week ago, they had discovered that the former angel tended to be a little car sick during long drives. After a rather close mishap and emergency stop at the side of the highway, Dean and Sam had tried to convince him that looking at the passing scenery was probably not a good idea.

"Admiring the beauty of my Father's world is the only advantage to travelling by automobile," Castiel had replied placidly.

Sam knew he hadn't meant to offend, but Dean had had a sour look on his face the rest of that morning. Driving was a huge chunk of his life, after all.

Which led to the current interesting conundrum.

"Why are you driving?" Sam asked blankly, facing forward again.

Sarah frowned, and her tone became cool again. "Because I can?"

"No, I mean —"

"I know what you mean," she cut him off. "Dean was having a moment – and considering I'd like to get wherever we're going alive, I convinced him to catch a few hours of sleep – to try to relax a bit."

Sam couldn't help staring at her.

"You 'convinced' him?" he repeated. "How?"

Even when he wasn't driving the Impala, Dean put up enough of a grudging fuss whenever Sam offered to take a driving shift. But handing over the keys to a stranger?

'Not that Sarah's a stranger – not really,' he amended, shooting her a hesitant look that she ignored. 'But that's right up there with saying 'no' to a fresh baked piece of pie, in Dean-land.'

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but he's going through some stuff right now," Sarah said reproachfully, and Sam held himself back from the sharp reply. The passive aggressive tactic was one he had learned to tread carefully around with Jess.

Instead, he replied, "Yeah, I know. This thing with Ben…"

He trailed off, not even sure where to go with that.
He'd seen Dean on edge more times than he could count, yet the past day had been one of the worst episodes. He'd practically broken Sam's good hand when Sam had tried to turn up the volume on the local news channel as they left Brookline.

"Dean, what the hell?" Sam had demanded, both annoyed and concerned at the same time.

"I have a headache," Dean had answered shortly.

"So? I've seen you drive when you were half-dead and hung over, with the stereo up on panic."

"Not today."

Sam had sighed. "I know you're worried about Ben, but lashing out at me isn't going to make things better."

His brother's expression had closed-off the way it always did when Sam tried to bring up anything related to emotions.

"Sam, do not try to shrink me on this," he had ordered. "When you've gone through it, then you get to be sympathetic."

Which had effectively shut Sam up, because he had no idea when or if he would ever go through having to worry about a kid. Any dreams of having children had died with Jess almost six years before, and he knew he had been careful enough with any of the relationships he'd had since then that the chances of suddenly discovering a secret love child were slim erring on the side of none.

He couldn't even imagine what his brother was going through right now.

In an attempt to distract himself, he reached for the bag of M&Ms by his feet, before he remembered it was empty. He felt slightly guilty – for all of his complaining about Dean's eating habits, Sam had been the one to polish off the bag of candy earlier in the drive.

He sighed inwardly and glanced at the dash; the clock read 1:07. A full two hours had passed since he last looked before falling asleep.

"Last time I'll be doing that for a while," he thought, shuddering at the memory of his brothers' blood on his hands.

He shifted, and then cleared his throat. "Uh, just so you know? If you need someone to spell you in an hour or two, I'm good. Broken hand's never stopped me driving before."

"Mm-hm," Sarah murmured and Sam frowned for the cold reception.

After another pause, he tried again. "Sarah…"

"Don't," she said, the sentiment strained. "Please."

"But –"

"I can't, Sam," she said, and it was the first time she had actually said his name since finding out their identities. Still, it was laden with such a tired and angry quality that Sam realized he wouldn't be let off the hook any time soon. "Maybe this is just another everyday thing for you and Dean – maybe you guys are so used to weird that it's no sweat to take it in stride and let things go, but…I just can't."

"I know it's weird," Sam agreed, feeling desperate, "I never, ever would have thought being turned into a woman was even possible, let alone –"
"It's not the woman thing," Sarah sighed and Sam started in surprise at that. "I mean, that is weird, don't get me wrong – actually, it's really weird, on a lot of levels, but it's not what..." She ended with an exasperated sigh and went on, "It's that you've been lying to my face since we ran into each other."

"Because you would have reacted so well to me saying, 'Hey, Sarah, it's Sam – you know, the guy you helped exorcise a murderous picture ghost and who you spent the weekend with like million years ago? Ignore the addition of breasts, but how about a coffee sometime?'" he deadpanned.

In the reflection of the windshield he saw her roll her eyes.

"Obviously I'm hoping you might have had more tact than that," she said. "Maybe the morning when I brought you Maggie and Don's spell might have been a good idea to tell me?"

Sam was privately doubtful of that. She wouldn't have taken the news any better then than she had when Dean spilled the beans, but he knew she was still smarting from the fact he had lied.

He shifted uncomfortably, glancing in the back again. Castiel was trying to – and slowly failing to, if his hunched shoulders and drooping eyelids were any indication – fight off sleep. Not paying attention, though, and Dean was still out for the count.

"Look, I'm sorry," Sam finally managed, returning his focus to the woman sitting beside him. "For not telling you before and...because I can't tell you everything you want to know right now."

"Sam –"

"I'm not ready to," he told her firmly. "I can't...explain the past four years in one conversation. Maybe if you'd been there – if you'd been a part of what happened – Dean gets it, Cas too, I think." He shot the ex-angel another look, glad to see Castiel finally had nodded off. He was making a soft snoring noise that was the counter-point to Dean's rhythmic breathing. "But you weren't. To you, it's all going to be just some outrageous story. To me, it's my life. It's the horrible things that I did. And before I can tell you about it, I have to deal with it. The lingering memory of the dream returned to him, and he added in a smaller voice, "I'm just not ready for you to look at me like I'm a monster."

The silence that followed was heavy. In the flickering light of the streetlamps along the highway, Sam saw that Sarah looked torn between trying not to look at him and trying to say something in reply.

Behind them, he heard Castiel murmur something and shift in his sleep.

"I'd get it, you know," he said softly. "If you wanted out of this? I'm actually surprised you decided to stick with us after...everything."

"Just because I'm mad doesn't mean I want out," Sarah sighed, sounding frustrated. "You're the reason..." She trailed off, and then tried again, "I told you this before, but when my Mom died – I completely retreated. From everything. When I first started working for my Dad, I was coming out of it."

There was an emphasis on that word, like she was trying to tell him something without actually verbalizing it.

"After I met you guys, though...it was like all that went away," she confided. "I suddenly had...maybe not purpose, but something I needed to do. And as freaky and scary and downright bizarre as it was, it was the first time in a long time that I was actually happy." She huffed something like a bitter laugh. "So yeah, I'm ticked off that you didn't tell me who you were. To tell you the truth, I'm
still ticked off that you disappeared off the face of the planet four years ago without so much as an 'I
never want to see you again' text message. But you guys really did me a favor back then. So this is
me returning it. It sounds like you guys need it."

Sam let that sink in, and then allowed himself a tentative smile.

"Thanks, Sarah."

"Don't thank me yet," she warned him, her tone returning to that wary, cold edged thing it had been
since she found out the truth. "I'm going to have trust issues for a while, and I don't know how that'll
affect helping you guys. I'm going to have to take this slow."

He nodded, because that sounded about right. Still, something in him felt unexpectedly lighter.

They went around a long curve, and Sam heard a sudden rustle behind him. Peering in the back, he
saw that Castiel had slid sideways until his head was resting against Dean's shoulder. He grinned, the
temptation to haul out his camera strong; he decided against it, though.

It had been a long time since he saw Castiel look so serene, and he was never so relaxed when he
slept. The guy had to be exhausted – and Dean was stressed over Ben – and so Sam decided to be an
awesome brother and take pity.

This time.

Dean awoke to a warm body curled into his side and hot breath ghosting against his neck.

For a moment he leaned into it, eyes still closed, feeling inexplicably safe and well-rested. The
sentiment reminded him of the times when he was a kid and Dad left them alone during hunts. Sam
would sometimes have nightmares and climb into bed with Dean, all spidery limbs and clingy hands.
Dean would protest and complain, but he'd put up with it in the end.

'Sam didn't smell like cut grass and coffee, though,' he thought vaguely as wakeful alertness returned
to him. He blinked his eyes open and turned to his side, freezing when his mouth came within
centimeters of brushing Cas's forehead.

His first reaction should have been to shove the guy awake. It was something his body was already
trying to do, the arm beneath Cas tensing as he prepared to push his friend off of him. But as he
moved, the angle he was at allowed him to see the peaceful expression on the ex-angel's face and he
paused.

He knew just how hard it was for Cas to fall into undisturbed sleep. Ruining that seemed
counterproductive to the whole speech he had given him yesterday about the importance of rest.
After all, if Cas was going to be hunting with them, they would need him at the best his human body
could give.

He couldn't help the brief, fond smile that tugged at his lips when the ex-angel frowned at something
unseen, and for one full minute contemplated the benefits of just waiting for his friend to wake up. It
wasn't like he wasn't comfortable and warm where he was, and it wasn't any different from conking
out sprawled next to Sam while watching a Star Wars marathon –

Dean's thoughts ground to a halt as he realized that there was something seriously wrong going on.
Because while he was no expert on friendship, he was pretty sure being comfortable enough to practically cuddle with another guy you're not related to was not normal friendship behaviour – hell, it wasn't anywhere even remotely close to Dean Winchester behaviour. And while Cas was – granted, a former angel, and thus as far from normal as possible – unaware of pretty much every socially acceptable behaviour out there, Dean did know better.

Eyes trained on the front of the car, where Sam and Sarah apparently were oblivious of the situation Dean had awoken to, Dean tried to slowly shrug out from under Cas's body. He tried to keep from waking him as he gradually pushed his friend into a sitting position, intent on getting him back on his side of the car.

Instead, Dean lost his grip on him too quickly, and Cas's boneless body slipped down further until he was lying with his head resting on Dean's lap. Dean winced, holding back a curse, because if there was anywhere he wanted Cas less right now it was down in that direction.

Cas's proximity to the part of him that felt bloated and painful was distressing.

He must have let out some kind of noise, because Sam was turning around to look at them. He took in Cas's and Dean's new position with a straight face, one which was betrayed by the amused glint in his eyes.

"Sleep well?" he asked innocently.

"Nair," Dean grunted warningly.

Sam chuckled and turned back around.

Sarah was raising her eyebrows at him in the rear-view mirror with the same pointed look she had used to convince him to hand her over the car keys at the truck stop outside of Pennsylvania.

"Stop bitching and get in the car," she'd told him when he got back from paying for gas and a bunch of sandwiches. He'd already been in a black mood thanks to the leering gas-station attendant and the disgusting state of the women's washroom. Dean had never missed the ability to piss standing up more than he did when it came to having to answer nature's call on a road trip. "You look like you're going to fall over. I'll drive."

"But Sam's in the shotgun," he had protested, even though that had more to do with him not wanting her to tell Sam about Dean's latest source of stress than with Sarah's own comfort zone.

"He's asleep," Sarah had replied, pursing her lips in a way that told Dean she knew exactly what he was worried about and wasn't above using it as blackmail.

"If it were my car, you wouldn't be bossing me around," he'd finally said as he climbed into the backseat behind the shotgun, earning a perplexed look from Cas; even the damn angel had known there was something off about him ceding control of the car so easily.

Said angel was now waking up, it seemed, because he had begun to nestle closer into Dean's lap, but then suddenly went rigid, like his brain had caught him up to speed on events. Dean could practically hear the realization dawning on him, and within a second, Cas was sitting up and leaning away, practically pressing himself into the other passenger door.

"Apologies," he said uncomfortably, not meeting Dean's eye.

"Whatever," Dean replied gruffly, a part of him – the girl part, he told himself firmly – mourning the loss of warmth. "S'the first time you've slept through the night, so I'll let it go."
Cas didn't say anything to that, and Dean tugged Dad's jacket closer around him.

"What time is it?" he asked loudly, hoping to diffuse the awkward situation.

"About six," Sam answered. "We're ten minutes from Lisa's."

"We got anything to eat around here?" Dean asked, the familiar ache of hunger warring with the other type of cramps.

"Sarah and I finished off the sandwiches you bought."

"And the chocolate?"

"Sorry," Sam replied sheepishly, holding up the empty M&M bag.

"Dude, you suck," Dean said with a glare, barely holding back from mentioning that apparently Sam's way of manifesting PMS was through sweet cravings instead of a short temper and horniness.

"Do we have a plan for when we get to Lisa's?" Sam asked, ignoring the jibe.

"I figured the direct approach would be best, considering the epic fail that was last time," Dean said.

"She'll probably slam the door in your face," Sarah said honestly. "It's what I would do."

"Well, I'm hoping I can convince her before she decides to do that," Dean sighed. "And if I can't... well, we can always send Cas to talk to her. We told her about him, and he can rock the angel shtick long enough to gain her trust."

"I am no longer an angel," Cas mumbled yet again, although it was more to himself than to them. It seemed he was becoming used to Dean referring to him as such. Dean refrained from reaching out and patting his arm, especially in light of the awkward wake-up call.

"It's not like we have any better ideas," Sam finally granted. "We'll wait in the car, I guess. Wouldn't want to overwhelm her."

Cas looked like he wanted to object to that, but Dean cut him off by clapping his hands together.

"Great! We have a plan! Let's hope it goes off without a hitch and that Lisa's at least got some food at her place."

Sam and Sarah sent him disbelieving looks, his obviously fake cheer doing nothing to settle anyone's unease.

'Well screw you guys,' he thought grimly as they pulled into the cul-de-sac where Lisa's house was located. Dean told them to park the car a few houses away, just in case the place was being watched, and shrugged out of Dad's jacket before getting out of the car.

The minute he stood up, he once again became uncomfortably aware of the damp sensation in his underwear and the return of the painful cramps. He'd discovered yesterday that for some reason, painkillers that worked on broken bones didn't necessarily dull those.

'Fuck, this sucks,' he thought as he walked up the street, elaborately casual, and entered the Braeden's front yard. When he reached the front door, he pressed the doorbell quickly and stepped back. 'Best get it over with. There's really no good way to ease someone into this.

Lisa was probably already freaking out, he doubted she was going to like this change in the status quo.
She had called him every hour after he got the voicemail until he had broken down some time after midnight and sent her a short text ("On my way – will call when able") to buy himself some time. How was he supposed to explain his new body parts to a woman he was still reasonably attracted to and who had given birth to his son?

'And whoa, why does that sound so weird?' he thought with a frustrated frown. It was a challenge he had been wrestling with the entire drive from Boston. 'How the hell am I supposed to be this kid's dad? It's not like I had a stellar relationship with my own to begin with.'

As much as he had looked up to and admired John Winchester – and as much as he had been devoted to him with the same ferocity that he was devoted to Sam – Dean was the first to admit that his father had been an obsessed, emotionally stunted bastard. And if the relationship had been an unequal one when he was alive, everything that Dean had learned in the years since his death had further soured the memory of it.

Like what happened to Adam.

The knowledge that his flesh and blood was rotting in Hell partly because Dad hadn't come clean with Dean and Sam, hadn't ensured that his nice, normal family was protected from his enemies, made Dean even more hesitant about the situation with Ben.

'Which might not even be a situation, because if everything works out, I'm still headed back to Hell in the near future,' he thought with a shiver. 'Say we find him – is it even worth telling him about me?'

His subconscious offered him no clear answer, and he gratefully abandoned it when he heard the sound of the door being unlocked and hauled open.

The woman who opened the door was a far cry from the vibrant, playful woman that Dean had left behind not a month before. Her skin was pale and there were circles under her eyes that rivaled Cas's right now. His heart clenched painfully at the glimmer of hope that had sparked in her eyes before she realized he was not who she was looking for.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice forced into something resembling polite. He didn't miss the way she seemed to be using the door to shield herself.

"Lisa," he sighed, unable to help himself. She was so obviously her and not possessed or being held under duress that he couldn't help allow some tension bleed out of his shoulders.

"Lisa," he sighed, unable to help himself. She was so obviously her and not possessed or being held under duress that he couldn't help allow some tension bleed out of his shoulders.

"Do I know you?" she asked, guarded. He watched her eyes flick downward, and he saw that in addition to the iron sill that Sam had installed the last time, there was a line of salt filling the furrow there. The carpet she was standing on was the same one he had painted a Devil's Trap under.

He couldn't help the swell of pride at that.

"I'd hope so," he said after a second's thought. He nodded down at the salt line. "Good to see you've kept those up. Guess you stuck with our advice."

"Your advice…?" she repeated, obviously confused. Then her eyes narrowed and her entire body went stiff with distrust. "Who are you?"

"Yeah, I guess it was too much to hope you'd just know, huh," he said, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Look. This is going to sound crazy – like, more than changelings and demons and angels – but it's me. Dean."
She stared at him for a full five seconds, before starting to close the door.

"No, seriously!" he cried, shoving his boot into the gap between the door and its frame. Lisa made a surprise noise, no doubt noticing that he had passed over the salt line and iron without trouble. "It's just a way of keeping off the radar – I'm still me, just in a different body. I got your text yesterday and we drove all night to get here – me and Sam and – "

"Prove it," Lisa challenged, not letting up on her grip of the door. "Tell me something only Dean would know.

He refrained from pointing out that if he were a revenant or a ghoul, that logic could have gotten her killed, and instead cast his mind back to something only he would know.

An idea popped into his head and he couldn't help leer. "Like, how you have this weird patch of freckles on your inner thigh? Or that heart-shaped birthmark on your left – ?"

"Stop!" she squeaked, the distrust on her face suddenly replaced with a flush of colour and uncertainty. She opened the door a fraction of an inch wider and stared at him. It was weird to be at eye level with her. "Dean?" She studied him closely, like she was trying to find him in his borrowed features. Her expression relaxed, as did the rest of her. "It really is you, isn't it?"

"Please tell me you got inked since the last time we were here," he answered, attempting a smile but failing as she suddenly threw herself forward and into his arms. He staggered for a moment, caught off guard – 'Well, that was easier than I thought it would be…' he thought as he curled one arm around her.

"Where's Sam?" Lisa asked into his shoulder, uncertain. "Is he also…?"

"Learning how the other side lives?" Dean offered. "Yeah. He and the others are in the car."

"Others?"

"A lot's happened since we left here," Dean said, shrugging plaintively. "I figured it was best to ease you into this on my own. Had a bit too much drama going on lately myself." He prodded her towards the house. "Come on, we'll figure this out. Promise."

"Yeah…yeah, okay," she said after a moment, and moved aside to let him in.

He turned and waved at the others to join them and then followed her into the house. "Bourbon still on top of the fridge?"

"You're taking this really well," Sam offered, not knowing what else to say.

It was fifteen minutes after the awkward introductions and Lisa making them go through every test Dean and Sam had taught her about the last time they were in Cicero. Even Sam couldn't help being proud that she'd insisted despite her obvious distress.

Across the table, Sarah shot him an unimpressed look. She seemed to have taken it upon herself act as Lisa's support despite having exchanged barely two words with her beyond their initial introduction. Sam wasn't sure if it was just the common ground of being faced with extremely bizarre events or if it was one of those connections that only humans actually born with two X chromosomes
seemed to share.

"I'll freak out when my son is back home," Lisa said in quiet resolution, downing a fourth finger of bourbon. "And Dean's right. This really isn't the weirdest thing I've heard of. Especially not when it comes to you two." Her eyes flicked to Sam, and then to Dean, who was pacing back and forth beside the kitchen island, before she admitted, "Though it's still pretty high up there."

"If it makes you feel any better, it took them half a week to tell me," Sarah offered, part-joking, part-pointed.

They shared another significant look, filled with understanding and gratitude, and Sam felt inexplicably uncomfortable. He wondered if he should be worried by the possibly bonding moment happening between the two women.

"When did you say he went missing?" Dean broke in, asking the same question again that he had already asked twice. His brow furrowed thoughtfully, like he was puzzling over something that didn't make sense.

"Yesterday," Lisa answered once again, her voice wavering. "I went to pick him up from school and he wasn't…he wasn't there."

"Did you call the police?" Sam asked, knowing that was the sensible, non-hunter related reaction to this kind of situation.

"Of course! It was the first thing I did after checking in with all of his friends and the school!" Lisa cried, sounding insulted that Sam would ask such a question. "They told me it was too early to file a Missing Person's Report – that I had to wait forty-eight hours –"

She choked, her voice momentarily getting lost in emotion, and she pressed her fingers to her mouth in an anguished gesture.

"Benjamin is marked by God," Castiel spoke up, eyes fixed intently on Lisa. "His destiny would not be cut short so easily. I have faith that you will be reunited with him. Dean and Sam have proven to be a formidable force when it comes to their family."

Sam blinked at that. Either Castiel had gotten better at lying, or he was actually trying to be comforting in his own formerly angelic way.

"Did Ben…did he know?" Sam asked after a moment. He glanced over at Dean, who paused in his pacing to listen. "About Dean being…well, you know."

It still felt weird to say it.

"I never told him," Lisa shook her head, "I think maybe, he might have guessed or wanted…but no, I never…" She trailed off again, looking conflicted, like she wished she had come clean before her son went missing.

It was more confirmation for Sam, anyhow, and allowed him to pursue other avenues. Knowing what Dean had been like as a kid – knowing what he had been like as a kid – he tried to put himself into the shoes of an eleven year old boy who had a vague idea about how the supernatural world worked.

"Has Ben been…" Sam frowned, trying to find the right words. "He hasn't been doing anything reckless lately, has he?"
"No – he's been very careful since the last time you guys were here," Lisa said, despite obvious confusion at the question. "If anything, he's been checking in on me to make sure I'm okay. It's how I knew there was something wrong. He always calls or texts when he's on his way home, or when he's going to be late."

'Responsible kid,' Sam thought, sharing a significant look with Dean.

"Have you been contacted by anyone since he disappeared?" Castiel asked. "If any of the forces searching for Sam and Dean were responsible, you would have received some kind of ultimatum to draw us out."

Sam blinked. That was actually…a fair point. He didn't get a chance to say so, though, because Dean suddenly broke in, aggravated and sharp-voiced, "How about we don't wait for any ultimatums? We should summon one of the sons-of-bitches down here and ask them where the hell he is!"

'So he's going to be one of those parents,' Sam thought, although out loud he said, "No."

His words chorused with Castiel's, who stated, "That would be most unwise."

"I don't give a damn," Dean retorted.

"Dean, under no circumstances can you reveal yourself to the Host or any of your other pursuers," Castiel warned. "The protections you have established will only remain effective if you don't go searching for trouble."

"We've already been in the same room with an angel and nothing happened," Dean defended himself.

"Because we were lucky," Sam told him. "I'm pretty sure if that angel had enough time, she could have broken the sigils hiding us. Who knows what she might have decided to break next? That witch in New York seemed to think the spell keeping us looking like this was a messy one if not removed properly."

Dean scowled.

"Any legwork on this is going to have to be done by Cas, or Sarah," Sam said, not really liking that option but knowing there wasn't much else they could do.

"Or me," Lisa spoke up, determined.

"No way – !" Dean broke in, while Sam tried to say, "That's not a good idea."

"He's my son," Lisa snapped. "I want him back now and if that means helping you…hunt angels, then that's that."

"That would also be inadvisable," Castiel said dryly. "You are in the unique position of being someone that both Ben and Dean care about. Anyone seeking to do harm to them could do it through you. I will not allow that to happen."

There was a warning in his tone that made Sam shiver a little, because it sounded a little too much like the old Castiel talking. Lisa appeared to want to argue with that, but seemed unable to speak as the ex-angel focussed all of his attention on her.

Sam cleared his throat, trying to lighten the mood a little.
"You know," he attempted, waiting a breath until everyone's attention was back on him, "there's the off chance that we're not looking for something…biblical in nature. Or even some hunter that doesn't like us." Everyone was watching him, askance. "It's like Lisa said – there was no ultimatum. Maybe it's just something else entirely?"

"Like what?" Sarah questioned.

"Maybe it's just something that needs to be hunted down?" Sam suggested. "A regular case?"

"Yeah? And what are the odds of that?" Dean asked dryly.

"I don't know, Dean, he's your kid," Sam pointed, voicing the new knowledge out loud for the first time. "If he inherited our bad luck, the odds could be pretty high."

"And look at it this way," Sarah added, "If it's not an angel or a demon, you can at least go looking for it."

"Meaning?" Lisa spoke up, gazing at each of them in turn.

"It means – angels and demons or not – we're going to work this like any other case," Sam told her. "So we're going to have to do some research."

In the confusion of turning Lisa's kitchen into research-ground-zero, it wasn't until a few hours later that Dean and Lisa got a moment alone.

She disappeared around the same time Sam began to hack into the traffic camera system near Ben's school and Sarah started to go through the latest newspapers on Lisa's home PC; Cas busied himself with compiling a list of possible creatures that could have taken Ben, although their top three contenders remained at the head of that list.

Feeling frustrated, like he couldn't do anything, Dean found himself wandering through the house, looking at the memorabilia and evidence of a tight-knit family. He felt an ache inside him that had nothing to do with cramps, one that was fueled by the knowledge that just by knowing them he had brought danger down upon people he cared about.

He found Lisa upstairs in Ben's room, sitting on the kid's bed and holding onto what looked like a sweater of his. He had to swallow at the abject look of grief on her face; as much as he felt a new kind of terror at the thought of Ben being in trouble, he knew it was nowhere near what she was going through.

"It's gonna be okay," he told her, because there wasn't anything else he could think of to say. "We've got a crack team down there."

Lisa nodded, mouth pressed into a thin line that made Dean think she was trying not to cry.

Feeling awkward, he went to sit down beside her, but refrained from reaching out to comfort her. It felt too weird, first of all, and second of all, as far as she was concerned, he looked like a total stranger. The spontaneous hug at her front door had obviously just been nerves.

He looked around the space, seeing it with new eyes. He'd been in here, once, the last time he and Sam had been in Cicero; he had come in to check Ben's attempts at protections and had ducked out
right after because he had needed to tell Lisa about banishing sigils.

Ben's room was both exactly what Dean would have expected from the kid, based on his and Sam's tastes when they were that age, and weirdly normal. He had model cars strategically placed on the bedroom furniture, and posters of various action movies plastered the walls, along with personal drawings. A bookshelf was filled with comics and DVDs, mostly things like *Ripley's Believe It Or Not, X-Files* and *Unsolved Mysteries* – 'And seriously, the kid wasn't even alive when that show was on,' Dean thought with appreciation – was situated in the corner.

A box of salt was placed in the window, next to a meticulous salt line.

His brief flare of pride at that was replaced by that gnawing sense of guilt.

"Lis…I'm sorry," Dean managed after working himself up to it over several seconds.

"For what?" Lisa asked, a sad almost-smile on her face.

"You know what. If it weren't for me, if it weren't for my connection to you guys, Ben would be here right now."

"No, he wouldn't," she replied quietly.

Dean winced, because that was true. "If I had known –"

"Stop," Lisa told him simply. "I know who you are, Dean. This –" she waved a hand around the room, and at the window that opened onto the normal, up-kept suburban street beyond " – this isn't you. And I'm sure you would have stuck around last time if I let you. But you and I both know you would have been miserable."

"Which is why you told me he wasn't mine," Dean said quietly.

She shrugged in agreement.

"Lis – you don't know I'd have been miserable," Dean pointed out, even though experiences with djinn and angels had proven otherwise. "Even if I was? I'd take that over Ben being missing and you going through this any day."

"Dean…" Lisa sighed, and then made a face, shaking her head. "This is really weird. You being a… looking like that."

"You think you're weirded out?" Dean snorted. "I'm the one wearing a bra for the first time in my life."

That got another subtle tug at the corner of her mouth, and she shook her head. "If you had stayed, you'd feel useless for not trying to find your brother. Or your…friend."

Dean couldn't quite parse the hesitant note in her voice. "Cas?"

"When you said you knew an angel, I wasn't picturing some guy that looks like he should be stocking a library somewhere," Lisa admitted.

"I know, my first impression of him was more along the lines of holy tax accountant," Dean admitted.

"And he really pulled you out of…of Hell?"
"Yep," Dean confirmed. "Sam too, as it turns out. Gave up his angel juice and everything for that. That's why he's all human right now."

"And that's why you're so close," Lisa remarked, and Dean offered her a confused look. "You and Cas, I mean. I didn't really notice it with Sam, but you and Cas just look at each other like...I don't even know what."

"Oh, not you too," Dean groaned, pushing himself up off the bed and moving away. From her.

"Not me what?"

"Never mind," Dean said stonily, not wanting to burden Lisa with Sarah's ridiculous assumptions (Sam's fault!) that he and Cas had a thing. Instead he moved a little closer to the wall, examining one of Ben's drawings. "Kid likes to draw, huh?"

"This month," Lisa said with a sigh. "They had a comic book artist come into the school one day and do a workshop with the kids."

It took Dean a few seconds to realize what he was seeing – highly stylized and untidy in perspective – but when he did, he felt like he had been punched in the gut.

A figure that looked eerily like Dean – complete with some form of leather jacket and a sawed-off – was fighting with something that looked like a crayon version of Dracula. The character featured in almost every other drawing, sometimes accompanied by a gangly looking figure that Dean decided must be Sam and – most worrying – a figure that looked like Ben himself.

Fighting monsters.

The kid was glorifying his fucking life.

Dean turned away from the drawings and looked closer at the shelves, realizing that the books weren't just comics but stories ranging from fairy tales to famous ghost stories. Curious, he hauled out the largest book, a collection of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and opened up it on a random page –

The pages had been marked up with notes, untidy childish scrawl in pencil crayon or marker – ("Witches can cast sleep spell? Find out if it's true," Ben had written in the margins of the story of Sleeping Beauty). Dean pulled out another book, on American Hauntings and found more of the notes – ("Ektoplasma?" Ben had misspelled under a picture of a Victorian séance where the medium was regurgitating what looked like netted cheesecloth) – and a feeling of dread took even sharper hold.

"Did you know about this?" Dean asked, tense, handing Lisa the books.

She flipped through them, wide-eyed. "No, I didn't." She looked up. "You don't think –?"

Dean didn't reply, scanning the room once again. He cast his mind back to his own childhood, and where he had hidden things he didn't want Dad or Sam to know about – wallets he'd pickpocketed, CDs he had stolen, porn – and then made a motion.

"Stand up," he told Lisa, already moving to Ben's bed and hauling the bedclothes off of it.

"Dean, what are you –?" she asked, stepping back from the bed and staring at him in surprise.

He didn't answer. Once the bed sheets were gone, he flicked a calculating eye over the naked fabric, and then bent down to flip the thing over, separating it from the box spring. On the lower side he
caught sight of the law label and noted how it had come free – something had cut into it along the edges, revealing the innards of the mattress.

Dean reached it, ignoring Lisa's surprised exclamation, and hauled out a paperback sized tin.

"Please let it just be porn," he muttered to himself as he flicked the container open. He ignored Lisa's incredulous noise as he emptied the contents out onto the box spring, wincing as several newspaper clippings fell to the floor.

'Limbs Wash Up on California Shores,' Dean read, skimming through the articles. 'Lake Monster Attributed to Deaths on Lake Superior.'

There were more, and with each headline he read – *Man Shoots Self Twenty-Seven Times* – Dean felt a suspicion take hold and grow. He completely froze at one clipping – *Hazardous Biomaterial Found in Laundromat*, eying the attached picture warily. It had likely been taken by a cellphone camera, but there was no mistaking the remnants of shapeshifter skin in the photo.

"Son of a bitch," Dean thought, staring down at the article that read *Cattle Mutilations Increase In Wyoming*. Memories of telling Ben the different signs to look for, of Sam telling him stories to keep him out of Dean's hair while he taught Lisa how to protect herself and Ben.

"What is it?" Lisa demanded.

Dean turned to Lisa, for once in his life utterly unsure of what to say. Because even though he was pretty sure he knew what was going on, she wasn't going to like it. And even more than that, it meant Ben might be in more danger than they thought.

The contents in the tin suggested Ben had been collecting cases, and as much as Dean wanted to believe the kid wasn't stupid enough to try to go on a hunt on his own, he knew how an eleven-year-old boy's mind worked.

And if anything happened to him, it would be Dean's fault.

Dean forced himself to breathe, knowing that putting on a show of calm was important to keeping Lisa from freaking out. It was hard, though. He waited, expectant, as Sam rifled through the newspaper clippings, eyebrows furrowed.

When his brother finally looked up, there was something uneasy in his eyes.

"I know I shouldn't be impressed right now, but for a kid with no training, this is…" he trailed off, and shook his head.

"I know, right?" Dean blurted out, more breathless than he intended. He felt conflicted – pride over the kid's attention to detail warred with the deep seated worry in his gut. He wasn't sure how to deal with it.

Across the room, Sarah was murmuring something comforting to Lisa while Castiel leafed through one of the books Dean had brought downstairs with him.

"Dean, there's no proof that he tried to go after anything on his own," Sam reassured him. "He's eleven."
"So? That never stopped either of us."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Well, ignoring the fact that we were raised in the life and Dad pretty much expected it of us, Ben struck me as smarter than that. Besides, did you look closely at these?" He waved the newspaper clippings. "They're stories from out of state. Even if Ben was stupid enough to do something like this, he doesn't have the funds to get to the next town, let alone farther."

It should have been comforting, but Dean scowled and picked up one of the papers from the pile – one about the disappearance of a thirteen-year-old tagger on the other side of town – and thrust it at Sam. "This one's local."

Sam scanned the article, and then shrugged. "It still doesn't prove anything."

"It doesn't answer why he's got them either," Dean retorted. "Damn it…"

He let his head fall into his hand, trying to massage away the sudden tight pain behind his eyes.

"Okay, well, say for a second he maybe did earmark this as a possible case," Sam said after a moment. "You said it yourself, this one's the only local one. So maybe we should research this – " He glanced at the name in the article, " – Deshawn Barrett and retrace Ben's steps. If there were any steps, because I'm still not convinced –"

"What's the boy's name?" Lisa asked suddenly, looking up.

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, and Dean handed her the article. "Deshawn Barrett. Why?"

"I know that name," Lisa said, frowning as she stared down at the article. "It sounds like…there was a boy Ben was in Boy Scouts with." Of Dean's unimpressed look – because Boy Scouts? Really? – she added, "It was a short experiment. He didn't like it – anyway, one of the boys in his group was named Deshawn. I'm pretty sure his last name was Barrett."

"And they were friends?"

"Sort of. He came over here once or twice, but before Ben could really get to know him he sort of disappeared," Lisa said. "I heard from one of the other parents that his father died in a hit-and-run."

"How long ago was that?" Sam asked.

"Last year," Lisa said. "That's about when they stopped hanging out." She sighed. "Poor boy didn't exactly come from the most stable of homes to begin with, but I guess after his father died…"

"And as far as you know, Ben and Deshawn weren't in contact?" Sam pressed, looking thoughtful.

"I don't think so," Lisa answered. "Why? What does that have to do with Ben…missing?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe something," Sam said, evasive, and before Lisa could ask him to clarify, he went on, "Does Ben have a social profile? MySpace or Facebook?"

"Yes. I have the password, if you want to check it," Lisa said, already rising and heading for the study where the desktop computer was. Sam followed her, and without knowing what else to do, Dean did as well.

He really didn't get the point of social media; seemed a waste of time to him, but Sam got it, and that was what was important.

It took a few minutes to boot up the computer and log on, but when they did, Lisa scooted out of the
chair and allowed Sam to perform his search. A few minutes later, his brother made a semi-triumphant noise and pointed at the screen. "There."

"It looks like they were still talking," Dean said, leaning over his brother's shoulder to scan through the few lines of back and forth texts between Ben and the other kid, whose photo showed a skinny black boy who stared out at them with defiant eyes. "I guess they reconnected at some point."

"Not only that, it looks like they were planning to hang out at the arcade after school the day before Deshawn went missing," Sam said, and then clicked on a link to show the conversation history. "And when he never showed, Ben sent him some messages, asking where he was. And the last message is sent the same day that this article is dated."

Sam pointed at the newspaper clipping again.

"So that's two kids missing." Sarah remarked, appearing in the room, "Within a week." She addressed Lisa. "Have there been any other unexplainable disappearances over the past few weeks? Maybe months?"

Lisa frowned, and then nodded slowly. "Yes, actually, now that you mention it…There was a piece in the paper about three weeks ago about a little girl going missing, I think." She frowned, straining to remember. "She was at a piano recital and just vanished from the room where she was waiting. The police found it strange because there were no windows or doors other than the one – and no one came through there."

Sam tilted his head meaningfully, and Dean sighed. "Well, it's not much of a connection, but it might be something."

It was the first inkling of a lead on Ben's location, and so Dean didn't even complain when Sam sent him to go get his laptop. Research might not have been his favorite activity, but it got the job done. If it helped figure out where his…where Ben was, than he'd put up with it.

Hours later, they had noted several similar cases of children disappearing without a trace or an explanation over the last three weeks. Most of them were written off by authorities as kidnapping cases; the situation of the girl Lisa had mentioned was even being investigated as a parental child abduction incident, despite the father having been in Albany at the time.

"Other than these happening within the same five mile radius, none of these kids have anything in common," Sarah said, leaning away from Lisa's desktop computer.

Dean frowned, staring at the list they had made. There was Ben, his friend Deshawn, the six-year-old girl who had vanished from the auditorium, an eleven year old girl who lived on the other side of the reservoir and an eight-year-old farm boy who had gone out to milk the cows and never come back. There were possibly others, but he they didn't have time to list every disappearance if they were going to find Ben.

Sarah was right, though; the kids all came from different backgrounds, different socioeconomic statuses and different locations. Other than Ben and Deshawn, they didn't seem to have any connection to one another. The six-year-old was from an upper class family, the eleven-year-old was apparently one of the world's youngest novelists and the eight-year-old boy was autistic. Even their characters were radically different.

"Anything?" Dean asked a while later, twisting around to face his brother, who was frowning at his laptop.
"I don't know – maybe," Sam said. "I've hacked into the police database – it turns out there's a surveillance video from the date and time that Deshawn Barrett disappeared. I'm just waiting for it to decrypt."

Dean got up, stretched, and headed over to the table to crouch behind his brother, waiting for the video to load. It took a while – Lisa's internet connection was slow – but eventually the video opened up and Sam maximized the window.

The graphic resolution was grainy, but Dean could easily make out the basic profile of the boy on the Facebook page. He was in an alleyway somewhere, spray painting what looked like a stylized ape on the side of the wall. Before their eyes, though, he suddenly froze and looked around, like he thought someone was coming up behind him. He glanced around a few times, and then went back to his work. Seconds later, though, he stopped again and looked up, his entire body tense.

The video wavered for a moment, and the boy in the frame took a step back, posture becoming defensive, before the video flickered out completely. A second later, the picture came back online, only the kid was gone. The spray paint canister remained on the ground.

"I can see why they didn't circulate this," Sarah remarked. "The delay between him standing there and disappearing is way too fast for it to be a person. I bet they thought it was doctored."

"Can you freeze-frame it? Or slow it down or something?" Dean asked, frowning at the video thoughtfully.

"I'll do my best," Sam said, an amused twist to his lips at Dean's hesitance over technological lingo. Dean rolled his eyes.

Sam clicked a few things, and then replayed the video, slower this time.

"Stop," Dean said when he saw it again.

The frame Sam froze it on was indistinct, but clearly it had picked up on something.

Dean squinted at the screen, and then swore.

The thing in front of Deshawn was a tall and thin humanoid, almost like a Reaper, but where those dudes tended to be polished and grim looking, this thing looked like Freddy Kruger at Woodstock. Its skin was pockmarked and scarred, and its greasy, greying hair flared out like a mullet. Sharp claws reached out toward an oblivious Deshawn, and even with the bad resolution Dean could see that they oozed something.

As they watched the slow motion video, it shimmered out of sight when boy looked over at it.

"So it's fast and can apparently become fucking invisible?" Dean demanded.

"It sounds a bit like that leprechaun in Elwood," Sam suggested. "But that's no leprechaun. I've got no idea what that is."

"I do," Cas said suddenly, voice low in Dean's ear. Dean jumped, having not realized the ex-angel was standing so closely behind him. He forced back whatever comment about personal space he was thinking, instead watching the way Cas's eyes narrowed at the screen. "That is an Erlking."

"A what?" Sarah asked, when no one else would.

"Erlkings are a kind of faerie," Cas explained quietly, "Their characteristics are close to those of
sirens or shtriga. Their hunting patterns are more like djinn, though, in that they induce fever dreams of their victims. I should have realized, what with the hunting range and the preference for children…"

"Erlking…erlking," Sam murmured, scrunching up his face thoughtfully. "What, like the poem?"

Dean shot him an unimpressed look.

"Does now seem like the best time, nerd?" he asked, while Lisa spoke up, "What poem?"

"In 1782 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a poem about a creature called an Erlking that was based on an earlier German legend about a malevolent spirit that haunts forests and kills travellers."

"The legend is partially true," Cas allowed. "Erlkings are nomadic forest spirits, feeding as they move. They usually remain in one place over a period of weeks as their victims slowly starve to death."

Lisa made a strangled noise, and Dean took in her panicked look.

"Ben was taken barely more than a day ago," he told her. "We'll find him before anything like that happens to him. I promise. We've already got an idea where it might be. Right?" He shot Cas a look.

"Erlkings need to live in forested areas to survive," Cas agreed. "And they cannot rest unless protected by alder bark."

"Alder trees aren't native to Indiana," Sarah pointed out. Off their surprised looks, she added defensively, "I dated an arborist once."

Dean's mouth twitched at the subtle downward movement of his brother's eyebrows, but instead he suggested, "Maybe it doesn't necessarily need to find somewhere with alder to rest. Maybe it's a Dracula deal – you know, instead of grave dust it carries alder bark with it? If this thing's nomadic, it's got to have some kind of back-up in case it can't find a place to rest. I mean, we are in the Midwest right now, not exactly prime forest area."

"The only forested zone within the same five mile radius as all of the disappearances is the golf course next to the reservoir," Sam piped up. "There are trees and glades all around it."

"That must be its nesting area," Cas decided.

"That's a pretty big range," Sam pointed out. "We're going to need to narrow down its location a little more. Draw it out."

"How?" Dean questioned, eye flitting to Lisa and back. "We can't exactly use any kids as bait."

"That might not be necessary," Cas murmured, a thoughtful edge to the words.

"What do you mean?" Dean asked.

Cas gave him a look he didn't like.

"Do you know why Erlkings prefer children?" Cas asked. "Because their minds are more open – they are more imaginative and mentally flexible. They see the world in a way that adult humans do not. That…creativity produces a kind of energy that the Erlking feeds on. It is drawn to that above all things. If it were to notice a concentration of it in its territory, it would pursue it."

"Your point?" Dean asked, voice tight.
"This thing is drawn to certain prey, Dean," Sam said, seemingly unaware of what Cas was suggesting. "I mean, look at all these kids – musician, a writer, a graffiti artist, a kid who imagines the world of the supernatural in huge detail? This thing's going after kids who dream big. Who can see stuff we can't, so to speak."

"I have been alive for millennia," Cas continued dispassionately. "I have seen more than you could comprehend. Don't you think I would be the ideal candidate to draw it out?"

"What? No!" Dean snapped. "Bad idea!"

"Actually," Sam spoke up, almost carefully, "Dean, that's a really good idea. Cas can defend himself – and he said it takes a while for these things to eat, right? So he could have his phone on him and we could track him to wherever this thing is hiding the kids."

"And how many times in our lives have we had our phones crap out?" Dean countered.

"You could survey from a distance," Cas suggested reasonably.

"Yeah, and if that thing decides to up and vanish with you like it did that kid? That'll be real helpful!" Dean fumed.

"I would endeavor to leave you some kind of sign," Cas replied, a vague tone of annoyance seeping into his words. "And remember, I have been a soldier far longer than either of you. I am sure I would be able to find some way of defending myself against a lowly faerie."

"You had powers then – you could burn shit with a touch. It's a bit different now!"

"I am the best candidate here, whatever your low opinion of my abilities would suggest," Cas said, sounding stiff and somewhat insulted.

"Dude, I'm not saying…look, this isn't about you being weak or anything, but – you're – still injured," Dean said, trying to grasp at anything that might help him with his case.

"A fact which has never stopped you or Sam."

Dean opened his mouth to protest, flooded with at least a dozen reasons this wasn't a good idea, but Cas's face was resolute. A quick glance at Sam's 'what the hell?' stare and Lisa's suddenly hopeful face made his insides churn, because he knew this was probably the best plan they were going to get right now. And time was running out for Ben.

"Fine," he said curtly, staring into Cas's eyes. "How do we kill this thing?"

"Dean, this has got to stop," Sam said after a full forty-five minutes of his brother sulking beside him in the Charger. They were parked in a side road near the rear entrance to the golf club, which was abandoned for the night; in the far distance, they could make out the immobile speck of Castiel where he stood just beneath the shady trees.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Sammy," Dean replied, glancing at his phone, which had the browser open on the cell-phone tracking app. The minute the thing went for Castiel, they would be able to use it to follow it to its lair.

Problem was, Dean had been checking it every five minutes that he wasn't staring out making sure
Castiel remained in place.

"Sure," Sam replied, not convinced. "You know, if I knew you were going to be such a mother-hen on this job, I'd have left you back at Lisa's with her and Sarah."

'And wasn't that a job in and of itself,' he thought, remembering Lisa's protests and Sarah's unimpressed glares.

Ironically, it had been Castiel who had convinced them to remain behind, maintaining that Ben already had one parent risking their life to find him, and that Sarah was needed to guard Lisa in the event that something happened to them while they were hunting.

Sam was beginning to see the head-trip inherent to maintaining connections outside of hunting, and for the first time in his life felt an awkward sort of sympathy towards his father. John had been a bastard, but at least his way, they had maintained ties only with people who knew what was out there and how to protect themselves. It made it a little less of a burden, for all its pitfalls.

Dean was shooting him an annoyed look. "Seriously, dude, have you started speaking on some kind of girl frequency now? Because I may have been forced to look like this, but I haven't completely transitioned yet."

"You look like you're about to run out there with an extra sweater and a juice box," Sam pointed out, only half-joking.

Dean glared at him, resolutely put his phone away and stared purposely in the opposite direction from Castiel. He stayed like that for several minutes, before breaking the silence of the car.

"So I'm a little overprotective," Dean muttered, much to Sam's surprise. "Sue me – the guy's family."

"That's just it, Dean," Sam pointed out. "You don't get like this over family. I mean, yeah, you do over me when things get hairier than usual, but on regular hunts? When was the last time you stopped me when I suggested using myself as bait to some big ugly out there?"

"That's because you can handle yourself when you're not pulling your emo, self-sacrificing spiel," Dean retorted.

"Yeah? And what about with Adam?" Sam prompted. "When we found out who he was and I started to teach him how to hunt –"

"That wasn't Adam!"

"No, but it was something that was an almost perfect copy of him," Sam retorted. "It's as close to him as we ever got to know. And you bitched and you moaned, but you never stopped me from teaching him. You still let him make his own decisions."

"Sam, that doesn't count, it was a ghoul –"

"And what if it hadn't been?" Sam challenged. "Say we found out about him in time and he decided to go on the road with us, and we taught him. I can bet you you'd be overprotective at first, sure, but then it would be like when we were kids. The minute you knew I could do it on my own – you backed off."

"What's your point, Sam?" Dean growled.

"My point is, you know Cas can do this – hell, even all human like he is now, he's still a more
effective hunter than most of the ones we've met," Sam explained. "So this thing you've got about him helping us? It's not just overprotective, it's something…"

Sam trailed off, not even sure he knew where to go with that thought.

Dean glared a challenge at him. "Yeah? Something like what?"

"I don't know." Sam said, edging off a bit. "But whatever it is, I suggest you figure it out. Because I'm willing to bet Cas is getting sick of it too. And he's going to kick your ass about it at some point.

"Not while he's a nerdy little ex-angel, he won't," Dean muttered, half to Sam and half to himself.

"Don't be too sure."

Dean crossed his arms – and really, Sam might have classified it as a pout, if Dean hadn't sighed and then leaned back against the seat.

"I ever tell you about the time Zachariah sent me to the future?" Dean asked suddenly.

Sam stared at him, startled, not only because of the abrupt disturbance but because Dean had avoided that particular topic rather expertly over the last year.

"Not really," Sam said slowly. "When you called me to say we should start hunting again – but, you never told me what happened." He took a breath. "You know, beside the whole Lucifer wearing me to prom thing."

Dean winced. It was obviously something he still didn't like to remember, and considering Sam had lived it, he could certainly sympathize.

"Yeah, well, real eye-opener," Dean muttered.

"It didn't happen," Sam placated. "We stopped that –"

"Barely. And I still got to see what it looks like when I fuck up."

"Dean –"

"It wasn't just you I fucked up, either."

Sam raised his eyebrows, waiting for his brother to continue. It was another thirty seconds before Dean spoke again.

"Cas was there too. Only…" he swallowed. "I think he'd stopped being 'Cas' years before. He was this miserable, jaded, twisted…guy. Strung out on whatever drugs he could get his hands on and… and having fucking orgies!"

At this, Sam's mouth parted in surprised disbelief. "…You're kidding, right?"

Dean shook his head, no, and went on, "And him and me – the future me – something happened there. Because they couldn't – we couldn't – even look at each other. And, damn it, it must have been bad, whatever happened, because I – he – sent Cas to his death. Didn't even blink. Didn't even care."

"Dean," Sam sighed, and this time it wasn't in protest but in reassurance.

"So yeah, maybe I'm overprotective," Dean went on, voice taut with something. "But fuck if I'll let that happen to Cas again. He's already been hurt once since hooking back up with us, and we were
lucky it was as minor as a dislocated shoulder. What happens next time if it's something more serious? Something that a few aspirin or a slug of Jack can't fix? What happens if he starts getting a taste for the hard stuff?"

Which, really, Sam didn't have an answer for.

"I can't let that happen," Dean went on. "And this?" He jerked his head in the direction of where Castiel was playing bait, "This feels like the first step to that."

"Dean, you can't protect him forever," Sam told him gently. "And trust me, speaking from experience? He wouldn't want you to."

"I can protect him long enough," Dean retorted, determined. "Long enough to get him angeled up again in a way that won't get you sent back to Hell."

"He doesn't want you to," Sam repeated. "And that's not your responsibility."

"Yeah, Sammy, it is," Dean answered heavily. "Ever since the guy pulled me out of Hell, it's been one shitstorm after another for him. It's like you said – he got booted out of his Cloud Club for me, he gave up his friggen' grace because he knew I couldn't move on with you down there – so now I've got to live with that and the knowledge of what he's gonna look like if I screw it up."

It was brief, but in the dim light provided by the slowly waxing moon, Sam could make out the naked emotion on his brother's face. It stopped him dead in his tracks, because female body or not, Sam had seen that look before. A lifetime ago, in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

With Cassie.

Sam felt like someone had just pulled the floor out from under him, which was impressive considering he was sitting down.

The idea shook him, because…because Dean was straight.

Plainly and simply and unquestionably straight.

As much as Sam teased him about his macho persona being a form of overcompensation, it had always been just that: teasing. Dozens of women from one end of the country to the other over the past twenty years could attest to the fact that Dean was very much into the opposite sex. His guilty habit of Dr. Sexy, M.D. aside, he had probably never looked at another guy the same way he noticed every pair of breasts within a twenty-foot radius of himself.

'Except maybe Cas,' Sam allowed after a moment's consideration, thinking back to all the intense looks the two exchanged. He'd always chalked it up to the bond between rescuer and rescuee, like and yet unlike the same kind of communication that Dean shared with Sam. But what if it was something else entirely?

That Castiel cared about Dean was obvious – Sam had always thought it was a bit of transference: when his faith in God disintegrated, he had replaced it with faith in Dean. But it could easily be something more. He could understand Castiel having some kind of feelings for his brother, because if he was honest with himself, it just made sense.

'But Dean?' he wondered staring at his brother.

Dean suddenly straightened up, jarring Sam from his thoughts.
"What the hell?" he suddenly demanded, looking out the driver's side window. "Where's Cas?"

Sam looked out as well, scanning the darkness for the telltale shape of their friend in the distance, only to see nothing.

"Crap," he murmured.

Dean was out of the car before Sam even registered it and already running across the street and into the trees. Sam barely had the time to grab the flashlights and the weapons – iron knife and a blowtorch – before he was out of the car as well and following him.

They had to climb the fence separating the forested property from the road, but that was no problem, and they made it across the bark and leaf strewn paths with relative ease until they came to the spot where Cas had been waiting.

In the darkness it was impossible to see any clue of where Cas had gone. Beside him, Dean cursed, glaring down at his phone. "This thing's saying he hasn't gone anywhere."

"Meaning he dropped his phone," Sam groaned, while his brother quickly pressed the speed dial. After a beat, the tinny rendition of Greenbaum's *Spirit in the Sky* that Dean had programmed in there with a smirk a few weeks ago broke the silence. A dim light from a facedown phone several feet away lit up, and Dean was already on it.

Picking it up, Sam saw his brother's shoulders tense.

"Go get the black light from the trunk," Dean ordered quietly, and at Sam's questioning glance, he held up Cas's phone; he screen was smudged with blood.

Comprehension dawning.

He jogged to the Charger, grabbed the requested item and returned, not saying anything when Dean practically tore it out of his hands and started shining it around the dark grass. It took a few passes, before something fluorescent blue showed up in a longer patch. Dean shone the light out in a few directions close to it, finding more.

They had a trail to follow.

"We need to stop bleeding so much on cases or we're going to have to start investing in a moveable blood bank," Sam remarked, only half-joking as he and Dean started off.

They followed the intermittent trail of blood quietly for a quarter of an hour; the trail wasn't easy to follow, which suggested Cas at least hadn't sustained any kind of fatal injury, but the large globs of blood suggested he had been injured somewhere with a lot of blood vessels. Either the head or fleshy part of his arm or leg. Remembering the teeth and claws that the creature in the video had had, Sam wondered if maybe Cas had fought back and grazed himself on those.

After another fifteen minutes of tramping through the forested area around the course, Sam made out something like a shed in the distance. He frowned, because if this thing had been taking its victims here, wouldn't the authorities haven noticed?

As they got closer, though, they noticed that the shed was built like an old shack, with what looked like a storm cellar opening on the side.

Nodding to one another in the dark, Sam held up one of the flashlights while Dean bent forward to quickly open the thing. They moved quietly, climbing down into the earth and glancing around a
cellar that looked a bit larger than your standard storm shelter.

Stone foundations were blocked by shelves, and it looked like the space continued on around a corner. Landscaping equipment and bags of what looked like sand or plaster were piled along the walls. The place had obviously once been used as a storage facility, but now was abandoned.

In the dimness of the hidden cavern, the sharp smell of filth hit him – body odour and urine and excrement – and Sam swallowed, shaking his head as he fought not to gag. Instead he tried to focus on his other senses; his ears perked up to the sound that grew louder the closer they got – feeble, pained moans.

While Dean checked every inch of the darkness by the stairs, Sam carefully turned the corner. His eyes widened at what he saw.

In what looked like a nest made of dirty blankets and branches – most likely dried alder, judging by how dead they looked – were several bodies. Children – six of them that Sam could count – were huddled together, unmoving but for the slight rise and fall of their chests. From what little he could make out, they looked to be in various states of malnourishment, their faces gaunt and dusty. Dirt clung to their sweaty faces and their breath rasped out over dry lips.

It took him a moment to recognize Ben in all of that. Dean gave a pained exclamation when he caught sight of him, and Sam had to thrust out his arm to keep his brother from going for the kid. A second later, Dean's eyes landed on something else and he tensed, nodding meaningfully.

Castiel was several feet away from the kids, a crumpled, seated heap that wasn't moving. His ragged breathing suggested that he, like the children, was still alive, and there was a bloody gash on the side of his face.

As Sam took a step forward, his vision was suddenly blocked by the creature, which appeared in front of him out of nowhere.

He was aware of hot, sour breath on his face and a rage filled growl, before he went flying backwards and the world went dark and hazy.

Dean heard his brother cry out and whirled around.

The thing loomed over Sam, cocking its head to one side as it considered the unconscious body in front of him, and started to reach out with a slimy hand. Sam was probably just as appetizing to this son of a bitch as the kids, what with his memories of Lucifer and Michael battling for dominance in the Cage. Ten years of that was probably more interesting to the thing than the forty years of torture Dean had endured.

Jumping forward, Dean grabbed it by the back of its neck and hauled it away from Sam. He turned it around, swinging at it with the iron knife, but it blocked him with one arm and seized Dean's wrist with the other. Despite the clamminess, its grip was strong and Dean swore as he felt his hands hinge open and drop the knife.

It struck out with one foot, sending the knife flying out of sight.

Not dwelling on that, Dean moved back with his free hand and punched the thing in the jaw. It snarled at him, letting go, but then slammed out with a sharp foot. Dean only just managed to grab
and shove backwards, making the thing fall backward.

While it scrambled to all fours, Dean dove forward and tried to kick it somewhere in the trunk of its body. It appeared to have learned its mistake before, and aimed its next blow at Dean's chest. He staggered back, hoping to avoid it, but not in time. The foot connected with his abdomen and the pain he had been feeling for a day now tripled.

Gasping, Dean reeled backward, cradling his abdominal area protectively as he tried to regain his balance. The Erlking was back on all fours again, creeping forward. It grinned at Dean, and then suddenly vanished.

'Right, this thing can go invisible,' he thought, looking around wildly. 'Shit.'

Desperately, Dean took a few swings as he felt the air move around him, but it never connected. On a third swing, the invisible creature grabbed his arm and seized him by the throat with one oily, clawed hand. Another crunched into the side of his face, and Dean stumbled backward again.

His vision swam as the thing landed another blow on his gut. It then grabbed him by the neck again and shoved him into the crumbling brick foundation of the basement. Dazed, Dean tried to regain his balance, but every time he thought the world was about to right itself, the creature knocked him in the face again.

Before he knew it, he was flat on his back and there was a heavy weight on his chest. He could hear a sucking sound, like wind passing through a tunnel, and could smell the sour breath close by as it came closer, and closer –

Suddenly, he felt the brush of fabric in front of him as the trenchcoat landed over the thing's head, creating an outline of it and messing up its little invisibility spell. Behind it, Dean could see Cas, swaying a little on his feet but determinedly leaning forward and grabbing the thing in a headlock through the coat. Cas punched it, causing it to topple away from Dean, and then kneed it twice in the face.

It fell away, wrestling with the trenchcoat that marred its invisibility. Before it could, though, Cas grabbed hold of one of the bags of plaster nearby and tossed it at it. The sharp-clawed creature attempted to throw the bag away from itself, but accidentally ripped it, sending white dust flying everywhere.

"Try turning invisible like that, bitch," Dean grunted, pleased.

The thing gave an angry yell and flailed, like it realized it had just lost an advantage. As it finally got free of the trenchcoat, it struck out with its arms, breaking through parts of the stone foundations and sending one of the nearby shelves flying at Dean.

Before he could jump out of the way, he found himself pinned yet again, this time by an angular wooden shelf that pressed him into place.

"Dean!" Cas rasped, making an aborted move toward him. It cost him a precious few seconds of awareness as the creature recouped and barreled toward Cas, shoving him up against the wall.

From where Dean lay, struggling to free himself from the heavy shelf, he watched as the thing leaned closer to Cas, drooling heavily and licking its lips. Cas was squirming beneath it, trying to throw off its weight, but Dean could see his struggling was becoming more feeble as sweat broke out on his forehead and his eyes became vacant.

Whatever toxin the thing exuded was taking effect again.
"Cas," Dean grunted, wriggling out from beneath the shelf – too slowly! The thing's teeth were an inch from Cas's face –

Suddenly, the Erlking's head snapped backward as something hit it. Shocked, Dean looked up, his heart nearly stopping when he realized Ben was standing there, panting and wide-eyed, a large section of lead pipe held in his hand. He was shivering – either from cold or adrenaline Dean didn't know – and was staring at the creature in horrified fascination.

"Ben!" Dean rasped, pushing at the heavy debris pinning him in place. "Go! Get…out of here!"

Ben was backing away slowly, but the creature had recovered. He swung the pipe at it again, but the Erlking blocked it and wrested it out of his grasp with ease. Conscious though he was, Ben was not in any shape to fight this thing, and as Dean continued to slowly free himself, the Erlking quickly gained the upper hand. Ben took a desperate swing at the creature with his fists, but it avoided those hits with ease.

It snapped its hand out at Ben with a blow to the solar plexus before throwing him across the room.

By then, Dean had finally managed to get out from under the shelf and vaulted toward the monster.

"Hey, ugly," Dean growled, gaining its attention. "Stay the fuck away from my kid!"

Spotting a raised grating, he hopped up onto it and jumped down, landing a hard kick on its face. It stumbled back and to one knee, and Dean lashed out a few more times while it struggled to get back up. On the last kick, it jumped up with a roar, sending Dean back a few paces, and the back of its clawed hand ploughing into Dean's face, just above his left eye. Blood abruptly poured downward, forcing him to blink uselessly as his vision wavered for an instant.

It was enough time for the Erlking to completely recover itself.

Once again it had him by the throat, lifted him up and shoved him hard into the ground. Dean went momentarily lax, dazed as he tried to recover, but not before the thing was sitting on him again, leaning close.

Dean's hands were pinned to his sides by the creature's thighs, and in the dizzy moment where his head connected with the ground, he imagined he couldn't feel his legs. Ben was groaning somewhere nearby, and in his peripheral vision he could see Cas trying to get to his feet, but failing as the Erlking's toxins hindered him.

He had no idea how he was getting out of this one, when –

Someone stood over the thing once again. Dean saw hands wrap around its head, then move in a harsh, twisting motion. The creature's neck snapped, loudly, and it fell over limp next to him. Sam loomed above them both, breathing harshly despite bruises and some bloody gashes.

"Nice nap?" Dean gasped.

"Real refreshing," Sam panted back, shaking his broken wrist painfully. The pressure needed to break the thing's neck had evidently not agreed with his injury.

Dean coughed and choked, rolling away from the putrid body beside him; he could still hear it breathing, knew that it wasn't dead yet and that they had little time. Sam was already hauling out the lighter fluid, and as Dean hauled himself up and away from the thing, his brother flicked open his lighter and torched the body.
Flames roared behind him as Dean staggered across the room, sending an assessing look at Cas, who nodded as though to say he was alright, before staggering to Ben.

"You okay?" he rasped.

"I'll live," the kid said, quiet, trying to sound brave even though his voice was wavering. Even in the darkness, Dean could see him stare at him without any kind of recognition, before he looked back at the other kids. "What about them?"

"I'm going to get the First Aid kit," Sam said, already moving. "And there's cellphone reception up there so we can call an ambulance. Those kids need medical attention right away."

"Cas and I will stay here and keep an eye on them," Dean agreed. He dug his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Ben. "You go ahead, too. And call your mom, she's freaking out."

"You know my mom?" Ben asked, tired eyes going wide. "How? Are you friends of Dean's? You guys are hunters, right?"

Dean groaned, and shook his head. "Kid, now is definitely not the time to get into it."

Something in his voice, whether Ben knew who he was or not, seemed to make an impression, because Ben nodded and slowly, still wavering on his feet a little, followed Sam out of the storage space.

Cas was checking on all of the kids, arranging them into more comfortable positions as he had been taught by Sam and Dean. Dean joined him, and after assessing all of the kids – he was worried about the one boy, who had obviously been here a lot longer than the others judging by his emaciated form – sat down heavily a few feet away from them.

His body ached, and he was pretty sure he was leaking through the pad and underwear, but he felt too tired to do anything about it.

"You are bleeding," Cas said, and for a moment Dean felt a note of panic that he had been right. But Cas was eyeing the cut above his head, and not his crotch, so he relaxed.

"That's what happens when you get hit in the face by something with claws," Dean pointed out, a little amused; he felt a little loopy, probably had a concussion.

He also attributed possible concussion to the fact that when Cas shrugged out of his outer shirt and pressed it tightly to Dean's head wound, he didn't move to stop him.

Dean winced when the fabric touched his ruined skin, biting back a curse, but allowed Cas to keep the pressure there. Even tainted with the smell of blood and dust, the shirt still smelled like Cas and he felt irrationally comforted by it.

"Sorry we lost you," he said after a moment. At Cas's tilt of the head, he added, "I know you were supposed to be bait, but that should have gone better."

"Since knowing you, I have learned that things rarely go according to plan," Cas said placidly.

Dean snorted, because that was the understatement of the evening. Cas's mouth quirked into an actual smile, and Dean felt something in his chest jump with warmth.

Just as abruptly, he became aware that they were sitting closer than need be, even for an attempt at first aid.
"Dude, you should go check on the kids again," Dean murmured, pulling back.

"You're still bleeding –"

"I can hold a compress to my head as well as you can," Dean snapped, reaching up to shove Cas's hand away and to take its place with his own. As he did so, their fingers brushed, and a jolt not unlike a surge of electricity suddenly splintered through him, and he found himself breathless yet again despite not being in the middle of a fight.

Cas was staring at him, wide eyed, and for a second, Dean wondered if his friend had felt that shock as well.

Then Cas hurriedly turned away and went to sit by the kids.

'What the hell was that all about?' Dean thought, trying to ignore the too-fast beating of his heart.

"You're kidding, right?"

Sam snorted at the completely stunned disbelief in Ben's voice as he looked between Lisa and Dean; the latter two were watching him warily, like they expected his head to implode or something.

'Give the kid more credit,' Sam thought as he turned back to the movie he, Sarah and Castiel were watching in the living room. Well, Castiel and Sarah were watching it; Sam was watching Sarah whenever he wasn't training his ears on the kitchen. All three had decided to give the unconventional and newly reunited family unit some time to themselves, although Sam was leaning on the periphery in case Dean needed any support.

It had been a day since they found Ben and the other children; a day filled with a hospital stay to stabilize the kids suffering from malnourishment and to deal with the cops asking questions about who had abducted them. Sam, Dean and Castiel had made up some story about driving by and hearing a commotion, and although the police were suspicious, eventually they bought it because Ben corroborated the story.

Ben had been kept overnight to make sure he was alright; Lisa had stayed with him at the hospital while the others had returned home. Sam had sensed Dean's discomfort with the entire situation, but once Lisa came home, looking determined, everyone had known that there would be no avoiding the truth.

In the kitchen, Dean exhaled heavily. "Look, Ben, I know this is weird, but like it or not, you're my kid –"

"That's not weird," Ben interrupted, sounding like he was rolling his eyes. "That makes sense. But… you've got boobs. That's weird."

Sam had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at that, and even Sarah glanced up from the movie in amusement. Apparently Sam wasn't the only one listening in on his brother's current predicament.

For a moment, Sarah met his eyes and the gaze was perfectly free of the resentment and mistrust of the past two days. A second later, though, she seemed to remember herself, because she looked away quickly.
"Yeah, well, that's temporary," Dean was growling, sounding torn between embarrassment and frustration. "And not the issue. Well, it is the issue, because there are people after me and Sam right now and –"

"And they can't know we're related," Ben finished, sounding dejected.

Dean sighed. "Look, kid, to tell you the truth, the ones we're worried about already know we're related. The point is, we have to be extra careful. Which means I can't – we can't stick around here like I'd – we'd like to."

"Bullshit," Lisa spoke up, earning sharp intakes of breath from both Ben and Dean. Even Sam was surprised, because he had the idea that Lisa didn't really swear that much. "You guys need a break. Even if it's just a short one. And you and Ben need some time to talk about why trying to hunt things on your own is a bad idea."

The last bit was laced with warning. Sam winced. He felt partially responsible for that, considering it had been him that told Ben the old hunting stories in the first place, and of how much research went into a hunt…

'If I'd known he was my nephew, I wouldn't have done it,' he thought, wavering on the word 'nephew', before adding, 'Not that that makes any of this okay.'

"Mom," Ben groaned. "I wasn't actually hunting anything. I was just…collecting stories about weird things. In case…in case Dean came back and was looking for some interesting stuff to investigate." He snorted. "I'm not stupid, you know, I wouldn't actually try to hunt anything 'til I'm at least sixteen."

Dean choked out a noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh cut short. He coughed. "Maybe you and I need to have a little chat after all."

"Good," Lisa said, disapproval still evident in her voice. "Because I wasn't taking no for an answer this time."

"Yeah, okay, I think I saw a motel a ways out –"

"Forget that. You're staying here."

"Lis…" Dean sounded uncomfortable. "It's not a good idea. Besides, you don't have the room."

"Sure we do – I mean, it's not the Ritz, but I've had my sister and her husband's family here before, and that's twelve people. I think I can figure out how to make room for half that," she retorted. "Ben can stay with me in my room for a few days, Sarah can stay in Ben's room and you guys can crash in the living room."

"Lis –"

"That's that," Lisa continued, firm. "Ben, go get out your books. Just because you get the rest of the week off, doesn't mean you get to slack off. You still have exams coming up."

"Mom!"

"Go."

The kid grumbled and trudged around the corner, giving Sam a searching and almost doubtful look as he passed. Obviously the genderswap thing was still a little weird for him. Sam only hoped that
the next time they came back here, they would have their own bodies again.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Dean mumbled quietly. "I mean, by rights, you should want us as far from here as possible —"

"What happened to Ben could have happened whether he knew you or not," Lisa replied softly. "He went looking for his friend because he was worried. He probably would have done it even if he hadn't known something…supernatural was going on." She sighed. "Though he probably would have told me first."

"See?"

"Dean, remember the changelings? That was happening even before you came back into our lives," Lisa said quietly. "It was dumb luck or fate or whatever you want to call it. But I'm glad, because you saved my son. Our son. Twice."

Dean made a noise that sounded like protest, and Sam rolled his eyes, returning his attention to the movie. Lisa said something he didn't hear, although it sounded vaguely joking and vaguely threatening, and then Dean was striding into the living room with his hands in his pockets. His face was a rainbow of bruises from the fight – Sam was pretty sure his brother's colors matched his, including the broken nose – and the wound over his eye, despite being stitched, still looked inflamed.

"So, what the hell are you guys watching?" he asked as he heaved himself gingerly into the easy chair closest to the door. He snorted. "Is that actually in black and white? Lame."

"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir is a classic," Sarah protested, not bothering to look at him.

"Lame," Dean repeated.

"The story is rather intriguing," Castiel piped up, eyes not leaving the screen. "Despite the impossibility of their relationship, it is clear that the main characters retain a special connection."

Sam's eyes darted to Dean, whose expression flickered strangely, before he let out a loud groan. He pointed at Sam and Sarah. "You're conspiring to turn him into a girl, I know it."

"I am neither male nor female," Castiel reminded, although instead of sounding insistent he sounded like he was repeating a fond fact.

Sam shook his head, wondering again just how much was going on there and if they were even aware of it. He would have to keep an eye on things, just in case. He cared about both Dean and Castiel, and if this unnameable thing between them was going to lead to more pain…

Well, he had no idea what he was going to do about it, but if he was going to do anything, he needed to know. Which meant he had to pay attention.

'Damn it, and I thought my relationships were complicated,' he thought, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the wall. He didn't know which was harder – telling a woman he might still have a thing for that he had nearly destroyed the world and his own flesh and blood…or his brother accepting he might have feelings for his male, formerly angelic best friend. 'They're both kind of no-win situations from this standpoint.'

He heard a movement nearby and opened his eyes.

Glancing up, he watched as Sarah slowly turned to look at him. His heart leapt. 'Then again…'
She suddenly smiled, and Sam, surprised, made to return the gesture – and then froze.

Sarah's face suddenly began to change in front of him, twisting and reshaping until he was looking at Adam instead of her. The world of Lisa's living room fell away, and he was surrounded by cold tongues of flame and bright, eye-searing light.

"You didn't think you could escape it, did you Sam?" Adam asked in a cold tone that Sam knew meant Michael was in the driver's seat. "You might be out of the Cage, brother, but you're still bound to us. And we're not ready to let you go yet."

Something gigantic and bright swooped down upon him, screeching at him in a way that made his eardrums burst before the world went dark.
Castiel stared up into the hot sun, the overwhelming brightness causing his mortal eyes to squint. Prisms of color wavered on the periphery of his vision, and despite the enjoyable warmth on his face, he had to look away.

He stood on Bobby Singer's front porch, listening to the sound of cicadas and distant traffic, and for a brief moment felt peace.

It was shattered when the door behind him banged open, and he turned around; the movement was languid, and lacked any instinct for fear.

Ellen Harvelle was leaning in the open entrance, cleaning a glass with a rag and watching him, one eyebrow arched and the ghost of a smile on her face. The laugh lines around her brown eyes were as he remembered them, and the heat plastered strands of her long hair to her cheek. "You forget what you came out here to do, son?"

"No kidding," Ellen snorted. "Wait around in it a bit longer, and you'll notice just how different it is." She flicked the rag at him. "Which is why you need to go out there and get that boy of yours in here before he gets skin cancer. My daddy had that, and let me tell you, it's not a pleasant way to die."

Her words were puzzling, with no context or reason, and yet he nodded and started off down the rickety stairs. The movements were slightly constricted and uncomfortable, and he realized as he crossed the yard that he was once again wearing Jimmy's trenchcoat and suit, even though the Winchesters had long since relegated the latter to the back of the Charger.

That car was nowhere in sight, he realized as he looked around the veritable jungle of scrapped chasses and dust. Still, he could hear the sounds of tools around one of the columns of scrap metal and rubber, and when he turned the corner he forgot the discomfort his too-warm clothing caused him.

Dean was standing in front of his car – the Impala, not the Charger – his back to him as he took a long pull from a bottle of beer. He was shirtless in the summer heat, and even in this distance, Castiel could see the sweat glistening down his neck and back.
He swallowed, feeling the not quite comprehensible urge to run his tongue along the dip between Dean's shoulder and neck.

As usual, Dean seemed to sense him before he got very close, and turned around with the thrilled grin that Castiel so rarely saw. "So, decided that wasting your day researching with Sam was too boring after all?"

"Ellen sent me to bring you inside," Castiel answered, eyeing the amulet that rested against Dean's bare chest. The patch of flesh beneath it was a shade lighter than the rest of what was exposed, suggesting he had been outside for a while. "She mentioned something about skin cancer."

Dean made a dismissive gesture. "Once you've been to Hell, your perception of skin burns changes a bit."

Castiel's eyes slid to Dean's left shoulder, feeling the usual sense of dismay that he could no longer sense the spiritual brand there. If it was still there, given his current graceless state.

Dean appeared to notice his expression, because he cleared his throat.

"Well, you're out here, which is the important thing," he said, taking another pull of the alcoholic drink. "Today's the day, buddy."

Castiel blinked, momentarily distracted by Dean's lips around the mouth of the bottle, before asking, hesitant, "What day?"

"Well, I keep saying we've got to educate you in being human, but with things so crazy it never happens – so, cars or tunes?"

"I do not understand."

Dean rolled his eyes, setting the bottle down beside the left front wheel; Castiel tracked the movement. "Either we're teaching you how to care for my baby today or we're working on your sad, sad lack of musical taste. Take your pick."

Castiel thought about both for a moment, memories of watching Dean working with Sam on the car and of the close proximity that entailed. Distracted as he was by his charge right now, it would not be wise.

"Music," he said after a moment's deliberation. There was less of a chance of trouble there.

"Chicken," Dean accused lightly, but motioned for Cas to come follow him.

To his surprise (and the rebellious approval of his body), Dean ordered him to sit in the passenger seat of the car while he took his own customary spot. Before Castiel could argue, Dean was pushing in one of his tapes and the melody of a song Castiel had heard before but did not know the title of began to play.

"If you don't take anything away from today, you'd better remember this," Dean cautioned him, wagging a finger at him. "Zeppelin rules."

It was something he had said before, but not to Castiel, he knew.

Castiel tilted his head to one side, attempting to pick out the qualities which Dean seemed to enjoy so much. The music was rhythmic and hypnotic, in a way, despite the prevalence of a sound Dean called a bass guitar and the crooning, grating voice of the singer. The song was a far cry from the
hymns of the Host, but Castiel enjoyed it none the less.

"Dude, you are so overdressed right now," Dean chuckled suddenly, and reached for Castiel’s tie. "You look like you’re about to die of heatstroke. It’s making me warm."

Castiel’s mouth went dry as Dean deftly undid the knot of fabric, tossing it into the backseat and after a short pause, began to tug off the trenchcoat as well. He let him, feeling the warmth of Dean’s fingers through his cotton shirt.

Despite the heat, a shiver worked its way up his spine and into his limbs.

Dean stopped before he had managed to get the coat completely off, and stared, gaze searching.

There was a long moment where there was nothing but the sound of the music and Castiel’s own shallow breaths.

When Dean leaned in and pressed their lips together, Castiel’s body seemed to melt. He felt and heard the embarrassing little moan at the back of his throat, but realized he didn’t care. Dean’s hand was gently clasping him by the hair, as though using each strand as an anchor, and his tongue was taking advantage of Castiel’s parted lips. He tasted of alcohol and dust and Dean –

Castiel felt warm all over, and his mind was nicely hazy. The growing hardness in his lap was no longer such a foreign feeling, and he lazily pressed against the fabric of his pants, enjoying the little bursts of pleasure at the contact.

Dean managed to maneuver himself into Castiel’s lap, legs splayed tightly on either side and for a moment, Castiel’s mind offered him the completely useless fact that it shouldn’t have been possible. Two grown men shouldn’t be able to comfortably fit within the front seat of a vehicle, especially not given their current activities, despite the general roominess of Dean’s car –

Dean ground his hips downward, and the press of his clothed erection against Castiel’s completely eradicated any more useless thoughts.

He wanted to ask – to beg – Dean for something, but even if Dean’s tongue wasn’t busy grazing along the inside of his mouth, Castiel wasn’t sure if he would even be able to formulate the words.

A sudden tap at the window stole Castiel’s attention, and he broke the kiss, head whipping around to seek out the source.

Balthazar stood outside of the car, his vessel’s face appearing half-disgusted and half-amused.

"So, this is what you dream about?" his brother asked him.

And then, just as suddenly as the interruption had occurred, everything around him disappeared. Dean, the Impala, the salvage yard –

They faded before Castiel’s eyes. For a moment he saw the landscape where the scrapped cars had sat, but there was no cover here save for a few crumbling ruins of brick and stone. Sand covered everything, glowing with heat. Beyond that he saw an ocean – or what had once been an ocean but was now nothing but dunes of salt save for shallow puddles in the distance that seethed with heat. The very air lay thick, hot, and motionless, but not in the same pleasant manner as before.

"Interesting venue," Balthazar remarked, looking around at the desert they were suddenly standing in. Or rather, Balthazar stood while Castiel sat in the sand, trying to ignore the uncomfortable and embarrassing evidence of his previous activities.
Realization that he had once again lapsed into such a dream about Dean made his stomach clench uncomfortably. And that Balthazar had seen it made it all the worse.

Suddenly Dean's aversion to what he called 'dream-walking angels' made sense.

"Well, I guess I was right about why you gave up your grace," Balthazar went on, sounding infuriatingly smug.

Castiel felt the blood rushing back up from his lap to fill his cheeks. "This was not the reason! I never wanted…this…before – it is this body that –"

"Save it, brother," Balthazar snorted, "You can justify your little interspecies romance all you want, but it doesn't change the fact it's causing us problems."

"What do you mean?" Castiel asked, getting to his feet and self-consciously straightening his clothing. Inexplicably, he was wearing the tie again and the trenchcoat had smoothed out, its folds mercifully hiding the evidence of Castiel's recent activities.

"That stunt you pulled to get lover-boy's brother out of the Cage? You inadvertently turned the bastard you dealt with into an archdemon."

Castiel stared, frowning for a moment as his mind attempted to categorize the statement. He had to think for a spell, the knowledge long since filed away in the recesses of his brain. When understanding set in, though, he felt dread begin to grow in the pit of his stomach. "No…that's not…possible."

"Well, I'm here to tell you that it is," Balthazar said with a scowl. "And if we don't find a way to get your grace back soon, then your little human sexual awakening will be the least of your problems. Or have you already forgotten what happened the last time?"

"Of course not," Castiel maintained coldly, insulted that Balthazar would think such a thing. "But I will still not take back my grace."

"Cassy, if it's about –"

"It is not," Castiel growled. "Even if I could retain my grace without invalidating my deal, do you understand what would happen? If what you say about Crowley becoming an archdemon is true, it will twist me into something that is as much a threat to Heaven as he is. If anything, the grace must be destroyed."

"But you would be trapped as –"

"I will live with that," Castiel deflected. "It is the path I chose."

"A path which leads to you being reaped by Death in the end," Balthazar protested. "It's not worth it."

"I have said enough on the matter."

They stared in silence for a long moment, before his brother looked away.

"Well, then, any idea of how to kill an archdemon?" Balthazar asked resentfully. "Because my sources are stretched a little thin these days and with Raphael stepping up his game…" He trailed off, turning somber. "He has killed Remiel."
Where Castiel had felt warmth before, now he felt as though he had been turned to ice. "No."

"Yes," Balthazar said, bitter. "And he has taken the Staff. You know what that means."

"He intends to open a portal to Purgatory," Castiel murmured out loud, toneless.

"Only one reason to do that," Balthazar nodded, grim. "It seems he's serious about Take Two of the Apocalypse." He made a face. "So, we now have to decide whether to focus our attention on big brother or the abomination downstairs."

"There is still a chance we can weaken Crowley," Castiel put forth cautiously, trying to ignore his own guilt for the moment – and the nagging suspicion that even knowing what he knew now, he still would have made the deal. "Even if he is an archdemon, he cannot be a true one. Not in the strictest sense, anyhow, those must be born."

"Now you're just splitting hairs."

"If we act quickly enough, we can divide his demonic and archangel essences for a window of time. It might give us a chance."

"And how do you intend to do that?" Balthazar questioned.

Castiel made a face, his human mind providing maddening blocks against his usual logical way of thinking. Emotions and fears warred with each other for supremacy as he tried to plan, and after a moment he was forced to give up.

"We will cross that bridge when it comes," he said after a moment. "As it is, I am more worried about Raphael's latest move. It diminishes the time we have – how goes Gabriel's attempt to regain his grace?"

"Last I heard, he and the pagan strumpet were in Montreal and closer to diabetic coma than retaining his grace," Balthazar said dismissively. "He keeps ringing up his little mortal family – which leads to them going at me with the awkward questions whenever I stop in. Between them and the old hunter…" He rolled his eyes. "I don't know how you stand it, Cassy. I feel like strangling them all."

Castiel felt the corner of his mouth quirk, remembering how frustrated Dean had, and sometimes still, made him feel. "That is an understandable reaction. Humans are trying."

"The child annoys me the most. The other day she asked if she could see my wings," Balthazar went on, sounding disgusted. "I almost showed her, just to watch her eyeballs dribble out. I think her mother clued in, because she shut the little brat up." He offered a satisfied smile. "I don't know how you stand it, Cassy. I feel like strangling them all."

Castiel frowned. "Were you not just warning me –?"

"Yes, well, that worked out so well, didn't it?" Balthazar deadpanned. "Anyhow, if I even cared for such an entanglement, Gabriel would snip off my dangly bits and feed them to the Leviathan. I prefer my intrigues to be purely pleasure based – and with more people involved."

Castiel made a face. "I believe this is what Dean would classify as 'too much information'."

"Oh, that's adorable," Balthazar simpered. "You're trying to talk like him. You know, that's going to be a little awkward when Raphael restarts the Apocalypse. I somehow doubt he'll be giving you his blessing to bang Michael's meatsuit."
Castiel glared, opening his mouth to point out that the entire situation with Dean was an impossible one and that his dreams were obviously just fantasies concocted by his mortal brain and body. He thought better of it a moment later, because Balthazar had a mulish look on his face which suggested he was waiting for Castiel's feeble defence, and so Castiel forced himself back to the matter at hand.

Neither of them could hope to stop Raphael at the moment, not until they knew exactly what his next move would be. Creating the circumstances for the Apocalypse had been difficult the first time, Castiel understood, but to manage it now would require additional interference from on high.

"What we need is for someone to keep us informed of his progress," Castiel said after a moment. He offered his brother a meaningful look.

Balthazar stared at him, and then his eyes narrowed in understanding. "You have got to be kidding me."

"You would be best suited," Castiel replied reasonably. "Of all of us in the garrison, subterfuge and survival was your strength."

"Exactly," Balthazar cried. "Which is why going over to Raphael and playing the double-agent isn't going to happen – because it's suicide!"

"I do not think so," Castiel shook his head. "The situation of the archdemon changes that. The last time, the entire Host needed to band together to defeat them, regardless of individual sentiments on the matter. You could conceivably go to Raphael, tell him that you trust his vision of Heaven more than the possible destruction an archdemon would rain down. He already knows of my defection, and so you could also tell him of my role in the archdemon's creation."

"He's going to want more than that to prove my loyalty," Balthazar pointed out unhappily. "And if he decides I'm not trustworthy? Do you know how long he will lock me away? Much longer than you were up there, I guarantee."

"Then we will have to plan for that," Castiel answered calmly. "We will figure this out. There is a way, Balthazar, there is always away."

Dean's words had become like a mantra to him.

"Ah, that must be the very human sense of false hope I've heard so much about," Balthazar sighed, rubbing his temples in a very human gesture. "How depressing." He straightened his shoulders. "Well, let's get to the planning then, before you wake up. Unless you were hoping to finish off the little scene I interrupted earlier?"

Castiel blushed and scowled. "I already told you – "

"Yes, yes, deny it until you're blue in the face, why don't you," Balthazar cut him off gravely. "More's the pity, that. I don't think I've ever seen you have actual fun before."

A huge 'thank you' goes out to those of you who have been reading along so far and who have taken
the time to review, most especially: 222Raavens, aadarshinah, angelstryke, Anna, ashwingsmokefeather, Blasphemoos3, bleachcreep21, Busie, Crimson Vipera, darkburning, darkphoenix2345, DoctorKibbles, Effective Immediately, elenatethehun, EricNorthmanIsMySoulMate767, Fallen Seraphim, girlnineteen, Isis the Sphinx, Jade Chase, jasnrob, jazzy, jdluvva, justine82, kaddabo, kai, Kirilin, Kiyomisa, lasersforeyes (Shane) Lenore, Leoooo, Lendiscus, Lil Kitsune-chan, LonelyElf, Melacreature, mercurybard, Michele, mushimadarame, netherlady, Omri00, pinkskyline, PopsicleOfDeath, primarycolours123, romie, ruvy91, Sadie, shajs, Shay473, sonofafluffymuffin, vastrea and xoxo.
Dean awoke to a muffled Spanish argument going on in the room next door and the obnoxious vibration of his phone. Grimacing at the interruption to his sleep, he loosened his grip on the demon-killing knife and peeked one eye at the motel clock – which wasn't working – then reached out with his free hand to grab his phone. He groaned when 7:03 gleamed on the display with a harsh brightness that his eyes weren't yet ready for, but the displeasure lessened once he read the text.

"Goin to baseball practice 1st game nxt wk. Coming?"

Even through the bald text, Ben's exuberance came through and Dean couldn't help the way his mouth tugged upward in response.

After the initial uneasiness bred from the revelation of their relationship, Dean had made a concerted effort to get to know the kid better. Once the mindfuck of Dean being trapped in a woman's body, and the reason behind it, sunk in Ben had even started to become cautiously receptive. Within the last few days, they had even managed to strike up a precarious rapport.

His smile faded a little as he thought about how he was going to answer the kid. With everyone going pear-shaped of late, he didn't know if he had any right to get more involved in Ben's life than he already was.

The option of being able to pop in for a visit whenever he wanted was seductive. It felt almost like the universe was finally cutting him a break and letting him have a taste of the normal life without giving up the job. At the same time, the circumstances were deceptive: any relationship he had with Ben would always feel incomplete because of the nature of hunting and because they had already missed such an important chunk of the kid's life.

"Christ, I got to be my Dad anyway," he had bemoaned sourly one night during the week when Lisa had been telling him stories about when Ben was younger. "He wasn't around for Sammy and me
"It's not your fault," Lisa had told him firmly. "You didn't know."

Her assurances didn't change the empty sense that he had missed out on something important.

'No promises,' he finally texted back, knowing from experience that even false hope was a sure way to break a kid's heart.

He put down the phone and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, glancing at the two beds to his right; they were both empty and unmade. He could hear the muffled sound of the shower going and decided that it had to be Cas; Sam had thrown a shit-fit when he had seen the bathroom, which Dean could sort of understand given the crusted black stains and yellowed scum on the walls and tub. Dean was pretty sure the only reason Cas was in there now was because he had low expectations of humanity's offerings and probably thought bathrooms were supposed to look like that.

'Remind me to introduce him to steam showers someday,' Dean thought affectionately, and then frowned, 'On second thought, that'd bite me in the ass, 'cause he'd probably turn into a priss like Sam.'

His phone buzzed again and he reached for it.

"Got a hunt yet? Wut is it?" Ben wanted to know, and Dean huffed. They weren't actively looking for a hunt these days, but he had no intention of saying anything about that to the kid.

'Off limits topic dude. You know that,' he wrote back.

Even though Lisa had accepted that Dean would probably never completely separate himself from that part of his life, she had insisted that he keep it away from Ben. For the most part, he even agreed with it – considering the way his and Sam's lives had been twisted and shattered by their life as hunters, he was fully onboard with Ben growing up to be something safe and boring.

But at the same time, he wanted to make sure the kid actually grew up. And Dean knew better than most that what you didn't know could kill you.

Right now, Ben and Lisa knew enough about the supernatural world to have a fighting chance protecting themselves. It was more than Dad had ever done for Adam and his mother, but it didn't stop Dean's anxiety over the matter. He had had at least two nightmares in the past week where the fight with the Erlking had gone fatally wrong. That alone had made him readily agree to Lisa's stipulations about what was a kosher conversation topic and what wasn't.

Judging by Ben's stubbornness, though, that might not matter. The kid had a fixation with his idealized version of hunting, and Dean's gut clenched both with guilt and sick validation every time he saw the admiring look in the kid's eyes. While during their time together Dean had made an effort to steer clear of any more hunting stories, he had occasionally lapsed into an anecdote or two. In those moments he had felt completely at ease, shooting the shit with his kid, before realization took hold and he had had to force himself on to another topic.

This discomfort and unconscious need to censor himself was one of the reasons he had decided it was time to leave Cicero. Dean couldn't shake the feeling that the longer he was around Ben, the more the kid was getting the wrong message. Lisa was obviously on the same wavelength, because when Dean had come to her the day before and announced that they would be leaving, she had looked relieved.

"I hate to see you go," she had assured him, squeezing his hand affectionately (she had gotten over
the weirdness of his new form rather well), "but I'm worried about what all this is doing to Ben. I mean, it might be one thing if you guys were going to stay here permanently, but..."

She had trailed off on a sad yet resolute note.

Some of their more inclusive late-night discussions in the Braeden kitchen, where they were joined by Sam or Cas or both, had been about the Winchesters’ plan to travel to Hell. While Lisa had obviously been discomfited by the idea, and still seemed unsure of herself when talking about the supernatural world, she seemed to understand why it was so important for them to free Adam.

"Just don't say anything to Ben," she had ordered, warning in her eyes and her tone.

'No danger of that,' Dean thought as Ben's next text came in ('Aw, come on! Plz?'). Dean didn't want Ben to know anything about the plan to get to Hell; in fact, if he could have managed to talk Sam and Cas out of tagging along, he would have done it already. The Pit didn't need to claim any more of his family.

'Kick ass at practice,' he told Ben and then tossed the phone back on the bed, rolling the kinks out of his back.

Stripping down to his underwear, he went for his duffel and rifled through for something that didn't have sweat stains or dried blood on it; the grimy texture of the motel carpet made him particularly desperate to find socks.

The room was definitely one of the worst ones they had ever stayed in, not that he should have been surprised. Anywhere that offered three singles for the cheap price J. Jett had paid was usually managed by crack dealers or something. The room was cramped and dirty, with the smell of stale smoke filling the air, clinging to the stained curtains and bed sheets. The only upside that Dean had found so far was that there weren't any bed bugs.

"Next time I'm springing for a suite," he mumbled, shoving a coffee-stained shirt to one side. He had no intention of sharing a queen with Sam, even if it was cheaper and even if Gigantor was girl-sized now. And sharing with Cas was out of the question, for obvious reasons.

"Oh…uh…"

'Speaking of obvious reasons…'

Dean paused in the act of reaching for his bag, eyes flicking up to the owner of the voice.

Cas stood, framed in the bathroom doorway, clutching one of the thin motel towels around his waist. His hair was still plastered to his forehead and neck, and he was clean shaven for once, thanks to what he had explained as Jimmy's residual memories. Water droplets clung to his skin from his shower, and Dean allowed himself a moment's detached observation that Cas was finally filling out a little now that he could eat like a normal human being.

The banishing sigil scar remained as angry looking as it always had, though.

Dean opened his mouth to ask why that was – until he realized that Cas was staring at him with wide eyes, color flooding his cheeks.

Realization hit Dean a split-second later: he was sitting on his bed in nothing but a pair of underwear. While in the past his bare chest would have been unimportant in the big scheme of things, that had been before he was given breasts.
He hastily folded his arms across his chest, feeling his own cheeks begin to warm.

"Dude, you don't just stop and stare when you walk in on someone near-naked!" Dean snapped, glaring at the ex-angel.

Cas made a strangled noise that might have been an apology and promptly turned on his heel, shutting himself back into the bathroom.

Dean rolled his eyes skyward.

Ignoring the fact that his tendency to pop up at the most inopportune times was apparently a trait that translated from angel to human, the spontaneous voyeurism wasn't completely Cas's fault. Despite more than a month of living on the female side of things, Dean still had trouble remembering that certain parts of himself had to be covered at all times.

'No friggen idea how girls do this,' he thought as he pulled on the requisite clothing and frowned at himself in the tiny, cracked motel mirror. His hair was shorter now, thanks to Lisa taking pity a few days ago – she'd helped him and Sam get rid of their cumbersomely long locks without making them look like a pair of butch lesbians, which was a bonus. 'Wish I was in France right now. Girls go around topless there, right?'

He allowed himself to bask briefly in that mental image, before his mind returned to the matter of Cas. This wasn't the first minor moment of discomfort he'd noticed between them in the past few days. For whatever reason, Cas was twitchier than usual, avoiding Dean's gaze and once again trying to fight off sleep.

"My dreams are troubling," the ex-angel had deflected on the one day Dean had managed to convince him to talk. "My brother has also taken to visiting me there, and it is… discomfiting."

"Well, now you know how I felt," Dean had snorted, and hoped that that was the end of it.

Instead, the awkwardness had actually gotten worse. He hadn't managed to revisit the issue again, either, because every time he had tried Sam had been around, and damned if he was going to try to have a heart-to-heart with an ex-angel with his little brother hanging around.

Sam had been a lot more irritating than usual anyhow, sending Dean calculating looks ever since their rather surreal conversation outside of the golf-course in Cicero. Although he hadn't come out and said anything at that point or since, Dean had a nagging suspicion that an implication had been made that he should be trying to defend himself from.

He just wasn't exactly sure what that implication was.

A dark shape moved past the filmy blinds, and a moment later the door to the room clicked open. Sam entered, carrying a carton of hot drinks in one hand and a newspaper folded into the crook of his opposite elbow; he was still wearing a brace from the broken wrist the angel Suriel had given him. Even with the beating he had taken during the last hunt, the fracture was luckily minor enough that he didn't need a cast.

"What happened to your Lance Armstrong routine?" Dean asked, raising an eyebrow.

"For the millionth time, Lance Armstrong is biking. I've been jogging. There's a difference," Sam insisted.

Over the past week, his brother had started getting up before sunrise jog. Dean was pretty sure that nonsense had started with Sarah before she headed back to New York – apparently she had needed
'time to think', but Sam had kept it up every day afterward. Dean figured it was his way of coping with being dumped by the girl he hadn't even really been dating, but Sam insisted he was just trying to de-stress.

The shifty way he had said it, though, had tipped Dean off to the fact that Sam was having his own little date with Mother Nature that week, a scant twenty-four hours after Dean finished up with his.

On top of the Sarah thing, it was like adding insult to injury.

Jogging aside, Sam had taken the experience without the initial freak-out Dean had gone through. When Dean had mentioned it in passing (when everyone else was safely outside of earshot), Sam had shrugged and attributed it to dealing with Jess when she was going through her time of the month.

He had borne the experience with an utter lack of bitchiness for the first day, like he was some kind of martyr. Of course, when it turned out the he, unlike Dean, was going to be like all those women who had to suffer through a full week of being on the rag, that stoic attitude ebbed away rather quickly.

It was the other reason they had extended their stay at Lisa's, because there was no way in Hell Dean was driving anywhere with Sam's bitchiness on a hair-trigger. His brother had even snarled at Cas a few times over the past week, which even without Cas's kicked puppy reaction was just…wrong.

Dean shook his head at the memory and reach for the nearest cup of coffee. "So, you finally over your Health Nut Barbie schtick?"

"No. I just decided to take today off," Sam rolled his eyes. "Didn't sleep too well."

"More nightmares?" Dean asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah, something like that," Sam replied, and Dean could hear the unspoken, 'and no, I don't want to talk about it', so he let it go.

This time.

"Where's Cas?" Sam asked, heaving himself into one of the rickety plastic chairs in the room. Even despite his diminished size, the cheap furniture still buckled a little.

"Bathroom," Dean grunted, ignoring the look which Sam sent him. His brother wasn't the only one who didn't want to talk about things. "So, what's up?"

"I dunno, maybe nothing. Maybe something," Sam answered, obviously taking the hint. He handed Dean the newspaper. "I picked this up while I was in line for coffee – there's this blurb in there about an open case up in Michigan – nine employees of an art museum were found disembowelled within the past six months."

"So?"

"So, disembowelment isn't exactly the most common form of murder, even in serial cases," Sam said. "Made me curious, so I went to the library down the street to check it out."

He unrolled the newspaper and handed it to Dean.

"What am I looking at?" Dean frowned down at a grainy, pixelated picture that would have been hard to make out even if the paper hadn't been covered in crease marks.
"The art museum out there's dedicated to modern art – and the most recent exhibit – which got in six months ago – includes a showcase of obsidian pieces," Sam explained. "Didn't Cas say a keystone might be made of obsidian?"

Dean made a face, trying to think back to that conversation. "Yeah, so?"

"Well, it's kind of coincidental, don't you think? People starting to die when this particular piece shows up – I mean, if it were something that was forged in Hell, don't you think it might have some negative energy attached to it?"

"That's…kind of a lot to pin our hopes on," Dean said carefully.

"But it is also possible." Dean nearly jumped a few inches as Cas's voice sounded in his ear; he hadn't even heard the bathroom door open. His hair was a little drier now, and he was clothed in the same sweatpants and the *Eye of the Tiger* T-shirt he had slept in. "Let me see?"

There was that weird feeling in the pit of Dean's stomach again, and instead of allowing himself to think too hard about it, he went on the offensive.

"Dude, am I ever going to get that back?" he demanded. "We bought you a whole bunch of your own clothes, you know."

Sam made a face, while Cas looked down at the shirt in confusion. A moment later he glanced up again, but carefully avoided Dean's eyes.

"I apologize, I did not realize it bothered you," he said stiffly. "If you had said something yesterday –"

"I was half asleep at the wheel, I didn't notice yesterday," Dean replied. Cas frowned, and then started to take the shirt off, revealing the pale and still scarred flesh of his abdomen. Something tiny in Dean's brain vibrated warningly and he snapped, "I don't want it now. It's gonna smell like ex-angel. Wash it first."

Cas paused, and then nodded. "Very well."

And then he moved forward, as though nothing had happened, took the newspaper from Sam and sat down at the table to study the article. Beside him, Sam sent Dean a very pointed look that clearly asked 'what the hell was that?'.

Dean turned away, like he didn't want to answer, when in fact he wasn't even sure he could answer.

Cas wearing his clothes didn't actually bother him that much – hell, he'd lived his whole life swapping hand-me-downs with Sam. Living out of a duffel bag meant sharing clothes, more often than not. Even with the sparse wardrobe they'd found Cas at various Salvation Army depots and Wal-Mart's along the road, occasionally Cas ended up wearing one of Sam or Dean's pre-genderswap shirt's.

This particular shirt, though, happened to hold memories of someone else Dean had allowed to wear it years before.

Cassie Robinson had always looked hot in his clothes, all legs and curves underneath his too-large shirts. Seeing her wearing his things had always given him a rush of protective warmth and ownership, which had meant a lot back in the days when it was such a foreign concept.

For some reason, seeing Cas wearing that same shirt brought with it the same feeling.
'It's transference,' Dean told himself resolutely.

He associated that shirt with the good part of his relationship with Cassie. As he recalled, the last
time she had worn it she had ridden him long and hard on the floor her apartment. Obviously the
memory of that, and his stupid girl brain, were messing with Dean's sensibilities.

"I'm not sure about that," Cas was saying when Dean tuned back into the conversations. "Although,
I do think there's some potential here. I cannot tell through the picture." He grimaced it, like it
offended him. "I would need to see this in person."

"What difference would it make?" Dean asked. "You said your angel senses didn't work anymore."

"No, but if it is a keystone, certain Enochian incantations could possibly reveal it as such," Cas
answered.

"Still. That's a bit more 'if' than I like," Dean said. "And it could be a dead end – plus, after what
Sam and I just went through? Kind of want to get my junk back, I'm not even joking."

Cas tilted his head in confusion, still in the dark as to the Winchesters' recent feminine problems, and
Sam scowled.

"Dean, the exhibit is being shipped to London in a few days. If there's a keystone in it, that's one
more component of the ritual that we need," he reminded him. "I'll take another few days in this
body if it puts us any closer to getting Adam out."

And really, with that logic, Dean couldn't argue. They had checked out regular hunts for less.

"Fine," he grunted, "but we stay as freaking far away from Detroit as we possibly can."

It took three hours to get to Lansing, and another hour before they found a motel they could agree
on. After a lengthy argument about whether to pay the extra cost for a suite or start some kind of bed-
sharing rotation ("It's better to keep our research limited to one room, and besides, if we leave Cas
alone he'll try to stay awake all night," Sam had pointed out reasonably, earning a defiant look from
the former angel and a peevish look from Dean.), they booked a single room with two queens room
and set to work preparing to investigate.

It was decided that Sam and Castiel would check into the actual art museum while Dean drove to the
coroner's office; ever since Castiel's latest morgue mishap, there was an unspoken acknowledgement
that he would stay away from any dead bodies until his stomach had become more used to the smell
that often hung around them.

As for Sam…

'Being around dead bodies right now is the last thing I need,' he told himself, glancing around the
entrance to the museum warily. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary, but the past
week had taught him to keep his guard up at all times.

'We're not ready to let you go yet,' Michael had said, and even if it had been a hallucination brought
on by exhaustion, an excess of hormones (and he didn't want to think about that particular week ever
again) and the lingering effects of the Erlking's powers, it had rattled Sam.
Especially because it hadn’t been the last one.

Sam shook his head, clamping his mental walls down on that thought. He was dealing with it. Jogging provided a bit of an outlet, and once they got Adam back, the dreams would stop. They had to.

He and Castiel entered the East Lansing Museum of Contemporary Art in the late afternoon, about an hour before the closing time Sam had found online. The institution itself was associated with the local university, and some of the victims had apparently been students working there. The building itself looked blatantly modern, with a façade made of pleated steel and glass that seemed a little out of place in comparison to the more traditional buildings in the neighborhood.

Given the serial nature of the deaths, Sam had decided they would use the FBI cover, which Castiel was getting better at every time. Part of this was due to his steep learning curve, while the other had to do with his serious demeanor.

It never ceased to amaze Sam how much Castiel could pull off the fed look once he shed Jimmy's worn trenchcoat; the intense stare and unsmiling mouth convinced people of his supposed vocation better than any story Sam or Dean could ever spin. It made Sam feel a little less ridiculous posing as an FBI agent, at any rate, although the new lack of overly long hair was helping in that respect.

Lisa had called it a pixie cut, which Dean and Ben had laughed themselves silly over, while Castiel had tilted his head to one side and remarked, "Pixies do not cut their victims, they bite them."

It wasn't hard to get to the administrative wing of the building and meet with the director of the exhibit. Mrs. Strong was a short, robust woman in her early sixties with shocking white hair and who was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses despite the fact that they were inside the building.

"Two of you guys were here just yesterday," she pointed out after Sam explained what they wanted, a complaining edge to her voice. "I've already answered all of their questions."

"I understand, ma'am," Sam answered smoothly, unsurprised that the real feds had already been by. They had probably done a cursory check of the place, interviewed a few people in conjunction with the crime, and then filed it away as unimportant. "The Bureau is just being as thorough as possible. The other team might have missed something."

"It's making a few of the patrons nervous," the woman sniffed. "I doubt you understand, Agent Stein, but it's a bit hard to experience art when there are federal agents hounding you at every turn."

"We don't want to inconvenience you or your patrons," Sam assured her. "In fact, we'll do our best to be out of your hair within the hour."

The director grudgingly allowed them to make their rounds, and after speaking to any of the remaining employees who had known the victims and coming up with nothing, they finally headed into the art wing to examine the display itself.

The art piece in question hung several feet off the ground and was held together by a stainless steel frame that was about five-by-three feet wide. Within the metal, seventy similarly sized, smooth rocks had been arranged in a grid-like pattern. The bordering rocks were all spherule patterned pieces, which gave them a kind of snowflake patterned sheen, while the inner stones were solid black in colour. In the top right quadrant, one rock was a piece of lapis lazuli, its bright colour striking a major contrast with the rest of the piece. The entire thing was protected by what Sam imagined was safety glass.
"Says here the rocks the artist decided to use were found outside of Osaka, Japan and possibly date from the Kofun period. I guess he was going for some kind of old-into-new theme," Sam mused after reading the description.

Castiel was gazing up at the piece speculatively. "I do not understand how this is considered art."

"Neither do ninety percent of the population – you going to do your thing?"

The former angel nodded and closed his eyes in concentration; a moment later he began to murmur quietly, a low chant of language that Sam recognized as Enochian but didn't understand.

After several minutes with no result, Castiel stopped and frowned up at the art piece.

"Either the thickness of the glass is protecting the rock, or we are not dealing with a keystone," he stated.

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but he suddenly noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

Kneeling down, he reached for the black stain in the crease between floor and wall. Not bothering with gloves, as the real authorities had already been by here and either missed it or hadn't considered the stain relevant, Sam lifted it with relative ease. He rubbed the familiar, greasy substance between his fingers and frowned, standing up.

"I think it's the latter," he said, unable to hide the disappointment in his words. He held up his stained fingers. "Ectoplasm."

Castiel's eyes narrowed.

"A spirit could be responsible for the deaths here," Castiel agreed slowly, but continued to look doubtful.

"And there is precedent for museum exhibit's being haunted, but usually that's because the relics they include contain remains – King Tut, the Titanic, the Hope Diamond…I've never heard of a bunch of random stones some guy picked up on the side of a road being haunted though," Sam postured.

"Perhaps there is more to the situation," Castiel suggested.

"We need to know a little more about the victims," Sam agreed. "And the artist."

They exchanged assenting glances and after a final once-over of the site, they returned to the director's office. Sam pretended to be an amateur art enthusiast in his spare time and enthused about the obsidian exhibit, wanting more details on the artist and the location from which he had taken his materials.

Mrs. Strong had given them what little she knew, but it wasn't much more than the exhibit blurb had told them. Apparently Takumi Kurosawa, the artist, was one of the introverted types that shunned society.

"Well, if the museum doesn't know, might as well call someone who might," Sam sighed as they left the building. He pulled out his phone and began to scroll through the contacts, thumb hovering over Sarah's name. He wondered if calling her over a case would be some kind of breach.

"Is there a reason you are hesitating to contact Sarah?" Castiel asked from beside him, staring pointedly down at the screen.
"She said she wanted time to think," Sam replied defensively, jerking the phone out of sight. "I don't even know if she's going to take my call."

"You have not spoken to her in nearly a week," Castiel pointed out. "I may be inexperienced in the matter, but that does not seem to be the proper behaviour when attempting to court a woman."

Sam felt the blood rush to his face. He doubted the former angel's sudden perceptiveness was inborn. "Whatever Dean's been telling you, I'm not trying to…to court anyone."

It had been five days since Sam had been pointedly friend-zoned – and he was being generous even calling it that. Sarah had gotten a phone call from a client the day after the Winchesters had been invited to stay with Lisa that she needed to return to New York.

"I've still got bills to pay," she'd joked lightly at dinner before she left. Lisa had offered to drive her to the airport in Indianapolis, probably in an effort to let Ben bond with the family he had just inherited. Sam's appreciation for Lisa had gone up a little more just from that, although it hadn't made him feel any better about Sarah leaving.

Especially as he knew a large part of it was because of him.

"It's not forever," she had mentioned casually while getting her things together, "at least I hope not. I was serious before, Sam. I really do want to help you guys. But I just have other commitments to deal with." She'd straightened up and looked him in the eye. "And I need some time."

"Time," he'd repeated.

"It's a lot to process," she'd said. "Before it was kind of easier to handle – we were going from place to place so fast, and things kept happening one right after another – I mean, gods, angels and missing kids – it forced me to push it back to deal with for another time. But now those things have calmed down a little…" She trailed off, looking apologetically at him and then looking away. "I just need to think."

"Yeah," Sam had repeated, feeling a little dazed. "Yeah, I get it."

"No, I don't think you do," Sarah had told him quietly. "I mean, I'm sure you can imagine you know how I'm feeling…but you don't, really. And I don't blame you, because you have a whole lot of stuff on your mind that kind of makes my issues look petty."

"Tell me what's wrong, then," Sam had wanted to know. "You know I'd help in any way I could."

"Yeah, you would. But you can't make me feel any better about some things. Like the lying," Sarah had told him. "I get why you did it. The longer I'm with you guys, the more I get it. But it's not over. Because there's stuff you're not telling me – and lying by omission is still lying."

The memories of Adam and the Cage had flickered in his mind. "Sarah, I can't—"

"– And then there's the fact you guys are trying to go to Hell – which means once you get your little backdoor spell up and running, there's a huge chance I won't see any of you ever again."

There had been a brief gleam in her eyes, like regret, which had made Sam's heart leap a little, but he had forced himself to ignore it. "You know why we have to do that."

"I know! If I was in your place, I'd be doing it too, it's just…” she had looked frustrated, and then stared him down. "This conversation would be a lot less weird if you were still a guy."
His mouth had gone dry. "I am still a guy."

Her eyes had softened for a moment, and she'd looked like she wanted to say something, and then shook her head. Her mouth had firmed into a line, and she'd repeated resolutely, "I just need time."

Lisa had showed up then, car-keys in hand, and Sarah had taken up her bags.

"You have my number if you need anything," she had said lightly as Dean and Cas wandered into the entrance way to say goodbye. "I'll keep on the lookout for you guys in terms of spell stuff. Now that I've got Professor Yong's email address, we can keep each other in the loop."

She had looked back once as she left, apologetic, and then the front door had closed behind her and Lisa and she had been gone.

A week later, and Sam still wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"You attraction to Sarah was noticeable since she re-entered your life, and your behaviour has been particularly anomalous since her departure," Castiel remarked now, as though he still had the ability to read Sam's mind. "The solution to both facts would be to contact her."

"After living as an emotionless ball of energy your whole life, what makes you the expert?" Sam asked waspishly. Castiel frowned, like wasn't sure if he should be offended or hurt, and Sam immediately felt guilty. "Look, man, I'm sorry. I'm just…I mean…these things are complicated, okay? Just trust me." In an effort to move the conversation from his issues with Sarah, he ploughed onward. "Unless…is that something you're even interested in?"

"Your association with Sarah?" Castiel asked, sounding curious.

"No, you know…" Sam said, trying to think of a non-sleazy, non-Dean way of talking about hooking up. In the end he managed a lame, "Uh, meeting people?"

"We meet people every day," Castiel pointed out reasonably.

"Yeah, no, that's not what I meant," Sam said, trying to hold back a groan. How did Dean manage to get through conversations with Castiel without wanting to throttle him? Speaking of… "Did Dean, uh, talk to you about stuff yet?"

"Stuff," Castiel repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, the whole not-sleeping thing and other…issues."

"If you are referring to our conversation about the benefit of masturbation, then yes," Castiel said unsmilingly. "Although, I believe he implied it was something we should not speak of again."

Sam looked quickly around the street they were walking down to make sure no one was paying attention to their conversation. "Dude, lower the volume. That's not the stuff you talk about in public."

"You brought it up," Castiel indicated helpfully.

"Okay, so he did talk to you," Sam went on, ignoring that. "Did he happen to mention other…outlets?" Off Castiel's blank look, he went on. "We could – you could always find someone to…you know."

God, this was embarrassing! Was this how Dean had felt when he'd sat Sam down almost twenty
"You are implying finding me a meaningless sexual relationship in order to achieve physical release as you two are prone to doing," Castiel stated, realization coloring his tone.

"Yes – and no – and hey!" Sam felt offended. "Unlike Dean, not all of my relationships have been meaningless."

"No," Castiel agreed. "Sometimes they have been dangerous."

"That's…not the point," Sam evaded.

"Then what is?"

"The point is that part of being human is connecting with other people," Sam explained. "And that doesn't just mean random hook-ups, either. I mean, okay, in our line of work those are the most common way of doing it, but if that's not for you, we can always look out for something more substantial. Jail breaking Hell aside, you might want to give it a try before you're out of time."

Castiel gave him a look. "Your advice is maddeningly conflicting."

"Yeah, I know," Sam mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm just trying to…just, you know you have a choice, right Cas? You've already fallen – if you don't want to stick with the hunting lifestyle, it's up to you. If you want something normal."

"There is no such thing as normal," Castiel told him simply. "And as I never harbored any desire to become mortal, the pursuit of a normal human life and its requisite values is not appealing to me either." His expression turned shrewd. "How does any of this relate to your fear of contacting Sarah?"

"I am not afraid of contacting Sarah!"

"We have been walking for several minutes now and you have yet to make the call," Castiel pointed out. "I do not believe contacting her regarding the case precludes having to inform her of your feelings for her."

Sam opened his mouth to argue, but Castiel was not teasing or harping on him the way Dean would, merely expressing an opinion. In fact, it was probably the most objective view on the matter he would ever get.

He sighed and ran his good hand through his hair.

"Look, even if I did still…have feelings for her, it's not going to work out," Sam said quietly. "We're trying to break into Hell, first of all, and secondly I'm kind of trapped in a woman's body for the foreseeable future. Kind of makes the situation impossible."

"Mortal conceptions of the impossible are rarely so," Castiel told him. "If those are your only obstacles, I see no problem. You just finished telling me I should take advantage of the benefit of meaningless sexual encounters before we open a portal to Hell. I see no reason why you should not take advantage of the same advice. As for your current physical body, I fail to see how that impedes any impulses that you wish to act on."

Sam blinked.

"Huh. So the whole same-sex thing doesn't bother you?" he asked, genuinely curious. "I thought
there was that whole bit in Leviticus somewhere…?"

"God does not care where you stick your genitals," Castiel answered calmly. "Yet another law set down by early humans during a time when the only way to counteract the high infant mortality rate was to ensure as many child-producing couplings as possible occurred."

"Huh," Sam said again, and then paused; an idea had occurred to him. "So what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Well, you've been human over a month now. Any…preference?"

"Preference?"

'It's like pulling teeth,' Sam thought with a roll of his eyes. "Has there been anyone you've been attracted to?"

There was a pause, where something like guilt flickered in Castiel's eyes, before the former angel replied, "I have no frame of reference to draw from."

Like every time Castiel tried to lie, the words sounded stilted and forced.

"Uh huh," Sam said, not believing him but not wanting to pry overly much. He still didn't have the same relationship with Castiel as Dean had, where point-blank meddling was normal. Instead, he tried another avenue. "What about Jimmy? Didn't you say you still had some of his memories?"

"They would be irrelevant in this exercise, as his attraction to and appreciations for his wife's form were all-encompassing," Castiel answered obliquely. "They were soul mates."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Sam frowned. His thoughts went momentarily to Amelia Novak, off in the world somewhere with no idea that the man she loved was long since dead. He supposed they would be reunited in Heaven, but the situation still sucked.

Judging by Castiel's grim expression, the angel thought the same. It had to be worse for him, considering he was going to be wearing Jimmy's body for the rest of his life.

Sam tried to think of something comforting to say (and really, they didn't exactly make Hallmark cards for this kind of thing). He settled on a light-hearted, "Well, you're human now. Maybe you've got one too."

"'Got one' what?"

"A soul mate."

A surprisingly bitter smile tugged at Castiel's lips. "I somehow doubt it."

"Why? You said it yourself – you have your own soul now."

"Even barring the fact that I existed as an angel for millions of years and the fact that when I expire from this mortal life I will completely cease to exist, there are only three humans that I am acquainted with," Castiel told him quietly, "and all three have soul mates already."
For a moment Sam was confused, and then his brain kicked in: Bobby, whose soul mate had probably been his wife Karen, and Sam and Dean themselves. During their recent stint in Heaven, Ash had implied Sam and Dean shared a bond like that of soul mates, which if true (and wow would that be weird if it was) kind of explained the wistful glimmer in the former angel's eye.

Sam's thoughts shifted back to his conversation with his brother the week before, and his suspicions that the bond between Dean and Castiel being something more. It occurred to him that maybe Castiel wasn't depressed at the thought of not having a soul mate – but perhaps the fact that the person he was closest to already had one, whether it was his brother or not.

'And I'm getting way ahead of myself here,' Sam told himself when he realized where his thoughts were leading. 'There's nothing like that going on between them. Cas doesn't even know what it is to be into someone as a human, let alone anything more than that.'

Out loud, he said in a reassuring, upbeat tone, "Well, the world's a big place. We could still find you someone. Plus, I think we might want to start your expectations off a little lower than 'soul-mate'. What about just working on that whole attraction thing?"

"Sam…"

"What was Jimmy into, anyway? Other than Amelia?"

Castiel watched Sam for a moment, as though attempting to discern the point of this practice, and then frowned thoughtfully. "He appreciated well-proportioned looks and a kind heart…I believe he valued sense of humour as well."

"Okay. And what about you?" Sam prompted. "It doesn't even have to be looks, you know. I guess if you were still an angel you'd be focussing on a person's soul, so maybe personality is the closest you can get as a human. Which is an important quality – don't believe guys like Dean, who just focus on looks."

"I don't –"

"Give it a try," Sam prompted. "I mean, the first thing that comes to your mind."

Castiel was once again inexplicably red in the face, and he lowered his eyes like he was embarrassed. "I –"

So, of course, that was the point where Sam's phone rang, startling both of them. With a resigned sigh, which turned into a long-suffering groan when he saw who it was, Sam put his phone to his ear.

"Hey, Dean," he said, watching Castiel, whose face remained flushed. Was it his imagination or did something just flicker across the ex-angel's face. "Find anything?"

"Got a look at the records for all the vics, and an up-close and personal visit with the last three before their families pick them up," Dean answered. Sam motioned Castiel into a small alleyway, trying to escape the sound of traffic passing, and put Dean on speaker-phone. "According to the coroner, not only were all of the vics disembowelled, but they were all done in exactly the same way – get this: harakiri."

Sam blinked. "You're kidding."

"Nope. I mean, the coroner wasn't an expert or anything, but that's what he said it looked like."
"That's... really weird," Sam said after a moment. "And by weird I mean weirdly specific. Harakiri was traditionally reserved just for samurai clans in order to preserve their honor. Even when employed as capital punishment, it was usually limited to that social class. It was highly ritualized and only certain people could carry it out."

"Thanks for that, Discovery Channel," Dean said dryly. "Anything on your end?"

"We found ectoplasm at the scene," Sam relayed. "We couldn't actually get our hands on the stones in the exhibit, but from that alone I'd say it's more likely we've got a ghost on our hands than a keystone to Hell."

"Yeah, a samurai ghost," Dean said, sounding resigned. Sam could sympathize; he had been hoping for a lead on Adam. "Didn't we deal with something like this in San Francisco a few years back? One of Old Man Campbell's old cases?"

"Maybe. Could be a completely different situation though. Either way, we're going to have to do some research into the background of the museum, the exhibit, the artist..." Sam sighed. "So much for finding a lead..."

"We knew it was a long shot going in," Dean said, "No point in cryin' about it now."

"We may have stumbled upon a sessho-sei," Castiel spoke up suddenly.

"A what?" Dean's voice demanded on the other end of the line, and even Sam had to shake his head in confusion. He wasn't familiar enough with Japanese terminology to even guess what that meant.

"The term means 'killing stone'," Castiel explained. "Japanese sorcerers often created cursed stones by imprisoning the souls of their enemies within; anyone who came in contact with those stones would die."

"I don't think all of those people who died actually handled the art piece, though – besides, the artist who set the stones would be dead too, and according to the information the museum director gave us, as far as she knows, he's still alive," Sam pointed out.

"As far as she knows," Dean repeated, sounding sceptical. "The dude could have created the killing stone to begin with."

"Still doesn't explain the people who died without coming into contact with it though."

"I have been thinking on that, and perhaps we were too quick to judge the circumstances," Castiel said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is a keystone afterall – that would amplify the powers of the stone, meaning the spirit trapped within would no longer require the stone to come in physical contact with its victim."

"Keystone or not, that still leave us with the problem of the ghost being in there," Dean said. "Unless we could still use it somehow with it inside?"

"Yong's ritual requires actually touching the stone, so I would say no," Castiel said. "We would have to exorcise the ghost before we could use it, as the ghost appears to be using the stone as its remains."

"Is that even possible?" Sam wanted to know.

"We might be able to transfer the spirit into another receptacle where we could dispose of it before procuring the stone," Castiel mused. He fixed Sam with a curious stare. "Do you think Sarah would
happen to have a curse box at hand?"

He was frozen in place, watching as Michael used Adam's hand to slice open his own belly, pale slippery intestines spilling out as the cut widened. There was a cruel set to his jaw that contradicted the pleading look in his eyes, and in Sam's head Lucifer whispered, "Thanks for leaving us a plaything, Sammy, we wouldn't want to get bored –"

"Sam!"

Sam blinked and shook himself a little, glancing up at Dean, who was waving a hand in front of his face. Across the Formica table, Castiel tilted his head to one side and studied him as well; Sam had apparently zoned out for longer than he had thought.

"What?" he asked lamely.

"Coffee – yay or nay?" Dean asked, and Sam became aware of the waitress hovering expectantly beside him. She looked to be in her late twenties, petite and grey-eyed, with brilliant red hair, high cheekbones and a pointed chin. She was smiling at them genuinely despite the fact that it was nine o'clock and she was likely just beginning the night shift. A slightly crooked nametag introduced her 'Arlene'.

"Oh – uh, yeah. Please."

"Long day?" she asked him sympathetically as she filled his cup. He noticed that Dean's had already been topped up, while Cas's remained empty. The former angel had still not adjusted to the taste of coffee, despite Dean's repeated attempts to entice him.

"Long month," Sam replied with his best approximation of a tired smile.

"Oh, honey, I know exactly what you mean," she said, and then disappeared back down the aisle.

"What's up with you lately?" Dean wanted to know as Sam reached for the packets of sugar. "With all the zoning out? It's weird."

"Takes weird to know weird," Sam pointed out.

"Meaning what?"

Sam deliberately raised an eyebrow and glanced from where Castiel sat by himself across the table to Dean's spot beside Sam.

Before the former angel joined their little hunting cell, the only time Dean sat beside Sam was when interrogating someone or going over case notes. After Castiel started tagging along, Dean usually sat with him. He had brushed it off as a moral support thing and how Castiel still wasn't used to being cut off from the hive mind of the Host; Sam had chalked it up to Dean being uncommonly perceptive and sensitive for once. As the weeks went by and the behaviour persisted, it had become more or less normal.

Right now, it was going a full day that Dean had been avoiding any type of close proximity to Castiel. Emotionally stunted as Dean was, he wouldn't just up and change his protective behaviour over night without some kind of catalyst. Considering Castiel had been steadily avoiding his gaze...
since the morning before, Sam was sure something had happened between them.

Judging by the way his brother suddenly busied himself with gulping down his own coffee instead of responding to Sam's unspoken observation, Dean was just as aware of the discrepancy and was looking to avoid it.

'Fat chance of that,' Sam thought, partly to pass the attention from his own problems and partly because he just hated Dean keeping secrets. "Is there something going on that you two want to tell me?"

"No!" they said at once, looked at each other in surprise for the first time that day, and then looked away.

Sam snorted. "Right, that was really convincing."

"Hey, what'd you say to Sarah to get that curse box here so quickly?" Dean deflected with ease, waggling his eyebrows at Sam. "Was there phone sex involved?"

"You're a pig," Sam retorted, really in no mood to relive the awkward conversation he and Sarah had had the day before.

After repeatedly babbling out assurances that he was still respecting her space and her wish for time to herself, he'd told her about the case.

"Our usual go-to guy's AWOL right now," he'd went on hurriedly to the silence on the phone, "so we were wondering if you might have access to a curse box or something?"

"Because I happen to be friends with witches, right?" Sarah had asked, a slight deadpan in her voice.

"Well – not just because you're friends with witches," Sam had deflected, even though they both knew that was a lie.

"Uh huh."

Scepticism aside, she had still agreed to arrange for one of the Starks' many bewitched containers to be sent by overnight mail to the motel where the Winchesters were staying. In the tense silence afterward, Sam had had to practically bite his tongue off to keep from asking how she was doing on the off chance it would fall into the category of 'disrespecting her space'. He'd actually commented on the weather (like an idiot!) before they had hung up.

He had no intention of telling Dean that, either, because Dean was a jerk and would never let him hear the end of it.

"You're a prude," his brother shot back now, flipping his phone open to check the time. Reflexively, Sam did the same; they had a schedule to keep.

The museum had closed hours ago, but according to the janitor that Dean had grudgingly chatted up the day before (after losing yet another rock-paper-scissors match), the custodial staff changed shifts at ten o'clock. It was then that the Winchesters and Castiel would make their move. Dean had managed to swipe a key to the back entrance long enough to make a copy, and Sam had hacked into the database for some clues as to where the security team would be during the night shift.

'The sooner we finish here, the sooner we can move on,' Sam thought, putting away his phone.

In the meantime, Arlene returned with a large piece of cherry pie for Dean and a cup of herbal tea for
"Anything else I can get you?" she asked, her manner still as sunny as before.

The question was directed at all of them, but Sam noticed that her eyes remained on Castiel while she asked. The same gesture had been performed often enough on Sam for him to know what it meant; from the way her gaze flitted to Dean, and then briefly to Sam, before falling on Castiel's left hand, it was obvious that she was sizing him up. Judging from how her body language instantly became more open, it seemed as though she had come to a conclusion she liked.

"I'm good," Sam said casually, nodding at Castiel. "Anything you want?" And when, as expected, the former angel shook his head in the negative, Sam went on, "Just the bill, thanks."

Arlene beamed again, and with one last look at Castiel, flounced off.

"Dude, you are missing out on this," Dean said through an overly large mouthful of pastry, the fact that he was addressing Castiel only obvious because he gestured at him with the pie. "Why didn't you get something for yourself?"

Sam rolled his eyes at his brother's pie-savagery, but Castiel only shrugged noncommittally, unbothered by the display.

"The names of the food offerings in these establishments confuse me. As it is, I have never eaten most of them and do not know what I would like," he said after a moment.

"That's why you order them and find out," Dean rolled his eyes. "I mean, you obviously like food – you completely demolished what I ordered for you."

"Fries are a rather ingenious culinary invention," Castiel admitted.

"What, you doubted me?" Dean snorted.

"Never," Castiel answered, with a more of a genuine note to his words than a normal person might inflect.

Which hit upon the crux of the matter, Sam thought. Over the past few weeks he had noticed that Castiel was very comfortable allowing the Winchesters, especially Dean, to make decisions for him, even in matters as trivial as ordering food. Sometimes he even ceded to complete strangers' suggestions, like the gas station attendant who had talked him into purchasing three cartons of whole milk because they were having a special.

That had led to the rather interesting situation of Dean – not wanting to hurt Castiel's feelings, Sam was sure – proposing a chugging contest rather than let the stuff go bad in the trunk of the car.

Sam hadn't had dairy since that day.

Arlene returned with the bill, giving Castiel another once over as she passed it to Sam and said, "Hope to see y'all again soon."

Sam watched her disappear, and then turned to Castiel.

"You should go talk to her," he said quietly, offering the former angel an encouraging smile.

Castiel blinked, nonplussed. "Why?"

"Because she couldn't keep her eyes off you," Sam explained helpfully. "And she was pretty much
talking just to you. That usually means a girl's interested."

The sound of his brother shovelling pie into his mouth stopped, and Dean suddenly glanced up. "Wait, what? Who's interested in Cas?"

At this, Sam had to raise an eyebrow, because even though Arlene wasn't exactly Dean's type – which was usually dark haired, long-limbed and easy – she was still good looking, and his brother's radar for that sort of thing was always on. Except now, it seemed.

"Seriously?" he asked dryly. "You didn't notice our knockout waitress hitting on Cas all night?"

"No one hit me," Castiel frowned, while Dean defensively pointed at the folders he had shoved to one side, "Been a bit busy, Sammy!"

"That's never stopped you before," Sam returned, although without any sort of malice. His brother was right to a certain point. They had been going over the specifics of the case while they ate, because it wasn't exactly one of the most straightforward jobs they were going to be pulling. Purposely breaking into an art museum to actually lift something from one of the exhibits was a little more complicated than a salt-and-burn. Sam shuddered mentally, remembering how the last time they had broken into a museum they had ended up in Green River County Detention Center. Even though that had been their intent, it was not an experience he wanted to repeat for real.

"There something you wanna say?" Dean was asking, a challenging glare on his face.

Sam ignored it.

"Here," he said to Castiel, placing a few bills into the folder Arlene had left at their table and handing it to the former angel. "You go pay, we'll finish up here."

"Very well," Castiel said, although he still looked a little perplexed.

Sam sighed and shook his head, smiling slightly as Castiel wandered down to the front cash. His smile faded when he turned to his brother and saw that Dean was scrutinizing him with the beginnings of a frown on his face.

"What was that all about?" Dean wanted to know, in the too controlled tone that suggested he was trying not to be annoyed but failing miserably.

"What was what all about?"

"The way you're practically throwing him at her," Dean replied tensely. "He didn't even know she was alive until you pointed it out."

"I'm not telling him to take her out back and mount her," Sam deadpanned. "It's just some conversation. He's been human for a month, eventually he's going to start being interested in people other than us. He just needs some practice."

"Practice what? Getting into chicks' pants?" Dean wanted to know, sounding unimpressed. "You really think that's a good idea, considering the kind of schedule we're on here, Sam?"

Which was more than ironic coming from him.

"I think it's better than him only having crappy human experiences like dislocations and nightmares, before he decides to follow us into Hell," Sam argued reasonably. "I'd think you of all people would
be gung-ho to get him out there. I mean, you're the one that took him to a brothel."

Dean's expression momentarily shifted, a lazy grin playing at his lips. "Now that was fun."

"Besides, he needs to start getting some street smarts," Sam went on, "unless you want him trusting
everything anyone ever says for the rest of his life. He just figured out what free will means. He
should be using it, not just taking orders from you instead of from the Host."

And the frown was back, although this time Sam could tell it was an expression of grudging
agreement instead of displeasure.

They could hear footsteps approaching and soon the former angel was once again idling uncertainly
beside their table.

"Hey Cas – how'd it go?" Dean asked, and again Sam raised an eyebrow, this time at the barely-
there falsity in his brother's voice.

"Paying for dinner is a less taxing task than commanding a garrison of the Host," Castiel pointed out,
no trace of sarcasm in his words. He held up the receipt. "The waitress provided me with her name
and contact information. She suggested an interview at a later date. I was not aware that she heard us
conversing about the case."

Sam felt the urge to burst out laughing; beside him Dean snorted inelegantly and reached for the rest
of his coffee.

"It's got nothing to do with the case," Sam explained to the former angel, trying to keep from
laughing. "She wants you to call her to go out." He paused, waiting for Castiel to get it, and then
added, "On a date."

Castiel frowned, looked at the number, and then asked seriously, "And this would be a prelude to
sexual activity?"

At this, the rather large mouthful of coffee Dean had just gulped down ended across the table and
sprayed over the seat Castiel had occupied minute before.

This time, Sam couldn't stop the uproarious bout of laughter.

Sneaking into the museum, Dean couldn't help but feel like he was being watched. It was a sensation
that often came with breaking and entering, residual paranoia mixing with adrenaline and the
knowledge that he was doing something illegal. Since his first break-in at the age of eleven it had
become little more than an afterthought, but for some reason tonight it seemed magnified.

Still, it was nothing like the gut-clench reaction that often preceded danger, and so he thought
nothing of waving his brother and Cas along through the back door of the building. Thankfully, the
sensation disappeared after the door clicked shut behind them and so he decided to blame it on the
diner food having been undercooked.

As they came upon a hallway that split into two directions, Sam took the left path with a meaningful
glance that Dean instinctively understood meant he was heading to the security office to take out the
cameras and alarms.
Dean nodded, adjusting his hold on the knapsack with all of their tools. As Sam disappeared around the corner, Dean motioned for Cas to lead the way to the sculpture.

He knew better than to be lulled into a sense of security by how easy it was to get in; that was supposed to be the easy part. Actually getting their hands on the stone (so to speak) would be much harder. It wasn't as if they could just walk up to the display in question and just grab whatever they wanted.

Sam and Cas had said the piece itself was huge, and they didn't even know exactly what part of it was cursed yet. According to them, the display had about seventy different stones, any of which could be the one housing the ghost.

'Meaning we've got to narrow it down before we even try anything else,' Dean mused. 'And if Sam was right about it being bullet proof and sound proof, that might make things a bit trickier.'

Hopefully the signal from the EMF meter Dean had brought would avoid that problem. If it did, then the job was just a matter of transferring the spiritual essence into the box they intended to destroy, use a use a torch to cut the glass and hightail it with the rock – provided it was an actual keystone.

'Of course, if none of that works, we're gonna have to do something crazy like blow up the damn thing,' he knew, which had its own risks, including possibly freeing a pissed off ghost.

Cas had already suggested that the ghost was powerful enough to kill victims without them coming into contact with its stone. That meant there was always a chance it might become strong enough or angry enough to deviate from its current pattern.

'Which is really the only thing keeping us alive,' Dean reflected.

When he had first done his tour of the morgue and inspected the bodies of the latest three victims – Ken Date, Melanie Oda and Geoffrey Shigematsu – he had thought he was just dealing with a spirit with a hate-on for Japanese people. Possibly something like the racist truck they had dealt with down in Missouri. A little more digging, though, had shown that that wasn't the case. Some of the first victims – Tanya LeBeau, Stephen Collins and Prudence Palmer – weren't ostensibly Asian. It wasn't until Sam did some more research and discovered that even these victims had some blood connection to old Japanese families that they the ghost's motives took better shape.

"It's not just old Japanese clans, per se," Sam had explained as he showed Dean records from a vital records website. "It's old bushi clans – samurai. It's why they're being killed by harakiri."

"So any poor bastard who happens to have a connection to one of those families is going to bite the big one if they go near this rock?" Dean had wanted to know. "If that's the case, why hasn't there been more of a body count?"

"I know, right?" Sam had agreed. "I mean, there's been major immigration from Japan since after World War II. There's got to be hundreds of people with some distant connection." Dean rolled his eyes a little at Sammy's excited tone; it was something that never changed. "But according to the stats I got while cross-referencing obits with the places the sculpture's been since it was purchased six years ago, there've only been about a dozen deaths in each location. Reported deaths, anyhow."

"Have you done more than a perfunctory look into the background of each victim?" Cas had wanted to know. "As you said, harakiri was usually a punishment ordered only in specific cases."

"Right," Sam had granted, scrolling through some of the windows he had minimized. "Like murder, rape, robbery, corruption or treason." Dean had watched him pull up one window on Ken Date.
"Which is why this report here makes sense – this guy was accused by his ex-girlfriend of sexual assault, but it never went to trial." He had then pulled up another. "And it looks like Melanie Oda's got a few strikes against her for shoplifting."

"Kind of a big gap between lifting some CDs from Wal-Mart and taking advantage of someone, though," Dean had pointed out grimly.

"The spirit likely does not care for the varying degrees of severity," Cas had reminded him, "it cares only for meting out justice according to the old ways."

"Yeah, well, that's messed up," Dean had muttered. "Some people need to steal to survive – it's not right, but it doesn't deserve a death sentence either."

He remembered all too well the days back when Dad would go on trips that stretched longer than he expected, leaving Dean to fend for himself and Sam in any way he could. Money had to be saved to pay for whatever craptastic motel they were in that week, and so when they started running out of food Dean had had to steal. It was either that or go without food until Dad got back.

'Not that spirits ever care about the minor details,' he thought now as he followed Cas around another corner and into the wing which housed the cursed rock sculpture.

The thing was massive, and for a long moment Dean wondered what the hell they were going to do if things went south and the blow torch he had brought with him didn't work. There were some explosives in the trunk of the Charger a few blocks away, but nothing that could completely obliterate the art piece.

'Would still leave the pissed off spirit, though,' Dean thought as he began to take their tools out of the bag.

"I still fail to see the appeal in this," Cas said quietly, eyeing the sculpture like it had offended him. "There is no logic to it."

"I dunno, I kinda like it," Dean said, squinting up at the thing. He could feel Cas staring at him in surprise and glanced over. "What?"

"I was not aware you had a predilection for art," the ex-angel pointed out.

"Never said I did," Dean shrugged. "It's just kinda cool-looking. I mean, all those stones are cut the same, except the one. It's kind of like that one said, 'fuck you, I'm gonna be blue!'"

Cas glanced from him, to the art piece and back, and his gaze it softened slightly. Then, without any of the good-natured mocking Sam might have injected in his words, he said, "You have an interesting way of looking at things."

Dean looked away, very carefully not thinking about how the blue stone matched Cas's eyes, and mumbled, "Yeah, whatever," as he hauled out the EMF meter. At the same time he dialed Sam to make sure the security system had been dealt with before Cas did his little spell.

"We good?" he asked.

"Yeah, alarms are cut and cameras are taken care of," his brother answered.

"Good. Get your ass down here and help."

"On my way," Sam answered. "Just got to check something first, I think one of the night watchmen
might be hanging around."

They hung up and Dean turned on the EMF. It immediately started to whirl angrily, probably due to the proximity of the stone they were looking for. He needed to go to each one individually to pinpoint the right one, and was not looking forward to dealing with the topmost layer of rocks. He proceeded to make a slow progression from one end of the frame to the other, while Cas brought out the curse box and whatever materials he needed for his ghost-transferal plan.

So far things were going well; if they could finish the job quickly, that would mean time for a quick drink and maybe an extra hour of sleep for once. He glanced at Cas's focussed face and then remembered what Sam had said. The incident in the diner bothered him, but his brother had made a pretty good point.

"So, are you gonna call her?" Dean asked after a long pause, any overt curiosity masked by the hushed nature of his voice.

"Who?"

"The girl who gave you her number?" Dean deadpanned. "I mean, this thing goes the way it's supposed to, we might have some free time. We can stick around here a day, if you want."

"That would be counterproductive," Cas answered, sounding unconcerned. "There are more important matters to deal with than engaging in revelry."

"That would be where you're wrong, man, that's the best part of being human," Dean argued, going up another row of rocks. "No matter how crap life is, you can always find some time to blow off steam. How do you think Sam and I managed all these years without going crazy? You know, Apocalypse stuff aside."

"By drinking copious amounts of alcohol?" Cas suggested, in the usual tone Dean couldn't identify as serious or joking.

"Okay, fair point," he allowed, "but there are better ways. And seriously, that chick was hot."

"I thought you did not see her."

"I saw her on the way out."

"Then you are welcome to take my place," Cas said, a testy and defensive note in his voice. "I have other matters to attend to, not least of all helping you and Sam free your brother."

"Whoa, relax, man," Dean said, pausing in his perusal for a second. "I'm not trying to pressure you none. I just want to make sure you're doing okay. You're still acting like an angel, trying to power through things and experience as little as possible. It doesn't work that way. Trust me on that, alright?"

Cas cocked his head to one side, processing Dean's words, "I do trust you, Dean. However, I do not have time 'stop and smell the roses'." Dean almost dropped the EMF when Cas physically made air quotes. "Aiding you and Sam in yet another impossible endeavor is not the only obstacle I face at the moment."

"Why? What else is going on? 'Cause I didn't get the memo," Dean wanted to know, returning to the task of scanning the sculpture.

For once Cas ignored the figure of speech. "Matters with the Host remain troubling. My brother –"
The EMF suddenly howled as Dean passed over a stone a third of the way up the sculpture, and he and Cas went quiet. A secondary pass confirmed that it was the stone they were looking for.

Dean stepped back, ceding the spotlight to Cas on this one while he checked the blow torch they were going to need to cut through the thick layer of glass and the metal frame. He didn't know how long it would take, which made him glad for Sam's quick disabling of the museum's security.

'Speaking of, where is he?' Dean wondered as Cas placed a circle of objects at the base of the sculpture – the iron curse box, four white candles at each cardinal point and handful of flat stones Cas had inscribed with ancient characters. All of this was surrounded by various animal bones, teeth and claws that Sam and Cas insisted were sacred in most Asian cultures and would help strengthen the spell.

"We good?" Dean asked. Cas nodded. "'Kay, let's do this and get out."

"Should we not wait for Sam?"

"And have him bitch because we wasted time?" Dean snorted as he lit the candles. "Nah." He nodded at Cas. "So go ahead and do your thing."

Cas nodded, and a look of concentration appeared on his face.

"Deus, spiritum liga, " he began. "Animus ex interregnum aplegaa –"

The stone that they had identified as the possible keystone began to vibrate within the frame, and the dim emergency lights that remained on within that part of the exhibit began to flicker.

" – non est mortuorum, nec est viventum. Hoc continens esse vas, et hoc animam eius custodiet – "

The vibrations became stronger, shaking the sculpture. As the air around them began to cool, Dean cast a wary eye at the bolts that secured the piece in place.

" – Spiritus, qui e mundo praesideat," Cas went on, and Dean frowned when he felt his phone vibrate against his leg. "Non est mortuorum, nec est viventum –"

Surreptitiously checking the phone, he saw that Sam was trying to call him; he sent it to voicemail, knowing that interrupting the spell was not a good idea.

" – estra lapidem crucerem aufugias et velum transeat. Hoc continens esse vas, et hoc animum eius custodiet –"

As Sam tried to call again, Dean watched a wispy, cloying looking grey substance begin to emanate from the obsidian stone. He declined the phone call again as the spirit's essence began to settle in the box, making a mental note to bitch at Sam for interrupting –

"Freeze!" someone shouted from behind him, and the room lit up suddenly with flashlight beams.

'Fuck,' Dean thought, his body tensing in reaction.

"Step away from the sculpture," the unknown voice behind them continued, "and put your hands on your heads. Both of you."

"You really don't want us to do that," Dean said, trying to keep his voice calm and quiet, hoping that Cas could at least finish the ritual before they had to act. The ex-angel's body was rigid as well, and Dean knew his eyes were probably intent on the spirit still emptying into the box.
"Do as I say!" the man ordered, and Dean heard the safety on a gun being unclicked.

He swore under his breath, trying to calculate if he'd be able to disarm whoever was there before they got a shot off. Unlikely, considering he didn't know how many of them there were or how many were armed. Even if he did manage to keep himself out of trouble, Cas could still be harmed.

Slowly, he brought his hands up. "Cas…"

"Dean, we can't stop now –" Cas whispered frantically back. "If we do –"

"We don't have a choice," Dean shot back. "Just put your hands on your head and don't talk to anyone."

When Cas still didn't relax, Dean felt a sharp bit of anxiety that his friend wouldn't listen. He didn't want Cas to end up shot, but if Dean made a move to interrupt him or if whoever was behind them decided they were taking too long, the decision would be taken out of Dean's hands.

"Cas, just…trust me," he implored, trying to convey as much gravity in his request as he could without sounding like he was begging.

A terrifying second later, and Cas's shoulder's slumped. As the ex-angel slowly raised his hands to his head, Dean watched with dismay as the spiritual essence began to disperse until it nowhere to be seen. Just as it completely disappeared, someone came up behind him and forced his hands into a pair of cuffs.

Contrary to what every Hollywood film depicted, struggling to regain consciousness after being knocked out by a blow to the head was not as easy or as pleasant as waking up from a nice nap.

Even though Sam was, as far as he could tell, in a dark room, he had to concentrate several minutes to get his eyes to open properly. It felt almost like he was trying to stare into direct sunlight or right at an angel going supernova.

For a moment, he thought he saw Lucifer leaning against the wall, smirking at him, but eventually his vision cleared and he realized that he was alone.

Now that he could focus, he could make out a shabby, bare room. It looked like he was in some kind of a bunker, which was strange because the last thing he remembered was being in the museum security office. The only accoutrements were the chair where he was sitting, wrists tied behind his back, and the long industrial light bulbs lining the walls. The floor was painted with symbols and shapes that Sam recognized immediately, and at the sight of the iron door, he concluded that he was sitting in a panic room that was half the size of Bobby's.

"We still sure we're not dealing with some kind of shifter?" a muffled male voice on the other side of the door asked. "'Cause she looks way too much like Gwen for me to be comfortable."

"You've already stuck her with more silver than my Gran had in her tea service, so unless you want her to bleed-out on my floor, I'm gonna say no," a woman answered dourly.

Sam grimaced, feeling the telltale itch across his forearm that suggested he'd been scraped by something.
"Besides," the unknown woman went on, and there was the sound of movement on the other side of the door. It creaked open, slowly. "I'm pretty sure she's a hunter. Isn't that right, 'Agent Stein'?"

Three people crowded into the small room, close enough to Sam to intimidate but far enough away that he couldn't reach them if he managed to get free.

The nearest man was tall, about as tall as Dean was normally, with sandy brown hair and cold blue eyes. He was unshaven, with high cheekbones and a high forehead, and what looked like a permanent sneer on his narrow face. Beside him, a shorter, stockier man with blond hair and a beard considered Sam warily. They both framed the older, similarly stocky woman who had spoken. She was round-faced with greying dark brown hair and pursed lips. Dark brown eyes considered Sam judgementally in a way that reminded him in no small amount of Ellen Harvelle and Bobby all rolled into one person.

Further inspection revealed that all three wore charms beneath their clothing; in the background, he could also hear other people moving around, and the sound of someone sharpening a knife.

Realization dawned, and he glanced up at him warily, all the while starting to work the ropes around his wrists. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you're hunters too?"

"Well, looks like you've got some kind of brains after all, honey," the woman said sharply. "I'll admit it, I had my doubts."

"We haven't checked to see if she's a ghoul yet," the blue-eyed man insisted, hand hovering over the .45 in his belt. "I think we should make sure."

"And I think you should shut up, boy, and let your elders do the thinking for you," the woman shot back, before turning her attention back on Sam. "No reason we can't be civil."

"None at all," Sam replied tightly. "Mind telling me why you've got me strapped to a chair? Seeing as how we're all being civil?"

"Watch your mouth," the stocky man snapped, but the woman waved him off.

"We don't really appreciate other hunters in our territory – especially the kind that get their faces plastered over the news," the woman said quietly. "What exactly were you and your partners doing?"

Sam paused for a moment, focus momentarily shifting to thoughts of Dean and Cas. "What'd you do with them?"

"They're safe," the stocky man said lightly. "More or less."

"I swear, if you hurt them –"

"Worry about yourself –" the woman told him, bringing out something from behind her back – his wallet, he realized – and read off his primary ID, "Jane." She tossed it at his feet. "If that's really your name."

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," he offered with false cheer, back to working on his wrists.

The stocky man raised a hand like he was going to hit Sam, but the woman made another gesture and he backed off.
"See, that's the problem," the woman said lightly, taking another step forward and bending to eye level. "My family? We've got something of a reputation around these parts. And when some idiots like you and your friends waltz into our town, using our name and getting up to who knows what under our very noses? We don't like it."

The blue-eyed man smiled coldly.

"Your name," Sam repeated, a little caught off guard by what seemed like a non sequitur.

"Miriam Campbell," the woman said without any cordiality in her tone. "That's Christian — she gestured to the blue-eyed man, " – and there's my boy Mark." The stocky man didn't even nod to acknowledge the introduction. "Understand now?"

Sam's mind raced. "You're…Campbells?"

His eyes widened as his brain brought him up to speed. He remembered the hunter in Illinois – Ryder – mention meeting some Campbells in Michigan. Sam hadn't really paid it much attention, not really expecting them to be any relation to him, but the situation that was unfolding was fast becoming too coincidental for comfort.

"Got it in one. This county's our territory, girl, and we don't take kindly to outsiders edging onto our hunts."

"Campbell territory," Sam repeated, his attempts to undo his restraints halting completely.

"The whole Clueless routine isn't convincing anyone," Christian drawled.

"You would watch that show," Mark remarked.

"Shut up. Gwen was six."

Sam ignored them, focussing on Miriam. It occurred to him that there were a few ways that this could go, but with no idea what these people were doing to Dean and Cas, he was going to have to take a risk.

"My mother was a Campbell," he told them.

"Sure she was," Christian snorted. "Never mind the family's pretty much gone. We're the last ones, and we've never seen you at Sunday dinner."

Sam ignored him and focussed on Miriam.

"Mary Campbell?" he pressed, deciding to gamble. "Her parents were Samuel and Deanna Campbell."

Miriam's eyes snapped to meet Sam's, although the rest of her body language didn't give anything away.

"Random names prove anything," Christian drawled. "There are hundreds of Samuel Campbells in the world."

"They lived in Lawrence, Kansas. He and my grandmother died in '73," Sam insisted "Mom died ten years later. Also in Lawrence."

"Real convenient that they're all dead –"
"Mind your mouth," the woman broke in harshly, watching Sam like she expected him to disappear into the floor or something. She practically barked out, "How did they die?"

"You want what actually happened or what story the cops got?" Sam asked, remembering everything Dean had told him about his trip to 1973. When Miriam gave him a hard look, he went on, "A demon possessed my grandfather. Broke my grandmother's neck, then gutted him while it was still wearing him."

"And your mother?" Miriam asked tightly.

"Fire," Sam replied, holding her gaze. "The same demon killed her, put her up on the ceiling of my nursery and burned her alive. The place was destroyed and Dad took us on the road with him to hunt down the thing that killed her."

By now, Miriam was focussing on Sam like he was the only other person in the world. There was a pause where Sam thought he was getting through to her, and then suddenly Christian's gun was in her hand and pointed at his head.

"Now you're either a really bad liar, or you didn't do your homework," she hissed, "because I know for a fact Mary Campbell had two boys. So you're gonna tell me the truth real fast, or I'm gonna give you a third breathing hole."

Dean leaned back in the uncomfortable chair, trying to keep his posture relaxed and expression unconcerned. Although it wasn't the first time in his life he had been caught by law enforcement, it was the first time that it had happened while he was working a job with Cas.

He only hoped Sam had been lucky enough to avoid the same situation. Considering they hadn't seen his brother while being processed, it seemed a safe bet. He'd lost track of Cas after getting their mug shots, though.

'So much for stayin' off police radar,' he thought with annoyance.

The interrogation room was smaller and grimier than the last one he had been in, lit by fluorescent lights meant to intimidate. Other than the table he was chained to – without, he noticed grimly, anything to help him pick the lock on his cuffs – and the two chairs on the other side, there was no furniture in the room.

The only door inside clicked open and two men, different from those who had made the arrest, sauntered in. They took the seats opposite him, their languid movements giving Dean a chance to study them.

The nearest one was pale and dark haired, with dark eyes that focussed on Dean like he could see right through him. His partner, a shorter Hispanic man, was more muscular in stature and more distrustful in his gaze. Both were vaguely familiar to him, but he couldn't pinpoint when he had seen them before.

"Erica Campbell," the dark-eyed one pronounced, pushing a plastic bag forward with several cards that Dean recognized as the fake IDs he had been carrying upon arrest. "Or is it Erica Joplin? Or maybe it's Larkin."

Dean didn't react, maintaining the lazy smirk.
"I'm betting none of those are real either," the cop went on. "Your accomplice just about confirmed that, but oddly enough refuses to give us your real name."

Dean kept his face blank. They had only mentioned one accomplice, which meant there was definitely a chance Sam had gotten away.

"Cas doing okay?" he asked casually.

The cops exchanged a barely there look, before the pale cop said, "That's not something you need to concern yourself with right now." He gestured to himself and to his partner. "I'm Special Agent Rhinebeck, this is Special Agent Ochoa. We've got a few questions to ask you."

"I don't care if you're Siegfried and Roy – I'm not saying anything to you until I know Cas is alright," Dean retorted.

Again the look, and then Rhinebeck said slowly, "You're talking about the man you came in here with, right? Cassidy Campbell?"

"Unless you morons managed to bag the ghost, too, then yeah, that's who I'm talking about," Dean replied, enjoying the momentary confusion on their faces before they decided to ignore the ghost comment. "He's a bit new to all this, so I just want to make sure he's doing okay."

Ochoa snorted. "Should have thought about that before you got him involved."

"Buddy, I tell myself that every day, but trust me, it's not for the reasons you think," Dean shot back. "Oh? And what reasons would those be?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Dean returned with a charming smile.

Ochoa's eyes flashed, but he didn't rise to the bait. Instead, his partner cleared his throat and took over on a different tact.

"It's strange, Erica, we can't actually find a record of you anywhere before a few weeks ago. You or your sister."

"Haven't got a sister," Dean answered truthfully.

"Fine. Your partner. Jane Whatever-She's-Calling-Herself," Ochoa interrupted. "We don't have anything on a Cassidy Campbell, either. Or any of the other false IDs he had on him." He smiled unpleasantly. "But we have a whole hell of a lot on James Novak."

Dean debated for a moment whether to screw with them some more by telling them that Jimmy had been dead since Cas's run-in with Raphael in Kripke's Hollow, Ohio. Instead, he answered, "No idea who that is."

"You sure?" Rhinebeck pushed a folder forward. "That's a Missing Person's Report filed in 2008 by an Amelia Novak regarding her husband." He flipped it open on a picture that looked like it had been taken from a wedding album. "Looks an awful lot like your friend Cas."

"Well, they do say everyone has a twin," Dean countered easily, not reacting to the unfamiliar image of a smiling Cas-lookalike with his arms around the pretty blond woman Dean had met once. "I know I've come face to face with myself more than once."

"Is this funny to you?" Ochoa demanded hotly.
"Little bit," Dean said cheekily, making a pinching motion with his thumb and index finger.

"He's got a wife out there somewhere. A kid, too," Ochoa growled. "But I get the feeling you already knew that. In fact...maybe you were the one who made sure they dropped off the face of the planet?" He sneered. "What's the matter, Erica? Fell for someone you couldn't have and did everything you could to get him?"

"Now you're just grasping at straws 'cause you don't know the whole story," Dean answered coldly.

"So why don't you tell us the story? We've got all night."

"What I could tell you would take twenty years."

"Good, because that's the kind of time you're looking at," Ochoa smugly. "Forgery, identity theft, abduction, breaking and entering, possible accessory to murder – you're going away for a long time if you don't cooperate."

"Whereas if I do, it'll just be a moderately long time, right?" Dean rolled his eyes. "Sorry to burst your bubble, boys, but this isn't my first rodeo."

"Seeing as how we can't find anything on you before last May, we'll take your word for it," Rhinebeck said. "We're just hoping you're a better human being than the file we have on you would suggest."

"It takes a pretty messed-up person to take advantage of a guy with mental illness," Ochoa added.

"Cas isn't insane," Dean told them plainly.

"We just spoke to him. Guy thinks he's an angel. Either he's nuts, or he's on some serious drugs. The point is, he's not in his right mind and you've just jumped all over that," Ochoa told him bluntly. He adopted a knowing leer. "Is that something you get off on? Having someone forced to depend on you – does it make you feel powerful?"

"Does your haircut make you feel like Antonio Banderas?" Dean replied curtly.

"I hope you keep that sense of humour in prison – 'cause that's where you're headed," Ochoa pretended he hadn't heard him. "We've got a laundry list of charges drafted for you three. For folks who just appeared out of nowhere one day, you sure don't waste time."

"I used to work in the forgery business, you know," Rhinebeck took over quietly. "Whoever you had cook you up knew lives did some pretty good work. Too bad you didn't try to keep below the radar, because that one's the first one we've got you on."

"Then there's the trail you've left us since Detroit," Ochoa added.

For a moment Dean was confused, but then he thought back to the day he and Sam had busted out of the hospital and remembered the two cops that had tracked them. He'd thought they were regular detectives, but apparently Cas' being found on top of the tallest building in Detroit had warranted FBI involvement.

"Huh. So that was you?" he remarked conversationally, and looked over Ochoa judgementally. "You're a lot shorter close up."

"Laugh it up, princess, we've got enough to put you away for a while."
"Even if we ignore the forgery, the identity theft and the possible complicity in the disappearances of Amelia and Claire Novak, we have surveillance footage of you and your partner abducting Novak from Sinai Grace," Rhinebeck told him severely. "We've also got your DNA at the home of Richard and Linda Tobin of Decatur, Illinois. Then there's the similar DNA found at the site of their daughter Nicole's murder across that same town – enough with enough genetic material from Novak to place him at that crime scene too."

"Hell, we could even speculate that he was the one to pull the trigger," Ochoa added.

"And now we've caught you both leaving yet another crime scene," Rhinebeck finished dispassionately. "You don't have a lot of options here, Erica. There's not a jury in the world that won't convict you. You – and your partner, when we find her – are going to prison. That's a fact."

"Well, this sounds like a carrot being dangled at me," Dean said quietly. "Too bad I was never really into vegetables."

"Then how about you sink your teeth into this?" Ochoa growled. "Novak's more or less clean – just deeply disturbed, if the medical records we have on him are anything to go by. From what little he's said, I bet he'd manage the insanity plea, no problem."

"But there's still a lot of circumstantial evidence to sift through," Rhinebeck added. "We could use your help clearing that up. You cooperate – give up your partner and clarify a few things, like what Novak was doing on that rooftop and who you people are – and we'll make sure Novak gets off easy and you ladies get reduced sentences."

"Or don't. Novak's pretty coherent for a crazy person, so I don't know," Ochoa took up. "A jury might still find him mentally competent enough to stand trial. For murder. And while Illinois doesn't have the death penalty, life in prison for someone like him isn't going to be a picnic. Good looking guy like him? Probably won't last two days before he becomes someone's bitch."

Dean hadn't even noticed he'd moved until he felt the hard edge of the cuffs digging into his wrists, stopping him from going for the asshole's throat. Neither of the feds moved or showed any surprise at Dean's outburst, although Ochoa smiled unpleasantly.

"So, for the last time. Here's your choice," Rhinebeck concluded. "You give us your account of everything that's been going on, sign a confession and tell us where to find your partner. We'll make sure Jimmy goes to a nice rehabilitation center where he can get the care he needs. We'll even see if we can swing you and Jane staying in the same place for the next two decades or so."

"Or you don't, and you're all charged to the full extent of the law."

Rhinebeck slowly slid the paper with the confession to the charges over to Dean. They both looked at Dean expectantly.

'Son of a bitch, I do not need this right now,' Dean thought as he kept his gaze level, ignoring the churning anger in his gut. Out loud, he offered a toneless, "I think I'm gonna ask for my lawyer right about now."

Sam stared down the barrel of the gun in Miriam's hand; while outwardly calm, his thoughts raced. Being surrounded by a group of armed hunters and secured to a chair weren't exactly good odds, even given some of the crazy escapes he and Dean had made in the past. Although he could already
feel the ropes around his wrists loosening, he still needed a little more time if he was going to pull one of those off.

"Bet you didn't expect anyone to call your bluff," Miriam continued on stonily. "Bit of advice, honey, do your research next time. I remember hearing about those kids. My daddy left to bring them home after my cousin died – called the night before he disappeared to say he'd found 'em, and we never heard from him again. So how about before I let Christian test out his ghoul theory, you wise up and answer our questions?"

Sam's eyes flitted to the blue-eyed man and back to Miriam; there was something hard in Christian's gaze which reminded him uncomfortably of Gordon Walker. He probably wouldn't mess around with the smaller tests, but would go straight to the headshot.

"Who are you?" Miriam repeated.

Sam's lips thinned as he tried to come up with a decent lie or cover, thoughts struggling to process all of the information he had been given since waking up. Miriam's story threw him for a bit of a loop, because he certainly didn't remember anyone ever coming to get him or Dean. Maybe he'd just been too young, but even if he hadn't been, he doubted Dad would ever let someone take him and Dean away.

A sudden recollection sprung up of an afternoon the year before Dean's deal came due. While Dean had been trolling for a possible hookup, Ruby had sought Sam out for the first time and dropped a hint about his family. He had spent the next days on the phone and computer learning about how almost every member of his mother's friends and family living in the states bordering Kansas had died. He could still remember most of the names and their relation to his mother – most of them cousins or aunts, and one uncle that had died about ten years after the fire.

There had been a few names of people who he had never managed to track down, family members who were missing and never found. One name in particular had meant something to him thanks to a story Dean told him about the man that paid for Mary Winchester's headstone.

"Jacob Campbell," Sam said cautiously, keeping his eyes on hers. "That was your father?"

Miriam's eyes gleamed again with recognition, and he saw her grip on the gun tighten fractionally. He'd hit another nerve, and he was going to have to act fast before she finally lost patience with him.

"If you know Mary Campbell and her boys, you know who their father was, too," he said quickly, all while keeping his voice measured. "Which means you know why I don't exactly want to advertise that particular name just yet."

"Fair enough," Miriam granted. "Makes sense why you'd lie about bein' one of us, at least."

"I wasn't lying," Sam replied.

"Girl, if you don't start –"

"You met Mary, right?" Sam prompted. He didn't wait for her to answer, before plodding on, "And if you've been watching us since we started the job, you probably got a look at all of us. Notice anything about my partner? Maybe in the looks department?"

There was a stretch where he could practically see the calculations going in her head, and then Miriam's eyes flashed in understanding. The gun lowered half an inch. "That's not possible."

Mark and Christian raised their eyebrows at each other in silently communicated confusion.
"A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have thought so either," Sam said, attempting humour but only succeeding in sounding weary.

"What the hell is she talking about?" Christian demanded, while Mark eyed his mother expectantly.

From the way her jaw was clenched, Sam had a feeling she was thinking very hard and very quickly.

"Things just became a damn sight more complicated, that's what," Miriam finally said. She took her eyes off Sam for a second. "You boys get the others and go around this place to make sure all our wards are in place. I don't want anything getting in here."

"But Mom –"

"You do as I say, boy, or I'll know what for."

Mark grimaced, the chastised look similar to the kind Dean had always worn after a raking over the coals by Dad, but he stalked from the panic room. Christian, however, paused, and said coldly, "You know as well as I do that the wards are fine."

"And you know as well as I do that when I aim to talk privately, I don't want you around hovering like an overgrown bat," Miriam pointed out, clearly not bothered by Christian's attitude. "I'll tell you what's going on when I know for sure – until then, go make sure everything's closed up tighter than a frog's ass."

Christian's eyes snapped to Sam, and he looked like he wanted to open his mouth again, but another warning glare from Miriam prompted him to leave.

She turned back to Sam.

"If what I think you're telling me is so, your survival instincts aren't as good as they say," she told him bluntly. "Me and mine happen to be of the opinion that those two boys have a lot to answer for."

The look she gave him was laced with meaning. "Most of that answering involves being shot down like dogs. You haven't given me much reason to rethink that strategy."

"Maybe I'm hoping you got the same lesson growing up that I did," Sam suggested.

"That lesson being?"

"That blood means something. I heard enough about my grandfather to know he thought family was important, maybe your father believed that too." He narrowed his eyes in challenge. "Of course, if it's not, then how about this? You kill me, you're a step closer to restarting to Apocalypse."

Miriam's eyes narrowed. "That a threat?"

"More like a certainty."

They faced each other defiantly for a moment, and then Miriam nodded slowly.

"I'll tell you what," Miriam said to him, completely lowering the gun. "You're going to tell me your story, and then I'll decide what happens to you when you're done."

"Sounds fair enough," Sam agreed, glad for whatever little bit of time he could get. He was almost completely free of the ropes behind him now.

"It was your nursery where she died?" Miriam asked, the question sounding more like a statement. At his nod, she went on, "Then you'd be Sam."
"Yeah," he agreed, slowly, hoping it was an indication that she already half believed him.

"Start at the beginning then, Sam," Miriam ordered him. "The night your momma died."

The holding area of the East Lansing Sherriff department was small, but not small enough to require using one chamber; thankfully Henricksen's injunction to keep Dean Winchester in a maximum security cell until trial didn't affect Erica Campbell one bit, which was encouraging. Better so than the interview with the two agents, at any rate.

Dean was brought into the back of the building and led to one of the two small cells. Cas was already in the other one, sitting calmly on the cot with his hands folded in his lap and a meditative expression on his face.

"Only Cas,' Dean thought with amused affection as the officers closed and locked his cell door behind him. At his arrival, Cas stood up, expression anxious, and Dean's name obviously on the tip of his tongue.

"Alright there, buddy?" Dean said, circumventing the possibility of Cas giving away his identity. By now using his and Sam's aliases had become second nature to the ex-angel, probably due to the necessity in keeping them safe, but Dean knew just how easy it was to let things slip when you were relieved. He'd had years of practice avoiding it, but Cas not so much.

"Their interrogators are decidedly less effective than those of the Host," Cas told him seriously, and although Dean had a feeling Cas meant the comment to be a throwaway, perhaps even a joke, he didn't smile. The memory of how Heaven had hauled Cas home and replaced him with a soulless automaton that had nearly cost Dean his brother and the world would never stop haunting him.

"Yeah, well, be grateful for that," Dean said heavily. He ignored the thin cot and went to sit in the corner of the cell, which unfortunately stank of something he'd rather not think about, but which happened to be closest to Cas. It would make communicating a little easier. After a second of hesitation, Cas chose a similar spot in his cell. "They still think you're Jimmy, right?"

He kept his voice low.

Although they were separated by a narrow aisle, the cells weren't closed off or soundproof. They would be able to talk to one another, but it would have to be quiet and careful to face away from the surveillance camera in the corner. Dean knew from experience that some cops could read lips. For a wonder, the guard that had locked Dean inside had left the holding area; Dean could just make him out beyond the heavy door that was the only exit from the place.

Cas was nodding.

"They continually asked me about the whereabouts of Amelia and Claire Novak," the ex-angel said, a wrinkle in his brow. "They would not take my explanations about their safety for an answer."

"Cops rarely do," Dean sighed, his suspicions of how Cas's interview with the feds had gone coming true. He didn't begrudge him that, though, considering there hadn't exactly been time for Dean to school him in a story before they had been separated at the museum.

"They kept insisting I tell them your true identity. When I explained doing so would jeopardize your life, they insisted they would be able to protect you."
"And what'd you say?"

"I said that I found it highly unlikely that any human would be able to stand against the forces of Heaven and Hell unless they knew of arcane methods of protection," Cas answered matter-of-factly. Dean did laugh this time, earning a knowing look from his friend. "That is how the law enforcement officials acted as well."

"Yeah, well, speaking about angels and demons is generally a sign of insanity down here."

"It saddens me that so many humans are unwilling to see my Father's world for what it is," Cas remarked quietly.

"If it helps any, them thinking your insane will probably save you from doing hard time if we were sticking around here."

Cas made a noise like he wasn't so sure that was a good thing, but Dean knew better. The detectives' words and threats about what could happen to Cas if he didn't cooperate still rang in his ears. He knew that if they were in a situation where escape was absolutely hopeless, he'd take that deal in a second.

'Cas ending up in prison would be bad enough, but considering how many angels and demons are looking for him? He'd be a sitting duck,' he thought. As it was, they were lucky Balthazar had carved the handy rib-tattoos into Cas, because the cops had taken whatever hex bags and weapons they had on them – along with the curse box – when they were processed at the station.

Something like a light bulb went on in Dean's head.

"Hey, I know how we can get out of here," he announced. "Why don't you call your brother down here? He can zap us out of here no problem."

Cas's face, which had briefly flickered with optimism, turned sober. "I am unable to do so."

"Why? The rib graffiti? Call him on the phone. You still get your one phone call, right?" Dean pointed out. He had used his to send Sam a coded message on one of their burner phones, but he highly doubted Cas had taken advantage of his.

"The medium of communication is not the issue. The idea itself is impossible at this juncture."

"Uh, why?"

"Balthazar is engaged elsewhere and calling for him now could threaten his life."

It was on the tip of Dean's tongue to say, 'so what?', which was a reflex with dealing with angels that weren't Cas, but from the grim set of his friend's face he realized this was something the ex-angel felt strongly about.

"Shit," he managed, rubbing his hand down his face in annoyance. Hand still resting on his chin, he asked, "Is this what you were talking about before? About your brother dream-walking you and things with the other angels going south?"

"Yes," Cas said, voice laced with resignation. "He brought me news that Raphael has killed our brother, Remiel, and stolen his staff."

"I'm going say that's a bad thing?"
"Remiel was the angel tasked with guarding the gates to Purgatory."

"Purgatory," Dean repeated, hours of research into biblical lore coming to the forefront of his mind. "I thought that was made up in, like, the Middle Ages." Off Cas's surprised expression, "What, you think Sam's the only one allowed to remember useless facts?"

"Purgatory is very real," Cas allowed. "It is where all creatures once possessed of a human soul end up. There they atone for their sins and cleanse themselves before Heaven is opened to them."

"So…why's Raphael interested in it?"

"Because he wishes to resurrect Lilith."

The silence rang between them while Dean tried to process that.

"Run that by me again?" he ordered, willing himself to have heard it wrong.

"You know that Raphael wishes to restart the Apocalypse, something he cannot do without the first and last seal. The first seal is a difficult, albeit possible, seal to recreate. The last…” Cas trailed off. "It can only ever be Lilith, and so Raphael is looking for her."

"No, that I kind of figured out for myself – what I want to know is why Lilith would be in Purgatory," Dean clarified. "Sam iced her – shouldn't she be, I dunno, dead?"

"She was killed neither by God or Death," Cas replied placidly. "If she were a regular demon, her essence would be scattered to the universe, as Gabriel's was."

"I'm sensing a 'but' here."

"But Lilith was the first demon," Cas went on.

"Yeah, yeah, human soul that Lucifer twisted," Dean said dismissively. "I get that that makes her a bit of a special snowflake, but enough to merit a Get Out of Death Free Card?"

"Lilith was not simply the first demon. She was the first angel to fall to humanity after Lucifer refused to bow to humanity," Cas explained gravely.

"Wait…what?"

"I was still young at the time, but I remember the event clearly," Cas went on. "Leliel was one of the most devoted of God's angels, so much so that she was charged with the protection of human women and their offspring during childbirth. But she was also devoted to Lucifer above all our siblings. When discord broke out between him and God, she sought to mend it."

"By becoming human?" Dean asked incredulously. "How'd she figure that was going to work?"

Cas was looking off into the middle distance, seeing or reliving something Dean could only guess at. "I believe she thought that by showing Lucifer the good and potential in humanity that she could help him change his mind. That they were worth her sacrifice of tearing out her grace and becoming like them."

"He obviously didn't see it that way."

"No. In Lucifer's eyes – in the eyes of many – rejecting the grace God gave her was tantamount to blasphemy. Even more so was the fact that she had convinced others to follow after her. Other angels who loved Lucifer and who wished to show him the error of his ways by example."
"So him torturing her until she turned into that demon bitch wasn't just him telling your Dad to get bent, huh?"

"No," Cas agreed sadly. "It was anger at what he believed to be the direst betrayal. When he finished with her, he did the same to the others – Belial, Marchosias, Alastair –"

"Hold on – Alastair?" Dean hissed, physically recoiling. "That bastard was an angel?"

"The creature that tortured you in Hell had not been an angel for millennia," Cas told him quietly. "But yes. Until Lucifer shattered him and remade him as a demon, he was one of the Host. An angel of healing, if you would believe. It has been so long, though, that even I often forget."

Dean was quiet as he tried to come to terms with this new knowledge, while Cas went on, "Once Lucifer's crimes were discovered, his disobedience to God's will could no longer be tolerated. Conflict arose, angels took sides – some believed as Lucifer did. Those that supported him fled Heaven for Hell, where the very environment poisoned and ate away their grace. Azazel was one of those. There was a terrible battle, and it ended only when God finally gave the order to lock Lucifer away and imprison his followers in the Pit. Michael obeyed, but by then the damage had been done. The Host was depleted and those demons that escaped Heaven's might began to tempt humans to sin."

Dean felt like his head was spinning, but he forced himself to focus. "And all this goes back to Lilith being in Purgatory how?"

"She is important both to the forces of Heaven and Hell. As such, her essence could not be left to the universe lest either side attempt to acquire it. Purgatory is neutral ground, and until now has been guarded by Remiel – the only angel neutral to the plight of either side."

"And Raphael killed Remiel," Dean reiterated, a sinking feeling in his stomach at the full implications. "He's trying to open the door and get her out. Shit – he really wasn't kidding about restarting Judgement Day, was he?"

"Raphael does not know how to kid," Cas agreed. "He has taken Remiel's staff, which has the power to open the gates."

"So he could already have her?" Dean asked, alarmed.

"No. There are certain rituals which must be performed and materials which he will find difficult to acquire," Cas assured him. "There is time – which is why Balthazar is unable to aid us at this juncture. He is – I believe the term is 'undercover'?"

"With Raphael?" Dean guessed.

"Yes. No doubt Raphael does not yet trust him, and if I were to contact him now he would be expected to kill me or hand me over to the Host," Cas affirmed. "Neither option is particularly convenient at the moment."

"Damn it, Cas, you've got Winchester luck," Dean said, shaking his head in disbelief. He let his head fall back against the bars of the cage. "Well, add it to the list of things we've got to deal with."

"No," the ex-angel said firmly. "You and Sam already have too much to worry over."

"Dude, it's not debatable," Dean told him pointedly. "You brought my family back, I'm gonna help you deal with yours." He grinned. "Besides, it's not completely unselfish. I'm really not down for the end of the world to start up again."
"But if you're caught –"

"Speaking of the end of the world – how are we going to get Adam out of the Cage without letting your dick brothers out as well?" Dean ploughed on, not wanting to hear Cas's doom-and-gloom speech.

"I do not know," Cas answered honestly. "It has never been done before I ensured Sam's return. Even if another archangel were to make the same sacrifice, the consequences of that action are far from favorable."

"Hey, being human doesn't suck that bad," Dean said lightly, but when Cas refused to meet his gaze, suspicion formed. "That is the consequence we're talking about, right Cas?"

"Perhaps, like all cages, Lucifer's has a weak spot," Cas suggested, ignoring Dean's question and shifting away. He stood up, beginning to pace. "You still retain the Horsemen's rings. We might be able to modify the magic to help us."

"You already know as well as I do what Death had to say to that," Dean muttered darkly. "And nice try changing the subject, man – what consequences?"

"Now is not the time," Cas replied dismissively. "We should be concentrating on finding a way out of here."

"We've got time," Dean retorted. "The cops didn't find Sam, which means he's probably working on a way to get us out right now – even if he wasn't, it's not like this is the first time I've been in trouble with the law. Right now, we're waiting for the opportune moment. So you can spill whatever it is you're keeping from me."

"I am keeping nothing from you, I am simply refraining from speaking on the matter as there is nothing we can do about it at present."

"That would be keeping stuff from me."

"We will need to locate the curse box," Cas went on, clearly pretending he couldn't hear Dean."We cannot afford to leave it here."

"Yeah, I somehow doubt Sam's going to want to call Sarah again after his latest fail," Dean finally said, deciding to let Cas's avoidance of the subject go this once. He made a mental note to bug him about it when they weren't sitting in a jail cell facing multiple charges.

"Considering the ritual was interrupted, the spirit may very well have escaped, but we might still gain some use from the box."

"Either way, it makes our job a hell of a lot harder," Dean sighed. "And not just the getting out of here part."

"I thought you said you were planning something."

Dean snorted. "You sound worried there."

"I am not worried. This prison is nothing like that of Heaven."

"Look at you, being all optimistic," Dean teased. "Being human's rubbing off on you."

Cas looked torn between pride and wariness. "That is what my brother says, although I do not think
he means it as a compliment the way you do."

"Yeah, well, your brother's a dick," Dean remarked. "I've never even met the guy and I know that."

Cas opened his mouth to say something to that, and whether it was an agreement or a retort, Dean would never know, because Cas's jaw clamped shut and he was suddenly turning to face the exit to the holding area. "What is that?"

Dean was about to reply, when he heard it as well. Outside the door, he could hear a commotion of people yelling orders and a cacophony of telephones ringing. In a police station, that usually meant only one thing.

"Something's happening on the outside," Dean said quietly. "And I have a hunch it probably has to do with our ghost…"

"…which is what brought us here," Sam finished. He swallowed, mouth dry from all the talking and surveyed Miriam speculatively.

There was a long lull in which she simply looked at him, her gaze scrutinizing where it had been thoughtful during his entire tale. He had taken a risk, confiding in her – the more people who knew the truth about him and Dean the more precarious their position – but Sam had also long since learned that there was no such thing as coincidence. And running into a heretofore forgotten branch of his family when he, Dean and Cas were desperate need of allies couldn't be an accident.

He hadn't told her everything. He had left out the specifics of his relationship with Ruby, and had implied that Adam had just ended up dragged into an undisclosed part of Hell, rather than being trapped in a cage with Michael and Lucifer. Otherwise, he had given her enough truth to hopefully make her think twice about shooting him.

Granted, his wrists were long since free and if she tried anything he could probably disarm her first, but that left more of a complication once he got out of the panic room.

"Well, you've either done a hell of a lot of research to come up with a story like that, or you've had some shit luck," Miriam finally said.

Sam nodded, wordless and expectant. She had yet to pronounce any kind of judgement on him, and he needed to know what his next move would be.

"That doesn't mean I trust you any more than before," she warned him. "Shit luck or not, you've made some real bad decision. Boy," she added as an afterthought with a wry twist to her mouth. "You're gonna have to square that at some point. But it's like you say – killing you would just be handing you to the angels, which we definitely don't want."

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. It was one less thing to worry about. Then he sobered up. "What about Dean and Cas? You said they were safe."

"Jail's safe," Miriam said bluntly.

Sam gaped. "They're in jail?"

"We needed them out of our hair for a bit while we talked to you," Miriam shrugged.
"And just approaching us and, I don't know, asking, was too much trouble?"

"Exactly what do you and your brother think of folk coming up to you out of nowhere and demanding who you are?"

Sam opened his mouth to argue, and then made a face in acknowledgement. Generally, the only people who did that were law enforcement, who the Winchesters liked to avoid like the plague. "Point."

"And you can stop pretending you didn't slip those ropes fifteen minutes ago," Miriam told him pointedly. "I wasn't born yesterday."

Sam blinked in surprise as Miriam chuckled mirthlessly and brought his wrists forward, massaging the feeling back into them.

"I've got pictures of you, somewhere," Miriam said suddenly, her face softening a little. "Mary sent them out after you were born. Invited me down to the baptism..." She shook her head, rueful. "There was a vampire nest down in Idaho that weekend, though, so I never made it..."

Sam allowed her a moment to reminisce, and then asked, "Are you going to tell them?"

"Hm?"

"The others. Christian and Mark, and whoever. Are you going to tell them who I am?"

"'Course I am. I don't keep secrets from my people," Miriam said firmly. "Only reason I didn't want any of them around while we talked is I know how they all react. Christian shoots first and asks questions later, Gwen thinks too much with her heart and Mark, bless his soul takes his cues from everyone else. As for Arlene... well."

Sam raised his eyebrows at the last name, because... no way could it be the same person.

"I'll tell 'em everything when it's relevant," Miriam went on. "Right now, there's this little matter of the ghost problem we've got to see to."

"About that," Sam started. "If this is your territory, why didn't you deal with that thing before all those people died?"

"Ingham County's a big enough place that patrolling it means we're not always here," she replied coolly. "It doesn't help we've been cleaning up a certain someone's mess over the past weeks. Just because the Apocalypse didn't happen don't mean all's right with the world."

Sam only just stopped himself from making a defensive retort.

"Speaking of our ghost – your friend thinks it's a sessho-seki?"

Another thing that Sam had carefully avoided was explaining too much about Castiel. He had told Miriam about the angels hauling Dean out of Hell, but he hadn't mentioned that Castiel had been the one to do it or that he was now human. Family or not, most hunters didn't adapt too easily to working with supernatural creatures, former angels or not.

"Yeah. And that it's extra powerful because it was made from a keystone."

"To get into Hell," Miriam said slowly, like she was still trying to understand.

"It might be," Sam granted. Then, more pointedly, "We never got the chance to find out."
"We saw a bunch of strangers edge onto a hunt and try to box up a spirit instead of exorcizing it," Miriam told him unapologetically. "For all we knew, you could have been looking to make some money."

Sam blinked. "On a ghost?"

"It's happened before," Miriam told him grimly. "Ran into some prissy British bitch in a graveyard outside Detroit bottling up the ashes of a local serial killer; apparently it's a hot commodity across the pond."

'Bela,' Sam thought with conviction, when there was a low, pounding knock on the panic room door.

"Yeah?" Miriam called, and the door slowly swung open to reveal several heavily armed people. Sam recognized Mark and Christian right off the bat, and to his surprise both of the women.

The first was of average height, with shoulder length, dark brown hair and almond shaped brown eyes. She wasn't particularly striking or commanding, but still Sam's felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Her face was uncannily familiar, not because he had met her before, but because he had seen a similar face before – both in the mirror every morning over the past month and in the frayed pictures of his mother that Dean kept with him at all times.

The second –

"You!" he gaped, staring at the pretty redhead that had been flirting with Cas earlier. She had one hand on Christian's arm, like she was steadying him. In return, he seemed to be unconsciously shielding her. It reminded Sam of the way he used to move around Jessica. "I thought you were a waitress."

"Ruthie's a family friend. We saved her from a poltergeist a few years back," the woman said cheerily. "When I said I needed to keep an eye on some people, she found me an extra apron. Real helpful of her."

"But…that whole bit with Cas…?"

"Your friend's a real cutie – a bit dim though," she told him seriously. "And sticks out like a sore thumb, which is why I marked him. I hope he won't take it personal, though." She bumped Christian's shoulder affectionately. "I'm an honest woman, after all."

"Apparently not," Sam bit out.

"We done with the slumber party in here?" Christian interrupted.

"You don't watch your mouth, I'll sew it shut," Miriam replied calmly.

"But I like his mouth," the redhead said, mouth curving up into a smile.

"You didn't grow up with it," the other young woman retorted in what Sam recognized as a longstanding argument.

"You've met Arlene. Christian's her husband," Miriam introduced, nodding at the redhead. "And that's his sister, Gwen." She gestured to Sam. "Folks, this is your cousin, Sam."

He startled at the frank use of his name, and noticed Gwen frown as well, like she was thinking about something. It looked too close to Dean's 'I'm figuring something out' face for Sam to be comfortable.
"Sam," Christian repeated, identical look on his face. Sam saw the exact moment when he got it, and he looked at Miriam with anger burning in his eyes. "You mean Winchester, don't you?"

The others recoiled at the name, which was a sign of just how bad it had gotten since the last time Sam had encountered hunters.

"That's not possible," Mark said, echoing his mother's earlier sentiments.

"How long have you been a part of this family?" Miriam wondered out loud, her amusement more of a warning. "Never mind the whys and wherefores of how it happened, the point is it's obviously possible. Now you're all going to sit tight and hold off on any stupid ideas about shooting Sam here until you've heard the full story."

She spoke with the same hard-as-nails quality in her voice that Dad had always used. Sam doubted Miriam Campbell, raised a hunter, had ever been in the army, but she certainly acted like she had.

"Oh, I'm all for it," Christian said snidely. "Doesn't mean I'm not going to shoot him at the end of it though."

Arlene kicked him surreptitiously, although even she was looking at Sam with barely contained dislike now.

"Can we maybe put the whole committing murder issue on the backburner for a bit?" Gwen spoke up, sounding annoyed. "That's not why we came back here." She met Miriam's gaze. "Calls are coming in over the scanner left and right. People are being gutted in the streets, but no one can give any description of who's doing it."

"Looks like your ghost is out of its prison," Miriam said grimly, frowning at Sam.

"Bang up job," Christian said.

"Hey, you were the ones who called the cops," Sam shot back.

"It doesn't matter how it happened, what matters is fixing it," Miriam stated. "Right now we've got a spirit on the loose and no remains to bury."

"And tricking a ghost into vanquishing itself it hard enough on a normal day, never mind that by now it probably knows it's being hunted," Arlene piped up.

"I repeat – bang up job," Christian growled.

"There are other ways to stop a ghost," Miriam stated. "My Gran wrote about some in her journal, but I'm sure there are other ways." She met Sam's gaze. "I bet that friend of yours knows a few, too. You said he had a good memory for the supernatural, right?"

"Cas?" Sam asked. "Probably, yeah."

"Which means me might want to get him out of the joint before we go to work," Miriam said decisively. She gestured at the door. "Okay, people, let's go."

She brushed past Sam and followed the others out of the room. Sam made a motion to follow, but was stopped by Mark and Christian putting their hands out to stop him. Christian followed through with a rough shove that send Sam back a few steps.

"What are you – you're just going to leave me?" Sam demanded.
Miriam reached out to smack Christian upside the head. "That's not how you treat a lady."

"He's not a –" Christian began to protest.

"I don't care," Miriam snapped. "Get outta here."

Christian threw one last annoyed look at Sam, and left the room.

"Thanks," Sam said, taking a step forward, but was stopped by a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"That boy might not be the most polite, but he's got a point," she told him firmly. "You're staying here."

"What?"

"If what you say is true, we've got to make double sure you and your brother don't fall into the hands of Heaven or Hell. Like it or not, you're under house arrest until we can figure stuff out," Miriam told him as she turned away and left the room.

Before he could react, she was gone and the panic room door was shut tightly.

"Hey – I can help!" he yelled, banging on the door with a fist.

The slat in the door slipped open, and he saw Miriam's eyes.

"You can sit tight until we get back," she told him firmly. "You might be family, but I still don't trust you."

The metal latch slid shut again and Sam yelled out a curse as he punched at the iron door.

"Is someone going to tell us what's going on around here?" Dean asked as he and Cas were led from the containment area, both cuffed. The skeleton force of officers at the station were running to and fro, answering phones and gesturing for several hysterical people, some covered in blood, to sit in the waiting area. "'Cause if we're about to watch a re-enactment of that scene from Terminator, I'm telling you right now, I'm so with the killer machines on this one."

"Shut up," Special Agent Ochoa growled. "We've got a situation on our hands right now. If I had my way, you two would be rotting back there until we had time to get to you. But your lawyers insisted on meeting with you now."

'Lawyers,' Dean thought with a frown. Probably the court appointed variety, which meant that Sam was not trying to get him and Cas out. He didn't mind – it meant his brother was probably out trying to do damage control on the pissed off spirit. 'Guess it's time to dust off the old 'great escape' playbook.'

Dean shrugged at Cas, who nodded as though to say he would follow Dean's lead on this, and they remained quiet as Ochoa led them past the interrogation room where Dean had been interviewed before and into a private conference room. He caught snatches of conversation as they walked by, confirming his suspicions about the recently freed ghost.

" – she was fine, and then the next minute she's got her guts spilling out –"
"– we were talking, and then he just –"

"– I've never seen so much blood –"

Ochoa sneered as he gestured for them to enter the room, and Dean shot him a winning smile as he closed the door in the guy's face. He almost missed Henricksen right now, though he was glad for the lack of follow-through these latest cops had. If he and Cas could play nice with the lawyers and make the rest of the feds think they were just run-of-the-mill dirt bag criminals, it would be easier to get out. He didn't exactly want a manhunt on top of everything else.

Turning to the two men already seated in the room, Dean felt himself tense up. The narrow-faced, blue eyed man was eyeing him judgementally, while the shorter blond man seemed unsure of whether he wanted to focus on Dean or Cas; their scrutiny was not what bothered him though. He recognized the subtle tension in their carriage, like they were prepared to spring at the slightest disturbance, and glancing down at their hands he saw the telltale burns and scars that came from fending off knife attacks.

Hunters.

"Well, look at that, Jimmy," Dean said, with confidence he didn't exactly feel. Inside, his thought were whirring a hundred miles a second. What were hunters doing here, looking for him and Cas? Had they been found out? It didn't seem likely, considering the chick make-over, but maybe someone had let something slip. "Looks like we got the butch lawyers. Should really help our case."

The taller man snorted. "Cut the crap. You know as well as I do that we've got no intention of you getting to court."

"Oh yeah?" Dean said, eyes flitting around the room for some kind of weapon. The chair was the most immediate thing that came to mind, and there was a metal siding to the table that if pried off might have a decent edge. He had no idea how the hunters had found him and Cas, but he wasn't about to go easily. "Well, with a winning attitude like that, why would you?"

The taller man smirked, the gesture not reaching his eyes and looked him over. There was something really familiar about him that made Dean's stomach waver. "You'd be Dean then, I take it?"

That comment caused Cas to give a sharp intake of breath, while Dean tensed even more if possible.

"I think you got the wrong case file there, mister," he said slowly, bracing himself in case it came to a fight. Granted, there were likely police watching the exchange to ensure there was no violence, but he'd take their intervention any day. It might just give him and Cas the chance to slip out. "The name's Erica."

"Sure it is," the blond man snorted, exchanging an amused look with the other man. "Well, Erica, the way we see it, you and Jimmy here are up shit creek right now. And we'd like to help you."

"Really," Dean said flatly. He met Cas's gaze, trying to communicate silently that if push came to shove, they were going to have to fight their way out of this one. The barely-there inclination of Cas's chin told him the ex-angel had gotten the message.

"Really. Especially considering all that trouble going on out there's pretty much on you," the blue-eyed man said, nodding at the commotion outside the conference room. "We've already managed to get that curse-box of yours from evidence. And Sam – I mean, Jane – already told us what you were trying to do with it."

Dean froze, mouth going dry. Worry hit him then that the reason Sam hadn't tried to contact him yet
wasn't that he was out trying to gank a ghost, but because he'd been caught by some hunters. And if they knew their identities…

"Where is he?" Dean asked, abandoning all pretense.

The blue-eyed man smiled unpleasantly. "He's safe."

"And we should trust you, why?"

I don't particularly care if you trust me or not," He leaned forward, just out of Dean's range. "As a rule, I don't trust other hunters – especially not ones who jumpstarted the damn Apocalypse – but the plan is to get you and your buddy out of here, and so I'm sticking to it. But it doesn't call for you being conscious. In fact, you're welcome to try what you want. You mess with my family, I'll end you whether we're blood or not."

The threat didn't make sense on its own, but there was a challenge and warning in the man's eyes whose particular blend Dean had only ever seen once before in his life: in the gaze of his own grandfather.

"Holy shit, you're a Campbell," Dean uttered in surprise as realization took hold.

Sam had been pacing around inside the panic room for an hour, trying to figure out the next move. Although the Campbells hadn't seemed inclined to kill him right away, their decision to lock him up to keep him "safe" worried him. He had been on this side of that particular brand of logic before, and it hadn't worked out so well.

'What are you talking about, Sam? I think it worked out splendidly,' a familiar voice murmured in his ear. 'You let me out, didn't you?'

Sam spun around, half-expecting to see Lucifer smiling at him with the same penitent, sympathetic expression he had worn in Sam's dreams for the past year, only to find himself staring at the bare iron door.

'Damn it,' he thought, trying to regulate his breathing which had gotten a little labored.

Whatever delusions he was suffering from, they were getting worse. He pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting his eyes shut and tried to remember if Dean had ever suffered from daylight reminders of his trip down under.

'No, Dean's always come at night,' he contemplated. 'With the exception of those times in the day when he just gets real quiet. Like he's re-living it. But he never mentioned visits.'

Sam wondered, not for the first time, if the demon blood he had ingested had permanently changed his perceptions. True, he was no longer craving the stuff thanks to Cas's deal, but what if it had knocked something loose within his psyche?

He was distracted from that train of thought by the sound of voices and movement outside the panic room. He straightened up, stopping a few paces away from the door; his muscles went taut as he waited for it to open, still not exactly sure what the game plan was.

When he recognized one particular voice, though, he relaxed. 'Dean.'
There was the grating sound of a bolt being retracted and the door opened, revealing Sam's visibly pissed-off brother and their ruffled ex-angel.

"Sam?" Dean's expression softened a little and he strode forward, clasping him roughly by the shoulder that Sam knew was synonymous with 'I'm glad to see you'. While Dean's eyes flicked over him as though looking for any kind of physical damage, he deadpanned, "Great work on surveillance, bitch."

Sam snorted. "How was your visit with the cops, jerk?"

"Like going to Disney World," Dean retorted sarcastically. "It was Henricksen all over, but this time there're two of them."

"The FBI's involved again?" Sam asked as Castiel joined them. "Damn it."

Which meant their disguised bodies had just lost a lot of effectiveness; suddenly Miriam's throwaway comment about getting their faces plastered all over the news made more sense. They were going to have to be extra careful now, Sam knew. Despite the fact that they were now on the cops' radar, their new identities were still a lot safer than their real ones. Dodging the cops was a lot easier than dodging angels, demons and hunters.

'Although,' Sam thought as he frowned at Christian, Gwen and Mark, who were eyeing the Winchesters like they were about to spontaneously combust, 'maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.'

Miriam and Arlene were out of sight, but Sam could hear them moving around and talking somewhere beyond the panic room. Judging by the echoes and the distant sound of static, they were far away – there was probably a corridor or passage out there.

"How'd you get out?" Sam asked his brother.

Dean jerked his head in the direction of Christian and Mark. "These guys are nuts, that's how. They built a bomb in a janitor's closet and then pushed us out a two storey window when it went off."

Sam pursed his lips. "Not exactly subtle."

"We didn't have time for subtle," Mark stated with a shrug.

"Seriously? That's how you treat family?" Dean demanded, shooting a nasty look at Christian. "You people are so off the Christmas list."

"Too bad," Gwen retorted. "Miriam makes a mean turducken, and I'd sell my soul for some of Arlene's apple pie."

Dean's expression seemed to darken at the mention of Arlene, who he had obviously recognized as the waitress from the diner, and didn't even rise to the pie bait for once.

"If you guys are done re-enacting the latest episode of The View, maybe we could actually get back to the job?" Christian sneered. "You kept Rain Man here from speaking his piece about how to get rid of a ghost the whole way –" He jerked his head in Castiel's direction, " – now we brought you to see your partner's okay, so spill."

Dean smirked humourlessly, the expression Sam often saw grace his brother's face when he was trying to make life difficult for someone. "You didn't say the magic word."

Christian probably would have taken a swing at him right then if Castiel hadn't intervened.
"Your respective attempts to intimidate one another is neither useful nor constructive," he told them, the gaze he fixed upon Dean almost chastising before he went on, "If we can pinpoint the general location of the spirit, I can possibly draw it to myself. I am surprised it didn't seek me out immediately after it was released."

"Why would it?" Mark wanted to know.

"I was the one who called it out of its resting place and attempted to place it within the curse box. It would consider me a threat to its existence," Castiel explained. "Likely it took so long to realize it was free that it lost track of me. And in that time, it was distracted by other victims."

"That's…specific," Christian remarked, giving Castiel a distrustful once-over.

"Cas knows his shit," Dean told him shortly, raising an eyebrow questioningly at Sam as though to ask if the Campbells knew about their friend's former nature. Sam inclined his head incrementally to the side to assure him that, no, he hadn't mentioned it, and approval flashed in his brother's eyes.

"What good does bringing the spirit to you do, though? Other than getting shish kebobed?" Gwen wanted to know. "Without any remains to burn, it's not exactly the most solid plan."

"That depends," Sam spoke up, thinking back on a few cases where getting rid of a ghost's remains hadn't been the easiest job; cases like the ghost ship and the spirit of the serial killer sprang to mind. "Maybe we can trap the thing until we can transfer it to the curse box."

"How?"

"The incantation I used before would still be viable," Castiel suggested.

"So what, we're just gonna let it try and gut you and then we all jump out and put a ring of salt around it?" Dean asked, incredulous.

"Not us." Miriam had returned, followed closely by Arlene; Miriam was armed and looked about ready to set out, while Arlene was still casually dressed and wore a disappointed frown. "We." She pointed at Sam and Dean. "You two are staying here."

"Excuse me?" Dean demanded. "Screw the fact that this is a bad idea that could get Cas killed, never mind you people, but if you think for a second I'm gonna let you bench me –!"

"You haven't got much of a choice, kiddo," Miriam cut him off. "You're both still on Heaven's watch list. Your decisions nearly cost us the world once." Sam ignored the startled expression on Dean's face before his eyes flicked to Sam, less approving at this reveal. "Right now, we've got a responsibility to keep you safe above all else."

"From freakin' Casper the vengeful nobody?" Dean spat.

"From the ghost that's now killed at least thirty more people," Miriam snapped. "And you're gonna just accept that until we get back. And then we can come to some better arrangement when we get back."

Something rang false in her tone, which made both Sam and Dean tense up.

Sam knew better than to see Miriam's words as a comfort or some misplaced sense of familiar affection. There was a respect for the blood kinship there – he could sense that – but her tone spoke of duty and the hardness in her eyes of resigning herself to a difficult job.
A suspicion about her true motives began to form at the back of his mind, and he didn't like it.

Neither did Dean, it seemed.

"Yeah, well, you can go screw yourself, lady, 'cause we're leaving – come on Sam. Cas." He took a step away from the center of the panic room, only to have Christian plant himself in front of him. "You ever want kids, I'd get out of my way, McDouchebag."

"Try it, princess," Christian shot back. "If you think I have a problem hitting a fake girl, you've got another thing coming."

Dean was the one to try to make a move this time, and once again stopped by Castiel.

"I will cooperate," the former angel broke in.

Dean froze, gaping at his friend in disbelief. "Dude, what the hell? We are not going along with this!"

"I disagree with the decision to keep you here, however your safety is of utmost importance to me," Castiel told him firmly. "If that is the price in this case, I will pay it. Miriam has said we will revisit the issue when we return."

The subtle tightening around Miriam's eyes didn't sit well with Sam's burgeoning suspicions. Under normal circumstances Dean probably would have noticed too, but his brother was too busy looking at Castiel like he had just kicked him in the gut.

"Cas –"

"If I can help stop the spirit, I must do what I can," Cas went on, voice almost beseeching Dean to trust him. "I did have something to do with its release."

"After they called the cops to interrupt us!" Dean snarled, making another move to come forward.

This time the Campbells didn't bother physically restraining him, instead raising their weapons warningly.

Dean narrowed his eyes at the shotgun Christian was pointing at him. "Go ahead. You'll be the first one I come back for when I get raised."

"I might not be able to kill you, but how fun do you think it'll be to hobble around with a busted kneecap or two?" Christian asked conversationally.

"Try it!"

"Oh, I wouldn't be aiming for you," Christian said unkindly, not taking his eyes from Dean as he trained the gun on Sam. "You probably wouldn't care about you – but I heard this whole mess started because you don't like the idea of your brother getting into scrapes."

Dean went white from rage, but he also stopped trying to leave.

Christian chuckled. "Match."

"If you two are done with the measuring sticks, you mind if we get going?" Gwen broke in, sounding impatient. "We still have to retrace the ghost's path from the museum – which we can't do with the extra security force there."
"Yeah, yeah, keep your panties on, half-pint," Christian grumbled, backing out of the panic room with the others while the Winchesters remained standing. Castiel murmured something apologetic to them as he followed the hunters out, all the while fixing Dean with a gaze Sam couldn't quite decipher, before the door slammed shut.

Dean was already rounding on Sam.

"I hope he's exercising enough free will for your taste," he growled, "because now we're stuck in here and he's out with those lunatics – lunatics who for some reason seem to know a bit more about us than the average hunter does. Wanna explain that, Sammys?"

"I had a gun to my head and had to think fast," Sam said defensively. "At least we're safe for now, they're not going to kill us. That gives us time to work out some kind of plan."

"Right. A plan. In a locked panic room," Dean said, furious. "Meanwhile, Cas is getting ready to go toe-to-toe with a pissed off spirit with nothing but a bag of dicks for support."

"He'll be fine, Dean – remember what I said about easing off the training wheels?" Sam soothed. "Besides, the Campbells are supposed to be first rate hunters –"

"This isn't about fucking training wheels!" Dean hissed. "This is about me not trusting that giant douchebag out there not to get Cas killed if he figures out what he used to be."

"They wouldn't – he's human now anyway," Sam argued, also lowering his voice. Although it wasn't likely anyone could hear more than muffled screaming through the iron and concrete, he didn't intend to take the chance. "Besides, I don't know if you've noticed, but they're working an angle. I don't think killing Cas is part of it."

"Oh yeah? And what is part of it?"

"I'm still working on that," Sam replied. "I'll let you know when I've thought it through a bit more."

"Yeah, well, you've got plenty of freaking time," Dean grumbled, kicking half-heartedly at one of the walls. "I don't see us getting out of here until they let us out. If they let us out."

Which, unfortunately, was something Sam was having misgivings about, too.

Dean was fully expecting to sit and rot in the panic room with his brother for at least a few hours, and so when he heard the telltale grinding sound of the door being opened not twenty minutes later, he was torn between appreciation and wariness. From his spot in the corner of the room, Sam glanced up as well, frowning in confusion.

The confusion turned to outright shocked amazement when the door was pulled open to reveal not the Campbells, but a more familiar and infinitely more welcome face.

"Sarah?" Sam gasped, crawling to his feet.

"You weren't picking up your phone," Sarah answered wryly.

"How did you find us?" Dean demanded, pushing off the wall. "Scratch that, how did you get in here?"
"That would be me," another familiar voice piped up, hauling the door a little farther open. Donald Stark peered in at the brothers with a smug expression on his face.

"Oh, man, if you weren't a psycho witch married to a homicidal maniac, I could kiss you right now," Dean said seriously, striding out of the panic room as fast as he could; Sam followed suite. The hallway wasn't much better, in terms of bareness, but it was at least more open.

"If it's all the same, I'm not into guys," Don replied easily, eyes doing an appraising once-over of Dean's body. "Even if the packaging says otherwise."

Dean rounded on Sarah, goodwill gone. "You told him?"

Even Sam was staring at Sarah like she had lost her mind.

"He and Maggie already knew you were in different bodies, remember?" Sarah replied, meeting Dean's gaze without any sign of guilt over spilling the secret to a bunch of witches.

"It's actually the only reason Maggie signed off on this little road trip," Don spoke up before Dean could untwist his tongue and berate Sarah for her lack of judgement.

"How 'bout that," Dean croaked. "Where is Mrs. Witch, anyway?"

"She'd love to be here, but she had a business meeting with representatives of the DAR," Don said easily, and then noticed Sam and Dean's tense expressions. "Oh, you're worried about that whole Apocalypse thing." He made a dismissive gesture. "Don't be."

"Yeah, we're gonna need a little more than that," Dean grated as he followed Sarah and Don up the concrete hallway to the ladder leading to the main part of the compound.

"I'm a big-picture man – I know how things would end up if the End of Days were to happen," Don said wryly. "Heaven wins, Mags and I get smote within an inch of our lives. Hell wins, we get to be slaves for about a second longer, and then smote within an inch of our lives. Demon mother-in-law, remember?" He shook his head. "No one's going to hear about you two from us."

"Oh, well, that's good to know," Dean grumbled, somehow feeling less than reassured. He shot Sarah the stink eye and pointed at her. "We're gonna have to sit down and have a little chat some time about talking about family business with the creepy crawlies."

Sarah rolled her eyes.

"Speaking of family," Sam said quietly as they entered the main area, and Dean looked up to see what his brother was staring at.

Arlene was slumped over the nearest desk, hair splayed out in a tangle around her. When Sam made an anxious noise and went to check on her, Sarah put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "She's okay. Just asleep."

"Sarah was specific about not killing any hunters," Don said, sounding slightly irritated by the directive. "She seems to think that would give you two more trouble for some reason."

"Good judgement call there," Sam said shakily, and Dean could sort of sympathize with the spirit of the sentiment; he didn't like the idea of having any more of their family's blood on his hands, directly or indirectly.

Even so…
"These guys are dicks," Dean muttered, grimacing at Arlene's still form.

"You're just pissed because she came on to Cas," Sam told him with the hint of teasing in his words. "Don't know why, seeing as how it's obvious she didn't mean anything by it. She was just trying to investigate all of us."

"Exactly," Dean said angrily. "She could have targeted either of us – but no, she went for the guy who doesn't know any better."

"Dude, she thought we were women."

"Still."

It bothered him, because he had been the one to give in and try to encourage Cas to pursue her. What if the ex-angel had, and the bitch had led him along? What if Cas had actually started to like her and then found out that it was a lie? Dean wasn't sure he could stomach a broken-hearted ex-angel on top of everything else.

He blinked, realizing he had put an excessive amount of thought into the whole ordeal.

'Damn it, this is why relationships are stupid,' he thought with an inner groan and looked away from Arlene – only to meet Sarah's all-too-knowing gaze. 'And we're heading off that conversation right now,' he decided, snapping out loud, "Why are you even here, anyway?"

"What, I don't get any declarations of devotion?" Sarah asked. "Dean, I'm hurt." She returned her attention to Sam, "I thought the spirit you were hunting might have gotten to you, so I asked Maggie and Don to find out if you were still alive."

"Hence why we're here in this lovely establishment," Don said, sweeping his hand around the bare walls. "Which was a pain in the ass to find, by the way."

"How did you even do that?" Sam wanted to know. "I'm pretty sure this place is warded to keep anything supernatural out."

"I got us past those after Don did a blood spell to locate you," Sarah said, unabashed. Once again taking a cue from the looks on Sam and Dean's faces, she added, "I don't know if you've noticed, but you two tend to bleed a lot."

"You think?" Dean deadpanned, looking around the main area of the Campbell's home base. He hadn't seen much of it on his first trip down, having been a little preoccupied with getting to Sam and making sure he was okay. Christian and Mark had been jerks on the way over and insisted on blindfolds like it was some kind of Batcave deal.

Looking at it now he felt a little impressed. It was like Bobby's place and Dad's storage locker together, only better organized.

The walls were corrugated and stacked with a full variety of weapons and supplies that made the Impala's – 'No, the Charger's,' he reminded himself tensely – trunk look like a kid's toy chest. If the situation hadn't been what it was, he would have loved to peruse the arsenal there the same way Sam perused books at a library.

Sarah was still talking.

"...As soon as I found out what you were dealing with, I tried to get a hold of you," Sarah was saying to Sam.
"I was kind of busy being held against my will," Sam told her, actually sounding apologetic.

'The freak,' Dean rolled his eyes at the almost misty look his brother was getting over the notion that Sarah had come looking for him. 'Oh, yeah, Sam is 'definitely' over her. No danger there…'

Out loud, he asked, "So what exactly are we dealing with? Other than a pissed off ghost our idiot family made us accidentally set free?"

"A cursed pissed off ghost that will eventually see the resurrection and release of a particularly powerful nasty?" Don suggested.

The brothers stared at him.

"What?" Sam inquired flatly.

"I found out after I got off the phone with you last time," Sarah spoke up, businesslike. "It wasn't adding up that I couldn't find more on this Kurosawa guy. You know, the guy who made the sculpture? So I called Don."

"I have a few business associates in Tokyo," Don explained to answer the unasked question.

"Except when I told him the guy's name, Don said that he wasn't an artist."

"Oh, the term is debatable. I'm sure some consider him a great artist, just not the kind you're talking about," Don said grimly.

"You're about to tell me he's some kind of pagan vengeance god, aren't you?" Dean groaned.

"Not quite. More like a sociopathic witch with attention deficit disorder that Maggie and I met a few hundred years back. A real piece of work – he targeted everyone without a care, whether it was humans, witches, demons...it didn't matter that we have our own kind of code, he just wanted more power. Some of the most creative disasters in history are on him."

"And then he decided to dabble in sculpting?" Dean asked in disbelief. "Seems kind of low key, if this guy's all that bad."

"Just because someone's a major league asshole doesn't mean they don't still dabble in minor douchebaggery," Don said humourlessly. "The cheap bastard swindled me out of thirty thousand yen back in the '40s."

"You're talking about him like he's not around anymore," Sam remarked, wary.

"He's not," Don agreed. "About six years ago he came across a Trickster who took a dislike to him. From what I've heard, they were both conceited assholes that decided the planet wasn't big enough for the both of them, aired their philosophical differences and Kurosawa ended up taking the express train to the afterlife. I actually thought that was the end of him."

"But?" Sam prompted.

"But then Sarah brought this cursed sculpture of yours to my attention, and the possibility of a ghost being trapped in a keystone to Hell," Don explained and Dean couldn't help sending Sarah another glower for how much she had told the witch. Whether he was supposedly on their side or not, it felt like more and more people were being let in on the secret.

If she noticed, she ignored it. "Don asked to see what I had dug up on where the sculpture had been
and all of the unexplained disembowelments associated with it. The exhibit's been in twelve cities over the past six years, as you know, and there have been deaths in all of them. The number was up to seventy-eight the last time I checked."

"That's more than the count we have," Sam frowned.

"I dug a little deeper and looked into some of the more loosely related crimes," Sarah explained. "And it's still only the ones that were in the unsolved crimes system, so there could be dozens more that I haven't found."

"How did no one notice this?" Sam asked. "Even the police aren't that stunned."

"Who's going to connect a bunch of weird murders with a rock sculpture?" Dean queried, and then addressed Don. "So that's it? He stuck some samurai in a rock hundreds of years ago and then decided it would be a good idea to put it in a sculpture? Why?"

"It sounds like an insurance policy, to me," Don said.

"What do you mean?"

"Kurosawa was a crafty bastard," Don said wryly. "If he was anything like me and Maggie, he had a plan for the off chance he lost to the Trickster." He clasped his hands thoughtfully. "See, Kurosawa may have sold his soul to a demon to get his power, but he was a devout worshipper of Izanami."

"Who?"

"The Japanese goddess of death," Sam spoke up.

"Right. She happens to be one of those gods that's open to deals," Don explained. "And hers are pretty straightforward. She likes to exchange souls for souls – a thousand souls for one, to be exact."

"So you think he set up the killing stone to get those souls and somehow...funnel them to the underworld?" Sam asked, frowning. "And once he hits the magic number, he gets out?"

"I think that's exactly what he did."

"That doesn't explain why his puppet ghost has been sticking to people of samurai descent, though," Dean pointed out.

"The guy was a bit of a xenophobic prick," Don allowed. "Likely that was part of the directive Kurosawa left."

"Well, shit," Dean said, not knowing what else to try. "Any way to undo his handiwork?"

"There's no counter spell that I know of," Don said. "But I know the spell he used in the first place. A little bit of tweaking and I could probably summon the ghost from the aether and then trap it again. Seal it back in the stone, as it were."

"What about the curse box?" Sam asked.

Don shook his head. "No, it would have to be its original prison. There's residual energy there that I can use as a kind of transmitter to bring the ghost to it. The stone will become a killing stone again, but I don't see any other options. The longer that thing is out of it prison, the more powerful it becomes and the more people it kills – which means the likelier it is that Kurosawa will be back. Trust me when I say no one wants that."
"But if you put it back in the stone, we can't use it," Sam said quietly.

"There are other keystones out there, Sammy," Dean said, both harsh and apologetic at the same time. "I want to get to Adam too, but if we let this thing stay loose that's more people dead because we screwed up."

Sam graced him with a long, measured look, like he was struggling with his good sense, and the nodded. "Okay."

"Good, that's settled," Dean said, rubbing his hands together in a mock-up of anticipation. He jerked his head towards the still unconscious Arlene. "Better take her with us. Never know when we're going to need some leverage."

Leverage turned out to be a little useless, in the end, because when they made it to the museum, the Campbells were long gone. They had left a chaotic mess of unconscious guards and a completely ruined security system in their wake too, Sam noticed as he, Dean and Don strode through the entrance way toward the exhibit housing the killing stone. Sarah had remained behind in case Arlene awoke from Don's sleep spell.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Dean said, speaking for the first time since they piled into Don's rather showy Mercedes ("It's still less conspicuous than the Corvette," Don had maintained when Dean shot it a dirty look.). "And it's not just because they're obviously not here anymore."

Sam made a noise of affirmation which turned into one of dismay when they reached the wing of the exhibit that housed the sculpture.

Or what was left of it, at least.

"Damn it," he heard Dean curse at the sight of the completely demolished piece of art.

It was twisted and melted in its frame, shards and whole pieces of black rock littering the floor surrounding it. There was a sharp, burning metallic scent in the air that Sam associated with acid, and parts of the frame still let off smoke. It confirmed his theory that the Campbells had done this, and not the ghost. And considering the spirit had long since been released, there was only one reason that they would have destroyed the piece.

"They were going for the keystone, weren't they?" Sam said dully, inwardly cursing himself. He kicked at the ruins of the sculpture, hating himself for having trusted them just because they were kin.

"You don't know that," Dean said roughly, although from the gleam of angry doubt in his eyes, Sam didn't think his brother was completely convinced. "Cas was with them. He knows how important it was to us, I bet he would have done his best to make sure it was protected. And it's not like it's here, right?"

Don toed some of the rocks. "Nothing here giving off any kind if vibes."

Sam shook his head, feeling disheartened. "I don't see how he could have protected it – not with Miriam calling the shots."

"Hey, you're the one who's always telling me not to underestimate him," Dean insisted. "For a nerdy little angel, he's got some skills."
"And if he didn't manage to?"

"Then we go to him and make sure his insane plan goes off without a hitch," Dean said. "Which means stepping in before those assholes get him killed." He addressed Don. "Hey, what do you need to work that witch GPS of yours?"

"Blood, generally," Don answered, sounding amused.

"As long as it's just that," Dean hedged. "Come on, let's get out of here. We've got a stop to make."

He was already heading back out of the building, a determined set to his shoulders.

"He's kind of obvious, isn't he?" Don chuckled as he and Sam followed Dean, his jovial nature seemingly unaffected by the direness of their situation. Sam was barely given enough time to parse what the witch meant, when Don went on, "On that note, I've got a bone to pick with you."

Sam blinked, wary, because one of the things you didn't want a witch talking about was anything involving bones. "Uh…sure?"

"What are your intentions Sarah?" Don went on, making Sam stumble a little.

"Seriously?" he squeaked, much to his embarrassment.

"Because I haven't seen her drop everything and fly across three state lines since that time her father almost died, which means she thinks a great deal of you," Don went on like he didn't notice Sam's discomfort. "And considering you and your brother are trying to get to Hell, I'm going to take a guess and say long-term relationships aren't in your five-year plan – or your five week plan, whatever."

"Are you – the guy who's actually cheated on his wife and got tracked down by an angry one-night stand – trying to give me dating advice?" Sam asked, trying not to sound as weirded out as he was.

"No, I'm trying to give you life advice," Don told him unsmilingly. "Sarah's like a sister to me. In fact, she reminds me very much of my actual little sister."

"And where's she?" Sam challenged, mildly annoyed at the surreal situation of a witch giving him the protective older brother speech.

"She was raped and murdered by Ottomans before I became a witch."

"Oh," Sam said, wincing. "Sorry."

"Mhmmm," Don made a noise, not taking his attention off of Sam. "Heard of the Black Death?"

"Of course."

"Started out with the guy that did it to her," Don told him coolly. "And his family."

A heavy feeling hit Sam in the gut. "Oh."

"I'll admit, my restraint wasn't great in those first years," Don said quietly. "But just imagine what eight hundred years of practice has done for my creativity?"

"Point taken," Sam ground out.

"Good. Just so we're on the same page," Don said. He stared Sam down for a long moment, and
then nodded to himself and quickened his step, taking off in the same direction as Dean. Sam
watched the empty space where he had been, and ran a hand through his hair in agitation.

'Whatever happened to falling for the girl next door, hey, Sam?' Lucifer whispered in his ear, and
Sam jerked around, only to be confronted with an empty viewing room.

Swallowing, he turned and ran to catch up with the others.

After leaving the museum, the four of them drove to the street corner where Sam and Dean had
parked the Charger earlier the day before. With the exception of a parking ticket they would never
pay, it hadn't been touched – probably because the Campbells didn't expect Dean and Sam to need it
if they were trapped in the compound panic room.

It didn't take long to dig through the trunk for the book of road maps that Dean kept in case their
phone GPS failed, or to rifle through the laundry bag for one of Cas's blood encrusted shirts.

Using a generous dollop of holy water to eke out a few fluid drops of blood, Don wandered over to
the map of Lansing which the brothers and Sarah had spread out over the hood of the car. They
waited as he chanted something in what Sam guessed to be Romanian, and Sam found himself
reminded of the ritual Bobby had done to find Lilith the day Dean's deal came due.

He shuddered, disliking the fact that if things went wrong, Castiel might end up the one with
shredded guts. He could only imagine what Dean felt about the entire thing.

There was a flare, red flames bursting from the Don's palm, and Don tipped it over the map, sending
damp trickles of blood down onto the paper. For a second, Sam expected it to seep right through, but
instead the droplets swirled and swerved across the lines in the map representing streets and
highways, coming to rest in the lower corner of the map. It was there that the moisture sank into the
paper, bleeding into it until it blurred an entire part of the chart.

"That's the college area," Sarah said, leaning over and tapping the red smudge. "Looks like the
student center building."

"Makes sense," Sam agreed. "It's the most likely place for there to be a significant Asian population
– I mean, lots of international students, right?"

Dean glanced at his watch. "School will be starting up in a few hours. If I were Miriam and them, I'd
be setting up a trap right now. They're probably banking on the ghost being drawn there anyway,
what with so many tasty targets." He clenched is fists. "I bet they stick Cas right in the middle of it."

"So we get in the middle of it, too," Sam said, a plan already forming in his head.

It wasn't too difficult to break into the atrium of the student center from the roof, especially
considering the maintenance door was hanging off its hinges in a way that told Dean the Campbells
had already been through.

He hefted his shotgun, half of him hoping for the chance to take a few shots at Christian, ghost be
dammed. Sam seemed to recognize the look, because he shook his head and nodded for them to
proceed.

"I feel like those teenagers in that movie about the SATs," Don remarked lightly, earning a glare
from both the brothers. "Oh, relax, if any of them jump out at us because they hear me talking, I'll twist their heads around so they can look at their own asses."

"Uh, thanks but no thanks," Sam said quietly.

"But feel free to rough them up as much as you can without actually killing them," Dean put in.

Don snorted as they kept going, entering the main section of the atrium. They did go quiet this time, though, nearing a railing for the main staircase. Dean saw that lines of salt and iron had been lined along any of the entrances. Chancing a glance downward, he could make out the familiar shape of Cas in the center of the entrance hall.

The Campbells were nowhere to be seen, but Dean knew better than to think they had just left him there. He could hear the echo of people moving around down below, mixed in with the slow, gravelly sound of Cas's chanting.

He glanced back, and Sam quirked an eyebrow at him. He shook his head. 'Let's give Cas a minute to try to gank the SOB.'

It was sadly the best plan they had just then.

Cas's chanting got louder and louder, and the lights within the entranceway began to flicker and the walls began to shake.

"Incoming," Dean breathed.

The waited with baited breath for the lightshow to stop and for the telltale signs of the ghost dissipating to take over – but the building just began to shake more in earnest. The voices on the main floor grew louder, more panicked, and Dean could hear Cas's words become louder and more intent.

'Things are going south,' Dean realized as cracks began to appear even in the walls up on the top floor.

"New plan," he grunted out loud, leaping out from behind the railing where they had been hiding and barrelling down the stairs.

"Dean!" he heard Sam hiss, but ignored it.

Appearing at the head of the stairs, the scene before him made him growl in angry frustration. The salt lines and iron barriers had been strewn aside, probably by the figure that was approaching Cas in the jolting, stilted way that spirits moved. The Campbells were dispersed around the room, dodging tables, garbage bins, plants and other objects that had filled the atrium that the charged spirit was attacking them with.

And for whatever reason, Cas hadn't been armed.

'There's bait and then there's stupidity,' Dean thought angrily as Cas ducked the spirit, whatever angel reflexes remained in his body helping him compensate for the fact he still wasn't at home in his body. 'And Cas isn't stupid.'

Dean didn't hesitate, cocking the gun and firing.

The spirit dissipated and Cas whirled around, staring in surprise as Dean made his way down the stairs. "Alright, Cas?"
"How did you…?" Cas wanted to know, but Dean could make out a brand of relief on his face. Behind him, he could hear Sam and Don appear out of hiding.

"Where's the stone?" Dean barked, using one hand to pump another blast of rock salt into the ghost's face, and the other digging into his coat to hand Cas a weapon.

"They have it," Cas panted, unclicking the safety of the gun and pressing himself back to back with Dean. "They were going to destroy it, to keep you from having a way into Hell."

"How'd you manage to keep them from doing it?"

"I may have…let on that a keystone could double as an earthly prison for an angel," Cas answered, the punch of his shoulder hitting Dean's back suggesting he had gotten a shot off on the spirit.

"Would have paid money to hear that," Dean chuckled, knowing that lying wasn't exactly Cas's strong point. "And they believed it?"

"Evidently."

Sam and Don had arrived, the former charging across the room to Miriam, who was still trying to pick herself up off the floor after a ratty looking couch threw her into a wall.

"Give me the stone!" he yelled above the din of swirling rubbish.

"I can't give it to you, Sam," Miriam called back seriously. "I'm sorry about your brother, but givin' you this puts you too close to Hell's clutches for my liking. The world's a lot bigger than just one family."

"And that stone your holding is the difference between life and death for a lot more people than just us," Sam told her. "Give it here, Miriam. We need to put the spirit back inside."

"Think I was born yesterday!?"

"No, I don't," Sam told her seriously. "But we need to stop this ghost before it kills again. And that stone isn't the only keystone out there. If you want to destroy it, go ahead – but make sure the ghost is in there first."

"Don't be stupid!" Dean roared, ducking the intangible cloud of the ghost which he figured might be the weapon it had been using to carve people up. "Just give us the damn stone so we can stop all this!"

He couldn't see Miriam's face, but there was a long moment where he wondered if she was just going to stubbornly try to stick to the plan that obviously wasn't working.

And then Sam was yelling, "Don! Heads up!"

Across the hallway, Dean saw Don suddenly reach up and close his fingers around something, catching it one handed.

'The stone,' Dean realized, a feeling like relief flooding through him as the witch suddenly began to chant in low, fluid tones that echoed despite the chaos going on around them. From where it continued to attack Dean and Cas, the ghost flickered and began to jerk like it was experiencing static.

"Chant faster, Don!" Dean yelled as the ghost rounded on the witch and started for him. He and Cas
continued to let off shots of rock salt, dispersing the thing the closer it got to Don.

And then there was the sound like the air being sucked out of a tube, and the ghost gave one last angry groan and disappeared.

Whatever objects were flying through the air dropped, scattering over the cheap industrial linoleum of the floor.

Abruptly, Don's eyes seemed to glow red in the reflected fire, and before everyone's stunned gaze, the rock he held in his hand suddenly turned bright, white hot and melted out of his hand.

"What the hell – ?"

Dean saw one of the Campbells – Mark, he realized – make a move toward the witch, hand reaching for the weapon as he tried to stand.

"Back off!" Dean snapped, hauling out the loaded .45 in his pocket and aiming it in Mark's direction. "He's a family friend."

His cousin growled, but stopped moving forward. "He's some kind of witch!"

"Who just saved your lives," Cas spoke up, sounding out of breath and annoyed. Obviously the failed plan had not impressed him.

"Family friend? I'm touched," Don deadpanned as Mark took a step backward. He looked around the ramshackle atrium, and then gave Dean a sidelong glance. "Although, not touched enough to stick around here. Too many hunters about."

"Noted," Dean said, keeping a careful watch on the rest of the Campbells in case they got any other ideas. "I guess we owe you one."

"Try not to sound so thrilled," Don smirked, offering Dean a mock salute and then Sam a gesture that looked strangely like the two-fingered 'I'm watching you' signal.

And then he was gone.

"Well," Miriam was the one to break the silence, a shaky note in her otherwise commanding tone. "That was an adventure."

Sam and Dean looked at her like she was insane.

"Guess we'd best get back to the compound before the cops show," she went on.

"You've got to be joking me," Dean said blankly.

"Of course not," Miriam snorted. "I said we had planning to do, didn't I? Don't know why you boys couldn't just wait for us to get back."

"Maybe because we know your plans have more to do with us taking up permanent residence in that bunker of yours than anything else," Sam accused.

Miriam's pursed lips confirmed that.

"Which is why we're gonna have to part ways here," Dean went on.

Mark and Christian both made aborted moves to approach them, but Dean brandished his shotgun.
"Now, I know this won't kill you, but it'll make me feel a lot better about this whole mess."

"You can try," Christian challenged.

"I could," Dean granted. "Or I can give Don a call and tell him the 'no killing hunters' understanding we had going is out of effect. And he's a lot nearer to your wife right now than we are."

Christian went pale, rage flaring within his eyes. "You son of a –"

"Careful now, that's your family you're talking about too," Dean said smoothly.

"Everyone, just calm down," Miriam ordered. She raised an eyebrow at the Winchesters and Cas. "Put those down. Let's go back home and talk about this like civilized folk."

"Yeah, if that was an invitation, we're gonna have to say 'no'," Dean said roughly. "Maybe next family reunion."

Miriam narrowed her eyes, interpreting his meaning well enough. "We can't just let you go, Dean. You're both too important."

"Oh, I get that," Dean said harshly. "But I'd rather eat a bullet then spend the rest of my life locked up in a panic room. So you can take any responsible feelings you have for this branch of the family and shove 'em up your ass, lady."

"We know who you two are now. It's an awful large loose end to leave," Miriam said coldly.

"What are you gonna do?" Christian challenged. "Shoot us?"

"Oh, don't tempt me," Dean growled. "But no, I ain't that messed up yet."

"You're not going to tell anyone about us," Sam said confidently. "Because as many hunters out there who don't want the restart the Apocalypse by putting a bullet in our brains? I'm sure there are just as many who are insane enough and far gone enough on revenge to not care about that. Which you can't afford."

"Plus, you don't want it to get out that you're related to us," Dean added, smiling unkindly. "So, no, we're not gonna shoot you. We just aim to take our leave, peaceable like."

"We'll come after you," Gwen promised.

"Oh, I'm sure you will," Dean said, as Sam came up behind him and tossed a rolled of rope at Christian. "But I don't think that's today."

Sam made the executive decision to keep Sarah away from the Campbells when it came to bringing Arlene to join them. He wouldn't put it past them to try to get to him and Dean through her, and so after Dean secured their estranged family to the main staircase, he half carried, half dragged the unconscious woman inside.

"It'll wear off in twenty-four hours," he told Christian as they took their leave.

He was expecting Sarah to have left with Don once relieved of Arlene, but when he, Dean and Cas arrived where the Charger was parked, she was leaning against the back passenger seat, arms folded.
Don's car was nowhere to be seen.

"What are you doing?"

"You guys can't go anywhere without getting into trouble," she told them simply. "You might as well have someone along who can dig you out of it again. Especially now that the three of you are wanted criminals." Dean and Sam exchanged surprised looks, and she went on, "I heard it on the radio driving over here. Is that a story I'm actually allowed to hear?"

"It's a long drive," Dean said after a brief hesitation, which Sam interpreted as his implicit permission for Sarah to come along.

"Where are we going?" Sarah asked as Sam went around the back and hauled out one of the extra license plates. They would need it to get out of the city.

"New York," Dean grunted as Castiel climbed into the backseat. Once everyone was inside, he gunned the motor and started off. "It is long past time we had a conversation with Aggie."

"Dean," Castiel spoke up, quiet intention in his tone. From his place in the shotgun, Sam couldn't see his expression, but from the way Dean glanced into the rear-view and then groaned, he supposed it was a reproving look.

"What, now?" Dean wanted to know.

"The longer we wait, the more likely Raphael will track down what he needs to open the door," Cas said.

"Son of a –"

"What's this about?" Sam demanded, trying to meet Dean's gaze. Clearly he had missed a conversation.

"Long story short?" Dean offered. "Raphael killed the guardian of Purgatory so that he can resurrect Lilith, who's apparently VIP enough to merit a room there."

Sam felt like he had been hit in the gut. "Come again?"

"I know, that's what I said," Dean grumbled, checking his mirror and merging into the lane leading to the highway. "I think we can both agree as weird as that is, we don't want it happening again."

"And how do we stop it?" Sam asked.

"Apparently he needs some extra stuff before it opens up, though."

"Like?" Sam prompted.

"Hold up!" Sarah interrupted. "Who is this Lilith person?"

"Lilith's one of the seals to kick off the Apocalypse," Sam explained, turning around to meet Sarah's inquisitive gaze. "There's a longer story than that, but now's not the time. But I will tell you." There must have been enough promise in his voice, because Sarah nodded slowly. He returned his attention to Dean and Cas. "So how do we stop it from happening?"

"A very powerful incantation, first of all; it will be shielded the same way that the War Scrolls were," Castiel explained. "And the blood of one who was blessed by a prophet."
"And how do we find either of those?" Dean grumbled. "We don't have the Witch Location System on us anymore, not that it'd work."

"And most people who actually met any prophets would have died centuries ago," Sarah added, obviously trying to be helpful despite being out of the loop on this matter.

"Not exactly," Sam said, wincing at the thought of having to explain the concept of the *Supernatural* books and Chuck to Sarah. He was still coming to terms with some of the speculations fans like Becky Rosen had written about himself and Dean –

His thoughts stalled.

"Becky."

Beside him, Dean blinked. "And random award goes to…"

"She's with Chuck, right?" Sam said quickly. "Don't you think, knowing what he knew, he might have tried to protect her any way he could?"

"Who's Becky? And who's Chuck?" Sarah wanted to know.

"Well, they're not together anymore," Dean said, "but you might have a point there." He snorted. "I hope you don't mind taking a grope for the team –"

"Why me? What about the other part of what Raphael needs?" Sam asked, uncomfortable. He really didn't want to be within thirty feet of Becky Rosen if he didn't have to be, female body or not.

"Besides, we need to find the incantation –"

"In that case, the solution is obvious," Castiel spoke up. "We will divide our forces in order to lessen our search time. Two of us will track down the whereabouts of the incantation, while the others seek out this woman. Once we have found the first, we can regroup."

There was a short silence as the idea settled a little.

"Cas might have a point," Dean said after a pause, though Sam could see from the wrinkle in his brow that he wasn't exactly pleased with the idea.

Sam could see the benefits, though. "Now that we have to worry about the Campbells trying to track us down and stick us in the proverbial tower, it might be better to go our separate ways," he waffled. "It would at least make it a little harder for them once they inevitably get away from the cops."

"And how do you propose tracking down this incantation, huh? We had enough trouble trying to find the War Scrolls, and I do not want to have to pull another *Back to the Future* moment," Dean remarked.

"Only one person to try, what with Bobby being AWOL," Sam suggested. "Rufus is still up in Vermont, last time I checked."

"Which is on the way to New York," Dean said brightly. "Okay, here's the plan – Cas and I will grab another car and go find Rufus, see if we can't try to come up with a way to track this incantation. You and Sarah drop in on Becky and get her to safety."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, offer to tie her up or something. She'll like that."
"Dean," Sam groaned, unimpressed.

"Hey, I'd totally pull fangirl duty, but she likes you better than me," Dean sniggered, grinning at Sam through the rear view mirror.

"Okay, I know you said you'd tell me everything, but this sounds like it needs an explanation now," Sarah remarked, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh…"

"Are you familiar with the Winchester Gospels?" Cas inquired seriously, and Sam shuddered at the cognomen. Even Dean flinched in the driver's seat.

"Cas," he began, warningly.

"No, I haven't," Sarah said, folding her hands beneath her chin and watching the ex-angel expectantly. "Do tell."

"Hey, how about we find another car?" Sam suggested with false good-humour.

It was still raining outside when he peeked through the blinds of the motel room, making it hard to discern shapes through the downpour, let alone possible threats. At least they wouldn't have to worry about the Campbells showing up any time soon, even if they had managed to somehow talk their way out of the clutches of law enforcement.

"I hope they forced Christian through a cavity search," Dean commented, earning a deep chuckle from Sam on the other line. "You guys stop for the night?"

"Yeah, we found a place just outside of Pittsburgh," Sam answered. "You?"

"Just made it to Buffalo before the sky decided to re-enact scenes from Noah's Arc," Dean answered, pulling away from the window. Without the sliver of light from the parking lot outside, the motel room was dark. Across the room in the bed closest to the bathroom, Cas was passed out, fully dressed, on his back, making light snoring noises. "How's Sarah?"

"Well, she's got a separate room, but she was actually talking to me again on the drive up, so I guess that's something," his brother said, sounding a mixture of relieved and frustrated.

Dean made an amused sound, shrugging out of his flannel and maneuvering the phone into the cradle of his shoulder.

"Anyway, she said she was going to call Maggie at some point and see if she can't drop into Aggie's club. Maybe she'll be back by the time we're done."

"Witch versus pagan god," Dean mused as he wandered close to Cas's bed. "Is there any point to hoping they'll just finish each other off?"

"Dean, the Starks have been nothing but helpful to us --"

"Yeah, yeah, books and covers and all that," Dean grumbled. "As long as they keep their bodily fluids away from me, we can all sing kumbaya together."
It was a measure of how completely zonked out Cas was that he didn’t even react to the sound of Dean’s presence or the loudness of his voice.

‘Poor son of a bitch,’ Dean thought, with a mixture of sympathy and affection. Out loud, he said, "So are you going to email your Number One Fan and let her know you’re coming?"

"No," Sam said, quickly, and with an almost audible shudder. "Knowing her, she’s going to assemble a mass of groupies that tear me apart when I show up looking the way I do right now. Best to go with the direct approach on that one."

"Sounds like you're learning."

There was a sound, like knocking, across the line and Sam sighed. "That would be Sarah. I promised I'd fill her in on the Lilith situation once we settled in."

"How's she taking the whole Supernatural thing?"

"I haven't gotten that part yet," Sam admitted. "I'm kind of hoping to ease her into it..."

"Look at it this way – if she reads the series, at least you're off the hook for awkward conversations."

"Yeah, thanks but no thanks. I'd rather explain things to her myself than have her read it through Chuck's eyes," Sam deadpanned. "She's going to be freaked out enough when she finds out she's actually in one of the books."

"Well, maybe she'll get off easy and not be described full-frontal," Dean told him before he heard the telltale click that signified he had been hung up on. Grinning to himself despite the absurdity of the situation, he tossed his phone over to his bed and stared down at Cas. "Dude, sometimes I just do not get our lives."

In response Cas snored softly and shifted in his sleep. Dean's facial expression softened into one of his first real smiles in months, feeling affection and protectiveness flood through him at the sight.

'Like Sam,' Dean thought indulgently, reaching down to ruffle Cas's messy hair. It had gotten longer in the month that he had been human, and Dean figured at some point he was going to have to say something or the ex-angel was going to start looking as girly as his brother. When Cas unconsciously moved into the touch, Dean frowned a little. 'And not.'

Not for the first time did he remark on the similarity in his protectiveness over Sam and Cas, as well as the differences. It made sense, considering Sam and Cas were two separate situations – both family, but in different ways. The recent run in with the Campbells had reminded him that blood might be strong, but it didn't necessarily mean it could be trusted.

'What hasn't Cas done for us?' he thought, his fingers still combing slightly through Cas's hair. 'For me?'

It was a moment of rare introspection, the like of which only ever happened when he was alone and didn't have Sam in his back-pocket psychoanalyzing everything.

Cas was family. That had long since been established, but there was something that bothered Dean about that qualification. Cas should by all rights have belonged in the same column as people like Bobby, and Ellen and Jo when they had still been alive. It was what made sense and was how it should have felt.

But while half his self firmly believed that, there was another part of him that liked to sneak up on
Dean in the dead of night when he couldn't tamp it down any longer, a part of him that whispered knowingly, 'Not family.'

He shuddered at that thought, but not because it suggested Cas was an enemy or anything. Dean trusted Cas as much as he trusted Sam – probably more, when he got right down to it, because Sam had already done the unthinkable and Dean had meant it outside that hospital in Delaware when he said they would probably never go back to the way things were – but there was a licentious undertone to the thought that he wasn't comfortable with at all.

The same undertone that quietly insisted that the reason he could never sort Cas into the brother or blood kin categories was because the ex-angel didn't belong in either one but somewhere beyond both.

He still hadn't taken his hand from Cas's hair yet. The realization should have bothered him – he should have frozen up, backed away as he came back to himself and shook it off as having gone without sleep for too long –

Instead, he found himself trailing his fingers down the side of Cas's cheek, mapping the bone beneath and curiously noting the feel of stubble against his nails. They came to a rest at the corner of Cas's lips, which were parted in sleep.

Dean stared down at them, detached, not quite sure where he was going with this impromptu exploration, but unwilling to pull back. There was some unspoken question at the back of his mind, but he ignored it in favor of brushing a thumb across Cas's bottom lip, applying just the barest pressure there as he took in the surprising fact that a guy's mouth could be just as soft as a girl's.

He could feel the moisture and warmth of Cas's breath – a tired voice from within was asking him what the hell he was thinking – and then the pad of his thumb grazed the corner of a tooth and Dean jumped at the burst of sensation that rippled through his body at that.

Which is exactly the point when Cas decided to open his eyes.

For a long moment, he stared up at Dean – bleary eyed, confused, tense – before speaking.

"Dean?" he asked, his voice low from sleep. The movement of his lips and the sound sent vibrations through the hand that Dean had yet to remove.

"Cas," Dean answered simply, because he couldn't seem to think of anything else to say or how to explain.

Neither of them moved after that for a long spell, and Dean found himself trying to gage the look in his friend's eyes. Confused, expectant, curious and...the hint of something else...

The tip of Cas's tongue dipped out – probably a reflex and not any ingrained reaction, because it was Cas and not some normal guy who would probably be jerking away and demanding what Dean was doing – and caught the very tip of Dean's thumb. The nerves sparked from there, leading a trail up through his hands and arms, settling in the very base of his spine.

Dean shivered.

Cas seemed to be appraising him now, his head somehow managing the usual incredulous tilt despite the fact that he was lying on his back. It was like he was waiting to be told what happening or how to proceed in light of this new development. The absolute trust in his gaze, like he wasn't quite sure what was going on but that he trusted Dean enough not to steer him wrong made Dean's knees buckle and his guts begin to tie into knots.
He didn't even realize he was moving, not until he noticed the slow slide of his thumb and the slackening of Cas's jaw where he cupped it with his fingers. Cas's lips loosened around the digit.

Their eyes never left each other, but Dean was aware of his blood pumping loudly in his ears and Cas's breath coming through his nose in more ragged increments. These were secondary observations, though, because that was Cas's tongue caressing the individual sections of his thumb, and those were his teeth that were softly scraping the skin there –

And holy shit, Cas had just done something that created a sucking pressure around Dean's thumb, and Dean might not have a dick anymore, but it felt like all of his blood had just rushed into that general direction, because the feeling and that image in front of him were hot in a fucking wrong way.

His mouth was dry and he thought he might be shaking, even though it was really, really warm in this room. He was losing feeling in his extremities and now his knees really were buckling.

His thumb slipped from Cas's lips, but Cas had caught his hand in his own as Dean started to lean away, applying a light, insistent pressure to his wrist.

"Dean," he said again, more insistent this time, more gravelly and with a hint of both a command and a plea there.

His eyes were dark, not just from the unlit room or from sleep deprivation, but with something that made Dean feel almost like he was being sized up by a starving man getting ready to tuck in.

The hand around his wrist became more insistent, there was a tug, and Dean was sure that he was leaning – or slowly falling – forward, closer down to Cas and –

Dean threw himself so violently awake that he almost slipped off of the bed, an arm and a leg making painful contact with the grimy motel floor.

'What. The. Hell?' he thought, his heart beating rapidly from adrenaline and something that closely resembled fear but wasn't.

He was shaking, confused for a moment while his mind rebooted itself, and pushed himself off of his stomach to look around. His brain gave him several seconds to process his surroundings – the room looked just as it had when he had hung up the phone with Sam, and across the room Cas was still completely dead to the world – before assaulting him with the backlash of his dream.

He was suddenly painfully aware of the tight, twisted coil of unsatisfied want that encompassed his entire body. His limbs felt like they were on fire, and there was a needy throb in the place below his naval, like fingers grasping desperately for something and catching only air.

He recognized the familiar feeling of arousal, and his hand was already halfway on its way south to deal with the problem before he froze again, remembering he didn't have a dick to jerk off with.

And that whether he had long since figured the girl parts out or not, he couldn't exactly do that with his friend in the same room as him, anyway.

And that he had just been thinking some less than innocent thoughts about said friend.

Said male friend.

Dismayed realization swept over him none-too-gently.
"Fuck, no," he muttered, grabbing one of his pillows and pressing it against his face, willing the wanting pulsing in his body to go away.
At the distant sound of a telephone ringing, Bobby turned off the blow-torch and flipped up the visor of the welder's mask. The smell of heated iron and salt hit his nostrils, and he took a moment to ensure his handiwork was sound before leaving the former storm shelter and heading up the stairs.

It was the house phone and not one of the false agency lines he had rerouted, and so he took his time. The only person who had this number right now was Jody, and she likely just wanted to give him an update on how things were going back at the salvage yard.

It had been more than a week since Balthazar had flown into the cabin where Bobby was holed up and announced gravely that their time together had run short.

"What the hell does that mean?" Bobby had demanded.

"Big plans in the making, old man, and you need to scarper if you don't intend to be used as bait," the blond man had said unconcernedly. When Bobby had stared at him in disbelief, he had made a shooing motion. "I mean it. Off with you. And don't go somewhere that I or anyone else you know might look for you, because that's the first place I'll tell them to look."

"You'll tell them?" Bobby had repeated, grimacing.

"Cassy thinks I need to make nice with big brother for a time, which means the summer of our love has sadly turned to autumn," Balthazar had said in mock-mourning. "I promise, it's not you, it's me."

Bobby had rolled his eyes. "And the reason for all this?"

"Plausible deniability, luv," Balthazar had answered, snapping his fingers; instantly, all of the belongings Bobby had acquired during his forced protective custody had been packed into neat piles beside the door. "You need to go somewhere elsewhere, so that when Raphael asks me where you are I can truthfully say I have no idea."

It had been on his tongue to ask more, but from the set look on the angel's face Bobby had decided that he was unlikely to get any concrete answers. "And how exactly am I supposed to do that?"

"You're not so senile as to have forgotten how to drive, are you?" Balthazar had deadpanned. "There's an automobile outside waiting for you. You'd better be gone within the hour, or I can't be
held liable for what happens."

"What about Jody and Gabe's folks?" Bobby had asked.

"All taken care of," Balthazar had dismissed. "Freshly sigil-protected, and the latter are taking an extended vacation somewhere that I don't know about."

And without more than that, the angel had vanished in a flap of wings that ruffled the musty curtains. Bobby had stood blinking for about a minute trying to understand what had just happened, and then sprang into action. Dean and Sam had told them what had happened to Castiel the first time he had encountered Raphael in Chuck Shurley's home, and he didn't intend to experience that same treatment.

After briefly considering any of the hunters he knew and safe houses he had used over the years, he dismissed them all as too risky; if angels were going to be looking for him, now led by the still ambiguously motivated Balthazar, it was more than likely they would try to track him through those same connections. He had needed to head somewhere that was more or less outside of the hunting world.

Which is why once he had packed his belongings and research materials in the beat up Pinto Balthazar had acquired for him, he had headed for Wyoming and the old homestead where he was now staying.

The building and surrounding property had once belonged to his wife's parents, and had been passed down to their daughter after she and Bobby were married. When Karen had died, the property had reverted to him, yet he had been so grief-stricken by her death that it had taken a solid decade before he could bring himself to deal with it. Even then, he treated the house as an after-though – a secondary storage unit in case anything ever happened to the main house at the Salvage Yard.

The Marlowe house itself had been built at the turn of the century, squatted against a steep little incline just off a narrow road. It was small, fronted by a garden long since overgrown, with stone foundations that reached deep underground and bracketed by trees and weeds. The roof was in constant need of shingling, and the outward façade was made up of broken shutter and cracked plaster. Lichen and graffiti covered the board fence around the property, along with various protective symbols and incantations that Bobby had added over the years whenever he passed by the area.

Inside, there was a good size kitchen with an old stove, scuffed chairs and a table; there were also two rooms that had been a living room and parlor respectively until Bobby filled them up with years' worth of hunting memorabilia and curios, stacking them on crumbling furniture and in dusty corners. The upstairs rooms were also filled to the brim with old books and objects he had been storing here.

By now the place looked more like home than when he had inherited, which helped ease some of the discomfort of actually having to be there. He'd spent the week setting up and repainting wards against every evil son of a bitch out there, especially angels and demons, although in Crowley's case he knew it probably wouldn't do much to keep him out.

The only real downside to the property was that it didn't have a panic room, something Bobby had been trying to rectify in the abundant spare time that he wasn't spending trying to decipher the scrolls Balthazar had left him.

The one supposedly written by the Witch of Endor was so far the most helpful in his quest to find a way to get a hold of Meg, but it was far from a done deal.
What little he could make of the scroll appeared to be a treatise on the nature of demons; Balthazar's throwaway comment about Gabriel saying demons were similar to ghosts had helped Bobby get at least some of the context of the scroll.

Apparently, certain demonic essences could be exorcised in much the same way as a ghost or spirit could. Because most demons had been human at one time, they left spiritual residue on their human remains and belongings. By destroying something with that lingering essence – clothes, bones, jewellery – it was possible that the demon could also be destroyed.

But that discovery brought with it further complications, not least of all being determining the identity of a demon and then tracking down something that had belonged to them. The solution was almost even more difficult than the task.

The telephone trilled again as he entered the kitchen, which already resembled the one back home; as he picked it up he made a mental note to have Jody send some of his books to a P.O. Box that was near enough for him to drive out and pick it up without giving her his location. She had told him a few weeks back about how she had packed up all of his belongings in the house and either brought it back to her place or set up a storage space if anything looked like it needed more protection than an alarm code could offer.

'Hell of a woman,' he thought with a shake of his head. "Yeah?"

"Hey there, honey," Jody Mills voice was oddly high and chipper. "You haven't been home in a while."

Something like a stone settled in the pit of his stomach at the out-of-character greeting, and Bobby gripping the receiver tightly to him in realization.

"What'd you do to her?"

"I swear, all those hunters been watching your house for weeks now, and this little meatsack's been wandering in and out, but no one bothered following her home and torturing your location out of her," the voice went on like its owner hadn't heard the question. "Now, does that mean your hunter buddies have morals, or are just plain stupid?"

"If you hurt her –" Bobby growled.

"Unpucker your butt, old man, cop-lady's fine. I just want to revisit the conversation we started before you pulled your disappearing act."

Realization sunk in. "Meg?"

"The one and only," Jody's voice clucked. "You are a hard man to get a hold of, you know that? Not least of all with me wearing your girlfriend here. She has some decent protections, too. Then again, if she'd been a little smarter, maybe she would have gotten something a little more permanent than such a breakable charm."

"You let her go," Bobby ordered.

"Oh, I will – I've got standards, you see, and I don't like possessing anyone older than thirty," Meg replied. "I just needed good old Jody here to get your attention – and the cute redhead and the kid that were staying here just up and took off, so I didn't have a lot of choice."

Bobby felt his teeth grind together. When he last spoke to Jody, she had told them that once Balthazar popped in to warn him of his impending defection, she had sent Gabriel's human family to
stay with friends in Nebraska. He had been debating with himself about whether to have them come to stay with him for days now, balancing the imprudent idea of putting everyone on Heaven's wanted list with knowing he at least would be able to protect them better than most.

Meg's phone call made him all the more conscious of just how much danger people associated with him could be in.

"Consider my attention got," he snarled. "And if anything happens to her or them, I will find you and roast you from the inside out."

"Sounds like a party." Meg teased. "Although, I gotta say, as much fun as torturing and killing your friends would be, it'd be fleeting. And it'd completely torpedo what I'm trying to do here."

"Which is?"

"Like I said, Bobby – I just want to talk."

"Then talk."

"Not through the phones," she said coyly. "You never know who or what could be listening. I want a face to face."

"It's not gonna happen."

"Look, you can name the time and place. Set up one of those traps you're so good at if you want to stay safe," she told him, voice sounding like she was bored. "The guy holding your contract still wants me, right? So what could it hurt to hear me out before you hand me over to him?"

He frowned at her mention of the latest deal. She was right about this being an opportunity to fulfill his end of the bargain and get Crowley to return his soul. At the same time, though, he was wary – his agreement with the King of the Crossroads wouldn't have been common knowledge for the exact reason that was calling him on the phone.

"And how do I know this ain't a ploy to get me out in the open so you can take me out before I take you out?"

"Because that'd just be predictable," Meg sniffed. "I don't like predictable. It's boring."

"Excuse me if that don't exactly inspire confidence."

"Then how about you have confidence in the fact that I want the new boss gone just as much as you do – probably more," she told him.

He was about to reply that he doubted it, but on further reflection, figured it was possible she was right. She'd been around a lot longer than Bobby had. Whether he could trust her or not, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. Even if he hadn't yet figured out how to kill her, he could still exorcise her back to Hell and work on the problem of Crowley later.

'Still got ten years,' he thought sourly. Out loud, he asked, "How fast can you travel?"

"There are meat-suits everywhere – it's not exactly Angel Air, but fast enough."

"Then I'll call you with coordinates in an hour," Bobby growled. "And Jody better be alive when I do."

He hung up.
After grabbing a bag with his hunting gear and enough holy water to sink a ship, he headed out on the I-80 East to the border of Wyoming and Nebraska, breaking quite a few speed laws on the way. He made it to an abandoned covered bridge he knew about with fifteen minutes to spare, and set about warding it up in preparation for the demon.

As he finished up, he hauled out one of his burner phones and dialed Jody's number. The phone rang once, and then Jody's still uncharacteristic voice chirped, "Talk to me, handsome."

"Eastbound I-80, just outside of Pine Bluffs, Wyoming," he growled. "Now get the hell outta her."

"See you in a few, baby," she promised, and he heard the phone clatter and the screaming sound of someone expelling a demon.

"Jody?" he demanded. "Jody!"

There was a fumbling, thumping noise, like a body hitting the ground, and then a tapping and clicking. Bobby waited with baited breath, before he heard harsh breathing across the line. "B-Bobby?"

Something in his gut unclenched at the sound of the weary, yet obviously in-control, Jody Mills. "You okay there, sheriff?"

In the distance he could hear tires squealing and horns blaring, but paid it no mind."

"Think I'll live," he heard her say, then cough. "My mouth tastes like sulfur and I haven't had such a bad headache since...ever."

"Demon possession'll do that," he told her gruffly. "You remember any of it?"

"Some. But...you watch your back, Bobby Singer," Jody told him firmly.

"Always do," he answered as he heard a car approach and backed into the shadows. If it was going fast enough it wouldn't notice the symbols he had painted on the bridge and would drive right by. "You and me are gonna talk about better protections later. How do you feel about tattoos?"

There was a dry chuckle. "Wouldn't be my first."

Bobby blinked, slightly caught off guard by that; there was a heavy silence on the end as well, and he coughed, a little embarrassed.

Whether either of them intended to say anymore, though, was lost, when the approaching car suddenly stopped and Bobby's instincts came back on line.

"I think that's her," he said roughly. "I'll call you later. Check your wards over."

He put away his phone and stepped out into the night, squinting at the beat-up pick-up parked several yards away from the bridge.

To his surprise, the young woman that got out of the car – sixteen years old if she was a day, he realized with dismay – gave him one contemptuous look and then marched straight into the devil's trap he had painted.

"Is this a nice enough show of good faith?" she asked, youthful voice painfully high.

"Burn through your other meat-suit?" he growled bitterly.
"Oh, you liked that one, huh?" she chuckled. "I figured I needed some kind of insurance coming out here. You try to exorcise me, I bite off her tongue and you get to watch a pretty little girl choke to death on her own blood." Her eyes flashed black. "I may be working an angle here, Bobby, but I'm not stupid."

Bobby almost commented that it would be a fair price to kill the bitch that had caused Ellen and Jo's deaths, but instead he barked, "You got three minutes before I send your rotted innards back to Hell, new meat or not. What do you want?"

"I want Hell back to the way it was," Meg told him bluntly. "The Demon Who Would Be King is destroying everything."

"What makes you think I'm not just gonna summon him down here right now and hand you over?" he hissed.

"Go ahead, sweetheart," she challenged. "I mean, you know what happens once he strips me down to my gooey center, right?" The corners of her mouth turned up. "You lose your leverage. Because both of us know he's got no intention of giving you your soul back. You're too good a pawn." She laughed. "I mean, the Winchester's surrogate daddy? What a way to keep them in line!"

"Maybe," Bobby admitted gruffly, the words feeling like ash in his mouth. "But that'll only last ten years."

Meg sniggered. "I'll bet he has a clause in there that lets him change the terms any time he wants. Give you more time or less, depending on what your boys are doing – even supposing they live long enough. They're such self-sacrificing little bastards, if he offered them the deal to take your place downstairs? I bet they'd both do it."

Bobby clenched his fists, knowing she was probably right.

"So, here's my issue," she went on conversationally. "My people aren't exactly the cream of the crop. They keep getting themselves killed, or worse, defecting to the bigger kid in the playground."

"Demons ain't exactly known for their loyalty," Bobby hedged.

"Not the past few generations, anyhow," she said, almost in agreement. "It's those ones I'm worried about. The new boss's merit system makes the corporate ladder look like kindergarten, and who knows when some of my boys are gonna decide to get ambitious?"

"My heart bleeds for you," Bobby deadpanned. "Still don't get why I should care."

"Because, you delightful tub of lard, I have a plan to help both of us."

"Oh, really? And if I were so inclined, how would I go about doing that?"

"Well, first of all, you help me disappear in a non-dead kind of way," Meg quipped. "You boys are so good at coming up with wards for yourself, I'm sure you're clever enough to cook up something in my size." Bobby glowered at her. "Second of all, I need to get in contact with Sammy."

Bobby narrowed his eyes and began to chant, "Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus –"

"Not for the reasons you think," Meg snapped loudly, trying to sound sarcastic, although he noticed spasm slightly as the words washed over her. "He's the only one that can make my idea work."

"Find someone else."
"Would if I could, hot-stuff, but he's the only one who might be able to pull the thing off," she snapped.

"And why's that?"

"Hm, let me think – the fact that he's my father's vessel wouldn't have anything to do with it, would it?" the demon drawled. "Or the fact that he was Azazel's chosen – or let's go with the fact that even before he starting choking down the demon blood he's a natural psychic. Pick one."

"I ain't handing him over so you can try to restart the Apocalypse."

"Couldn't even if I wanted to, darling, the first seal's gone bye-bye," Meg deadpanned. "Though, the time will come where my father returns. I can bide – maybe even clean things up for him while he's gone. But I need to get Crowley out to do that."

"Well, your shit outta luck, 'cause I've got no intention of helping you make pretty for Lucifer."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry – it wouldn't happen again in your lifetime," Meg snorted. "Especially considering yours has already been cut short. Even if it wasn't, there's just so much red tape for me to wade through, and ample time for you and your boys to stop it." She huffed, impatient. "The point is, I want Napoleon down there gone. And I know you do too."

"Not enough to deal with the likes of you."

"Even if it could get your soul back?" she asked coyly.

Bobby hesitated. "That's a load of crap, and you know it. Contracts can't be broken, or we'd have managed to stop Dean's from coming due and beginning this whole mess."

"You couldn't break that deal because those dicks upstairs interfered enough in things to make sure it came due," Meg retorted. "You ice our little friend, it'll negate your deal – and any contract that he's ever made, without reverting to previous terms." She smirked. "Means you get to keep those squat little legs of yours."

"You still haven't gotten me to the point where I'm supposed to trust you."

"I couldn't care less if you trust me – it's better if you don't because the first opportunity I get I'm going to be bathing in your entrails," Meg told him earnestly. "But I'm an upfront kinda gal like that – unlike the guy suffering from Short Man Syndrome who's got your soul wrapped around his naughty bits. And if that's not enough for you, maybe think about the fact that even a twisted bitch like me is a better bet than an archdemon."

That momentarily dented Bobby's composure, and he took threatening step forward. "How did you…?"

"Please. I may be on the run, but I still have sources," Meg snorted. "And from what they've said, things downstairs ain't pretty." Her expression darkened. "Those disgusting creatures destroy everything they touch, and Hell is my dust pile."

She said it with so much venom that Bobby was surprised. Balthazar had sounded just as revolted by the concept of an archdemon, and the unexpected agreement in the viewpoints of the angel and the demon almost made him want to laugh.

'The enemy of my enemy…' he thought with a bare trace of gallows humour.
"The way I hear it, he's a hell of a lot more powerful these days," Bobby said conversationally. "It might be in my best interests to not piss him off."

"I always knew you were the leash and collar type," Meg taunted.

He ignored her. "Besides, I haven't got a way to kill him."

"He's still got half a demon in him somewhere," Meg snorted. "Start from there." Bobby raised an eyebrow. "Look, every demon out there that started off human. They've left something behind. Once it's destroyed, that demon's gone. Dust in the wind, baby."

"Yours included?" he asked, keeping his face deliberately blank so that she wouldn't see his relief that her words confirmed what the scroll had said.

Her eyes gleamed. "That would be telling."

"So, you're saying if I found Crowley's bones, that's the end of him?"

"That's a big if," Meg said with a rueful smirk. "The bastard has ears everywhere. He's probably had his bones hidden away somewhere centuries ago. But that would be where our boys come in."

Bobby raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Oh, I'm not telling you anything else," she said sweetly. "A girl's gotta have some secrets, you know."

"There are a lot of things I could do to you while you're in there to make you tell me."

"Oh, I'm sure," Meg cooed, eyeing him with something like delight. "And I'm tempted to see if Dean got his imagination from you or his real daddy." Her expression turned serious. "But I'm not telling anything until I know there's a deal to be made. And I have a feeling I can hold out longer under torture than your pathetic human conscience can. " She held a hand out, inches away from the edge of the trap. "So, what's it going to be?"

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Dean was not staring at Cas.

He just happened to be glancing in the same direction as the one where Cas was currently shimmying into his jeans, that was all.

There was nothing appraising or watchful about the action, either. He was only noticing because it was the first time his friend had managed to get dressed without tripping over his own feet or getting a limb stuck in an article of clothing.

It had zilch to do with the dream from the night before, because Dean wasn't thinking about that. There was nothing to think about. His exhaustion and overwrought nerves had simply fabricated a completely implausible scenario that his brain had proceeded to play out for him.

It didn't help that he hadn't had sex in months (at least with another person) and coupled with the girl hormones left over from his recent brush with Aunt Flo, he just wasn't himself.

'End of story,' he told himself firmly.

Besides, even in some kind of Whovian alternate reality where he might bat for the other tea, Cas would never be his first choice to toss the proverbial ball around with anyway. Because you didn't mess around with your best friend-slash-family-slash-whatever-Cas-was-right-now.

Especially not the best friend-slash-family-slash-whatever-Cas-was-right-now-virgin-ex-angel-that-pulled-you-of-Hell; because Dean was pretty sure there were laws about that kind of thing. And if those laws weren't the human kind, he was damn sure they were of the cosmic 'catching-another-one-way-ticket-to-the-Pit' kind of laws.

Not that any of that mattered, of course, because Dean was not attracted to Cas. At all.

'Not that he's unfortunate looking, or anything,' Dean acknowledged apologetically, unaccountably feeling like he had to justify himself to his subconscious. 'Objectively speaking. Or at least, I guess it's more Jimmy and Cas jus inherited, you know, whatever…'
But the fact was that Dean was a guy, Cas was a guy, so exhaustion-induced dreams aside, there was nothing going on there.

And, okay, looking at Cas now in the dimness of the motel room while he reached for a shirt, Dean could sort of see his friend rocking the *Dr. Sexy* look – complete with stubble and hair – but in a totally non-gay way.

"Dean?"

He mentally shook himself, glancing up at Cas, who was staring at him, head tilted to one side curiously.

"Yeah, sorry, haven't had any coffee yet," he replied smoothly, rubbing a hand across his eyes in an effort to physically push his blatantly inappropriate thoughts out of his head. 'Christ, I need a vacation. Somewhere sunny. Where girls run around naked.'

Yeah, that sounded better. As soon as all this was over, maybe they'd head to Florida or Hawaii. Which might be problematic considering they were once again fugitives, but in this scenario they would have their real bodies back.

"I could procure you some while you perform your morning ablutions," Cas offered as Dean tried to lose himself in a fantasy that involved a lot of alcohol and breasts that didn't belong to him. "There was an eatery that we passed on our way into town last night."

Dean briefly considered taking Cas up on the offer, but then decided that showering might tempt his already overwrought libido into another type of activity. Which normally wouldn't be a problem, but with thoughts of his best friend filling his head –

He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Nah. I'll get some once we hit the road. We've still got a ways to go."

Rufus Turner's place was still a day's drive away. Dean wasn't too keen on going back there, as his last sit-down with the old hunter had been more than a little disheartening, but Rufus was the most well-connected hunter they knew right now. He was the best bet they had right now of getting a beat on the Purgatory incantation that didn't involve tipping of the Heavenly Host.

"Explain how this thing works again?" Dean asked tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Can't we just come up with our own? It'd be a lot less hassle."

"That would be impossible," Cas answered, matter-of-fact. "The incantation was spoken into being by Metatron."

"Who-Now?"

"Metatron. He is the voice of God."

"I thought God was the voice of God."

"No. His voice is too powerful for any being, save perhaps the archangels, to withstand. Metatron was elevated to act as an intermediary."

"But I thought that angel in the Garden – Joshua – didn't he hear God?"

"No. He heard Metatron," Castiel corrected. "But it is the closest to God that any angel can experience, and so the concept has long since become synonymous."
"You guys just have rules for the sake of having rules, don't you?" Dean complained, beginning to pack away his overnight things. "Damn it. Why, do I get the feeling tracking down this incantation just got a hell of a lot harder?"

"Perhaps if Metatron had always been an angel I would agree," Cas replied thoughtfully. "But he was not always the voice of God. Once, long ago, he was a human scribe."

Dean blinked. "You're kidding me."

"No. Your Bible knows of him as Enoch – it was when God raised him to the Host of Heaven, the only mortal to be granted that gift, that angels first gained language. Before it, we had no such thing."

"Then how'd you talk to each other?"

"It is…too complicated to explain," Cas said after a thoughtful pause. "I can no longer access the words for the concept."

"Oh. Well, that sucks," Dean said sympathetically. "So this Megatron –"

"– Metatron –"

"– is the one who created the magic words to open Purgatory?"

"Exactly."

"Okay – so we summon his ass down here and get the incantation!"

Cas shook his head. "Part of the condition of his ascension was that he can no longer appear on this plane."

Dean made a face at his idea being shot down.

"Great. The one lead we've got and he can't even come out and play. How does that help us, again?"

"More than you think," Cas explained as he brought out Sam's laptop and determinedly started to boot it up. The past few weeks had seen him strike up a wary alliance with certain kinds of technology, although he still hadn't figured out call-waiting.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Angels have little regard for the past experiences of mortals. Once Enoch became Metatron, his earthly life was of no consequence to the Host, but it still would have had some type of meaning to him," Cas said. "I believe if he had anything to hide, he would have left it somewhere no other angel would ever look. Somewhere that might have had meaning to him as a human."

"Which means it'll be hard for Raphael to find, because he thinks we're all bugs," Dean realized.

"Essentially," Cas agreed.

"And you think we can find it when the entire Host of Heaven can't?" Dean snorted. "I know you've got faith, man, but that's kind of unlikely."

"Even before I was one of you, I noticed that humans are somewhat more imaginative than angels," Cas said, his mouth twitching like he was fighting back a smile. "There are different avenues that we can explore. And as the incantation is hidden in the same way as the War Scroll, we have a better chance of finding it than Raphael."
"I can't decide if this whole optimism thing you've got going on is a good thing or not," Dean muttered, only half-joking. "So, I take it from your enthusiasm, you think you found something?"

"Perhaps," Cas agreed. "I was reading a piece on the Interweb –"

"– Internet –" Dean corrected.

"– about a group of archaeologists and occultists in the Middle East attempting to trace the earthly remains of biblical figures using various esoteric methods."

"Wait, what?" Dean asked, shaking his head and leaning over Cas's shoulder to squint down at the screen he had brought up. "Let me see that."

"Uh," Cas trailed off for second as Dean took control of the laptop's mouse, before going on, "well, obviously their methodology is, uh, flawed. They are attempting to…to discern this through, uh, past life regression."

"Which wouldn't work?" Dean guessed as he scanned through the article. It was mostly just academic back speak and filler.

"N-no," Cas said, his voice tight for some reason. "Any, uh, figure mentioned in the writings of the p-prophets would have been beholden to God, th-therefore, reincarnation would be untenable."

"But I bet you have a souped-up, angelic way of getting the info, right?" Cas didn't respond right away, and Dean frowned at the side of his head. "Cas!"

"What?" the ex-angel asked with a cough, and again Dean noticed the uneasy tremor in his voice. He frowned, about to ask what was with the sudden tension, when he realized just how close he was to his friend. It seemed that without noticing, he had broken the personal space rule he'd been trying to instill in the ex-angel since they first met.

'Guess he's starting to understand how uncomfortable that is,' Dean thought, his satisfaction marred by his friend's obvious discomfort. For some reason, the idea of Cas being ill at ease by his presence bothered him.

Still, he wasn't going to comment on it. The lapse was awkward enough, and so hoping to fix the situation without drawing anymore undue attention to it, Dean started to straighten back up.

Unfortunately, he moved back at the exact moment that Cas turned to face him, bringing their faces within inches of each other. Cas's stupidly blue eyes were widened in something like surprise and wariness, and his mouth was parted like he wanted to say something but had forgotten what it was.

The close proximity meant that Dean was exceedingly aware of the warm, clean smell of the freshly showered man that blended with what he had come to identify as Cas's scent, and he felt himself flashing back to his dream from the night before. Immediately, his breath caught in his throat and it suddenly felt too dry to inhale properly.

His fingers twitched uncomfortably as he tried desperately to think of something to say to break whatever moment had forced itself upon them.

Some divine force must have decided to take pity on him, because at that exact moment his phone began to chime out the familiar bass ringtone. He jerked up and away from Cas like he had been burned.

"Yeah?" he snapped, whirling around and putting as much distance between him and Cas he could,
trying not to be acutely aware of the ex-angel also getting up and moving across the room.

Dean expected it to be Sam on the other line, but when the gruff voice on the other end barked out, "Dean?" he felt the tension of the previous moments bleed out of him.

"Bobby?" he asked tentatively. From where he was now standing by the window, Cas's head whipped around. "That you, man?"

"Sounds like you're still in the same situation as the last time we spoke," the old hunter said gruffly.

"Not by choice," Dean said, rubbing the back of his neck as something inside him loosened. They hadn't heard from Bobby in almost two months, and except for Cas's assurances that Balthazar was more or less trustworthy when he wasn't playing Benedict Arnold, there had been no word on if the older hunter was alright.

Dean understood that keeping away from each other was a measure to keep all parties safe, but that didn't mean he liked it.

"Listen, boy, things are getting hairier than we thought. We're gonna need a face to face to talk about some things."

"It's gonna have to wait Bobby, we're in the middle of keeping a zap-happy angel from restarting the Apocalypse," Dean pointed out.

"And I'm tryin' to keep a damn archedmon from getting too powerful and killing us all," Bobby snapped.

Dean blinked. "A what?"

"Don't tell me that feather-brained idjit didn't tell you what's been goin' on," Bobby growled. "Where are you? We need to talk shop, and over the line isn't safe." He paused. "Especially 'cause I doubt you're gonna like what I have to say."

Dean thought he heard a voice in the background and the telltale silence suggesting Bobby had just cupped his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, but he didn't pay all that much attention to it. The older hunter's words had suddenly reminded Dean that Cas had been trying to say something before and never gotten around to it.

If Bobby was worried, he needed to know what it was before there was any kind of discussing.

"Call you back, Bobby," Dean said sharply and hung up.

He rounded on Cas.

"What the hell is an archdemon?" he demanded, tossing his phone on the nearest bed. Cas adopted a look like a deer caught in the headlights. "Because it doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs, let me tell you."

"Dean --"

"Is this what you've been keeping from me?" Dean went on. "Judging by how wigged Bobby sounds, it's obviously not as cute and fluffy as it sounds."

"I was hoping we would address it once the situation with Raphael was rectified," Cas said, stiffly. "I was going to tell you, I just --"
But what he just, Dean didn't find out.

All of a sudden, there was the sensation of something cold grabbing hold of his heart and then jerking him viciously backward, before the whole world went white.

"I know by now I sound like a broken record," Sarah murmured, staring up at the blown up posters depicting the *Supernatural* series in the living room of Becky Rosen's first-floor apartment, "but this is really weird."

Becky's residence was located in a neat little white-stone building in Pike Creek that was surrounded by trees and small front garden. Sam didn't admit it out loud, but he was a little surprised at the normalcy of the exterior setting. He had sort of expected Becky to live in the basement of an old house or in some kind of gated, Stepford community.

'Or a mental institution,' he thought uncharitably. Out loud, he asked, "Weirder than spontaneous genderswap?"

He was only half joking.

Sarah's expression remained completely serious. "It actually it."

"Hunh," he intoned, trying to hide his surprise. "I guess that's something."

If Sarah was more freaked out by what amounted to an actual instance of *deus ex machina* than she was about his borrowed form, Sam was going to count that as a win.

Not knowing what else to say to that, he went back to surveying the empty apartment. He had found the location the night before on the lobby computer, having left his laptop with Dean and Castiel when their little hunting party separated.

'And Dean'd better be using if for researching that Purgatory incantation and not to introduce Cas to porn," Sam thought with a resolute scowl. The only reason he had left the laptop behind was because in comparison to tracking down a slightly insane fangirl to protect her from archangels, Dean and Castiel had gotten the more difficult task.

'Except the part where Becky might kill me and wear my skin, which could constitute 'difficult',' Sam mused queasily.

Going after Becky right away hadn't been his first choice, having pointed out to Dean that there was no evidence that she had even been blessed by a prophet. He'd tried calling Chuck first, but for some reason he had been informed that the guy's number had been disconnected.

Which Sam could understand; he figured that with the Apocalypse a failure, Chuck might have decided to go on vacation or try to distance himself from the events of the so-called Winchester Gospels. As annoyed as he was with the writer's up close and personal knowledge of his life, Sam could sympathize with his need to stay out of the cosmic fray. Tracking down Becky was hopefully just a way of cutting out the middle man.

So far, it had turned out to be a bust as well, because Becky was nowhere in sight and it seemed like it had been a while since she had been around.
Sarah took one of the many *Supernatural* books off the packed shelves of what they figured was the study and flipped through it, distracted. "So, everything that happened to you and Dean is in these, right?"

"More or less," Sam agreed, studying a few framed pictures of Becky and another girl; the latter was almost familiar, but Sam couldn't really place her. "Everything hunting related, at least."

'And sometimes sex related,' he didn't add.

Gratuitous nudity aside, Chuck had been kind enough to at least skip past his and Dean's childhoods for the most part. Sam didn't think he could take people reading about how awkward puberty had been when you had to share a room with your older brother, or how miserable an experience it was to spend a night cleaning Dad's vomit off the floor when he'd come back from a particularly hard hunt.

"And it goes up until now?"

"Huh?" he asked, momentarily caught off guard by her question. He tore his attention away from a studying the back of one of the pictures, which proclaimed 'Me and Crystal – Besties!' in vibrant pink writing.

"The books – or the events in the books. They include stuff that's been happening in the past few years?"

"Not really. The series stopped about the time that Dean got sent to Hell." Sam had to swallow for a moment, because that memory would never be a good one, before going on, "It's only in the past few months they started being published again. Which we're going to put a stop to as soon as we deal with this Purgatory thing, because seriously, Chuck should know better."

"Chuck's this Carver Edlund person, right?" Sarah clarified, tapping the book thoughtfully. "And he's a…prophet. Like, of the biblical variety?"

"Yeah. He's been tuning into our lives for years, apparently," Sam answered. "We didn't know until a year or so ago. If you think you're confused right now, imagine how we felt."

"I can't," Sarah said honestly, shaking her head. "I'm kind of still having trouble wrapping my head around it." She pursed her lips, thoughtful, and then asked, "So, if they're being published again, that means everything else you guys do is eventually going to be in these books?"

"Until we threaten Chuck's life – yeah."

"So…I'm going to be in them?"

Sam winced, considered for a moment, and then admitted, "Pretty sure you already are."

"What?"

"Well, that book that you've got right there?" Sam said uncomfortably, pointing at a copy of *Woman in White*. "That case happened almost a year before we met you. And the series is chronological, so…"

"So I'm in the books," Sarah concluded, going pale.

"If it makes you feel any better, the series is pretty underground and doesn't have too big a fanbase," Sam told her, completely able to understand her discomfort. "No one would ever make the
connection to you."

Well, except very dedicated fans like Becky or even Yong.

She shuddered. "I still feel kind of violated."

"Join the club."

"How is that even legal?"

"Chuck never used any last names in the books, or anything that could get him sued," Sam responded. "At least, that's what I think, anyhow."

Sarah went quiet, in the tense and uneasy way he had become familiar with since they reunited in New York. He bristled reflexively, wondering if her reaction once she processed all of this was going to be unpleasant or calmly accepting. He really never knew what to expect when it came to Sarah.

Something moved in the periphery of his vision, and Sam tightened his grasp on the picture in his hand; for a moment he imagined Lucifer was leaning against the window sill, sticking out a forked tongue at him and waving merrily. The minute he looked, of course, the mirage disappeared.

Sam still hadn't figured out why he was seeing the Devil, but it only seemed to happen when he was feeling overwhelmed in some way, or when his guard dropped a little. Unfortunately, his guard always seemed to waver whenever he was around Sarah.

Beside him, she moved suddenly shoving the book back onto the shelf.

"I don't think I can read it," she admitted. "It feels…invasive."

Sam blinked, surprised. For some reason, her words filled him with a sense akin to gratitude.

"Besides," she went on, "if it's all the same, I think I'll wait. At least until you're ready to tell me about it yourself."

Sam couldn't help looking over at her in surprise. She was gazing at him with something akin to caution, but he could also recognize what might have been an apology in her speech.

"I thought you didn't like being kept in the dark?" he asked carefully, trying to ignore the little surge of optimism sparked by the gesture.

"I like not knowing if you're okay even less," Sarah admitted to him after a breath. "The past week's been…" She trailed off and shook her head. "The last time we said goodbye, I didn't see you for years – and I spent a good month or so after you left wondering if something had killed you. And it sucked. Doing it a second time…"

Sam kept his voice neutral. "So you were worried about me?"

"Of course I was worried about you," she told him, wryly amused. "I worry whenever my friends do something stupid. It doesn't help now that I know a little about the stuff you've been dealing with that I wake up at three in the morning wondering if you and Dean and Cas have been carted off by angels or something."

He grinned at her, flashing her a knowing look and repeated, "So you were worried about me."

"Shut up," she ordered, though she looked like she was fighting off a smile as well. "You're still a
"It's *not* a sex change!" Sam protested, despite the obvious teasing. "And I said I was sorry."

"Then why did you do it?" she wanted to know. "In the big scheme of things – you know, angels, demons, Apocalypse – magical transformations are kind of low on the list of things to worry about."

Sam swallowed, having been dreading this particular question since Sarah found out about him and Dean. At least when she had been angry about it, he hadn't needed to worry about how to explain. And in the wake of that business with the Campbells, and then finding out about the *Supernatural* series, she had been distracted.

But now the question was there, out in the open, and he had no idea how to even approach the topic with her.

"There were…reasons," he finally managed, focussing determinedly on the odometer of the car.

"Which were?"

Again, he struggled with himself. Normally coming out and telling a girl he was interested in her wasn't hard. He wasn't as in-your-face about it as Dean, but his confidence when it came to girls had soared since he first kissed Amy Pond when he was fifteen. Even though he'd made a complete fool of himself with Jessica, eventually he had managed to impress her enough to go out with him.

'But I looked like myself back then,' he thought miserably.

"Sam, if this is a 'protecting me' thing –"

"It's not!" he protested, although his mind cast back to the warning Don Stark had given him the day before. 'At least, not completely.' "It's just…things were complicated enough, I didn't want to make them *more* complicated."

"More complicated? What do you mean by – ?" her question cut off abruptly, and he could feel her staring at him now. "Oh."

He winced, unable to parse her tone. Silence stretched between them for several seconds, and then she cleared her throat. Sam braced himself for the incoming gentle let-down.

"So, this Becky person," she said instead, gesturing around the house. "You and Dean never really explained about her. I mean, I get she's apparently a huge fan, but why exactly is she important? How did she end up being blessed by a prophet?"

Sam blinked in surprise at the change of subject.

Chancing a glance to his right, he saw that Sarah's cheeks were slightly rosier than they had been before and her mouth was curving slightly upward in a – and he could be seeing things, but he didn't think he was – pleased manner.

The small flutter of hope in his chest grew. The subject change suggested she was obviously as flustered over the topic as he was, but she hadn't told him to back off, which…meant something.

"Yeah, it's a bit of a messed up situation," he agreed slowly, rolling with the subject-change the best he could.

"She seems a bit interested in you, so obviously you've met," Sarah remarked, pointing at the heavily
embellished posters of Sam's fictional self. "Is she an ex-girlfriend?"

"God, no!" Sam exclaimed before he had time to think.

Sarah started at the vehemence of his objection, and Sam immediately wished he'd controlled his reaction a little better. He ran a hand through his hair in agitation.

"A while back, Chuck used Becky to get a message to me and Dean," Sam explained. "It was an emergency."

"And she just accepted it? Just like that?"

"I think she was a little…off to begin with," Sam said, which was the politest way he could think to describe Becky's state of mind.

Sarah noticed, and her mouth quirked slightly upward. "You don't like her."

"It's not that I don't like her, it's just…well, have you ever seen the *Cable Guy*?"

Sarah grimaced. "Wow. Yikes. Really?"

"Yeah. And she was strange before she knew we were real. I mean, she writes this stuff called fanfiction –"

"You have *fanfiction* written about you?" Sarah gaped.

Again, Sam couldn't help staring at her in surprise. "You know what that is?"

"I was a huge *Buffy* fan when I was younger," Sarah answered defensively. "You don't go through that without knowing what fanfiction is."

"Huh," Sam exhaled. "Then I guess you know what slash is, too."

"Of course, I – oh."

"Yeah."

"Right, that's a little…" She trailed off on that thought, and then to Sam's surprise, she began to laugh.

"This is funny to you?" he challenged.

"It's…sorry, but it's actually hilarious," Sarah giggled. "I mean, I never really read much of the stuff, but that's…" She broke into a fit of laughter again. "Oh, please tell me Dean knows about this."

"You shouldn't laugh," Sam muttered darkly. "You've probably got stuff written about you, too."

"What?" Sarah stopped laughing, looking temporarily chastised. "No way!"

"Knowing what these people come up with, you're probably paired with that creepy little girl we ganked, too," Sam teased. "Creepy, under-age ghost non-con."

Whether Sarah had a response to that, Sam didn't get to find out. There was suddenly the sound of glass breaking from one of the rooms beyond the study, and a clatter like boots hitting the floor.

They both froze at the indication that they were no longer the only ones there.
It took Dean several seconds to reorient himself when the pulling sensation stopped, and when he finally did it took him several more of staring down at his own temporary face for realization to kick in. The experience of being hauled from his body was always muddling the first few seconds.

'And the fact that there's an 'always' is the problem here,' Dean thought with a grimace, staring down at the uncomfortable heap his borrowed form had fallen into. 'Is that what this body looks like when I'm asleep? Seriously, I look like every horror movie chick that gets ganked in a dark alley."

"Dean?"

He turned and noticed that Cas was staring at him, wide-eyed. Beyond him, the prone body that had once belonged to Jimmy was crumpled on the floor as well.

The anger from before was gone for now, replaced with wariness over the sudden change in the status quo. Dean took a tentative step forward, eyes flicking over his friend to make sure he was at least as intact as any spirit could be.

"Cas?"

"Yes," the ex-angel confirmed, bemused look on his face as he gazed over. Something in his expression softened. "It is nice to see your usual form again."

"My…?" Dean blinked, then looked down at himself and gaped. Barring the clothes he had been wearing before being hauled out of his body, his spectral form was the one he was used to. Every hard plane, freckle and crooked finger was the way it should have been. "Oh, thank the Flying Spaghetti Monster."

At least outside of the plane of the living, he was still himself.

Cas cocked his head to one side. "What does pasta have to do with this?"

"I'll tell you later," Dean answered, and then frowned. "You okay?"

"I appear to be. The experience is somewhat mystifying. This state of being is similar to existing outside of a vessel…and yet, I feel infinitely more vulnerable."

"That's because right now you're just a soul, not a supercharged angel," a voice behind them explained.

They both whirled around in surprise and Dean reached instinctively for a gun before remembering he was both incorporeal and not packing. Upon recognizing the pale, petite dark-haired figure watching them impassively, his sense of self-preservation was joined by one of dread.

"Tessa?!"

"Hello, Dean."

"What the hell?" he demanded, looking around the empty motel room. "Is there a carbon monoxide leak in here we didn't know about?"

She pretended to sigh. "You're never happy to see me."
"Yeah, well, there's a reason why normal people aren't on a first name basis with their Reaper," he grimaced. "Otherwise I'd have bought you a drink the last time I kicked the bucket."

"Charming, as always," she rolled her eyes.

"What do you want?"

"You must be Castiel," Tessa dodged his question and nodded at Cas, who still looked somewhat perplexed. "It's nice to officially meet the guy that undid all of my hard work."

Comprehension dawned on the ex-angel's face. "You oversaw Dean's journey to Hell."

"That was you?" Dean interrupted, surprised. He didn't remember much of the journey downstairs.

"Yes," Tessa said. "If it's any consolation, I didn't want to bring you there." Dean blinked. "Oh, don't get me wrong – still wanted to get my job done. But I would have preferred to do it without the aid of those Hell mutts. Your case took me longer than I would have liked."

Dean shrugged and muttered. "Okay, so maybe I've given you the slip once or twice."

"Try a few hundred times," she corrected. "That includes that incident with that Trickster who stuck you in that time loop."

"You were there?" Dean demanded.

"Of course I was," Tessa snorted. "Your soul did leave your body, you know. I would have taken you any of those opportunities if he hadn't stopped me." She sighed. "Do you realize how much of a pain in the ass you've been? The last person I had to work so hard on was Rasputin."

"My heart bleeds for you," Dean bit out. "So what, you're makin' up for lost time now?" He gestured at his and Cas's bodies. "What is it, things slow on your end so you figured killing us would be fun?"

"You're not completely dead right now," Tessa told him unconcernedly. "Just mostly."

"Why?"

"Because I asked her to bring you both here," another chillingly familiar voice interrupted.

There were few creatures that inspired instant deference in Dean, human or not. It probably came from a childhood of looking up to John Winchester and being sure that no one could compare to his father. Even a trip or two back in time, as well as some of the knowledge of John's less heroic deeds, hadn't marred that respect. It wasn't often that someone could come close to that – it was even less often that someone could surpass it, and perhaps even inspire a healthy kind of fear.

But the creature that had spoken had Dean's metaphysical heart skipping a beat and his throat swallowing nervously.

Dean took his time turning around, trying to hold back the instinctive shiver at the realization he was once again in the presence of the Great Destroyer.

Death was sitting at the tiny motel table, drizzling syrup over a stack of what looked like authentic Belgian waffles. Despite all the times Dean had seen the guy eating, he remained as skeletal and hollow-eyed as ever.

"Thank you very much, Tessa," the Horseman said quietly, and when she disappeared, he glanced up at Dean disinterestedly. "Hello, Dean." Dean swallowed. "Castiel." Cas actually inclined his
head, respectfully, but didn't speak. "I find your recent mortality appropriate."

Cas pursed his lips, like he wasn't sure if he should be insulted or not.

"Is, uh, this a social call?" Dean asked. "Because seriously, you could have just e-mailed. Or sent a text."

He was fighting the instinct to run screaming through the wall and as far away from the Horseman as possible. He'd even go so far as to hop a plane to bring him to the other end of the world if he thought it would do any good, and if that wasn't saying something, he didn't know what would.

"I simply felt it was time I let you know I am aware of what you've been up to," Death said nonchalantly, cutting a meticulous square of waffle. "Did you really think you could try to enter Hell without me knowing?"

Dean was quiet, clenching his fists.

"Though, I must say, I was surprised by the lead-up to that decision. The angel's little wager with the current King of Hell was an interesting twist," Death went on. "If it hadn't made things so much more complicated, it would have been a neat little fix-it." He took a mouthful of waffle, chewed slowly, and then fixed them both with an unreadable look. "And yet, even now that you have your brother out, you're still intending to do it again."

"Adam's still down there," Dean hedged, trying to keep unease from dripping into the unapologetic tone of his voice. "Stuck in the box."

"I've heard."

"Then you know why we're trying to get there," Dean went on carefully.

"Of course," Death acquiesced.

"Well, seeing as how I figure you're one of the few beings out there that can actually jailbreak Lucifer's Cage without opening it up, maybe you can help us skip all that and get him out," Dean proposed.

"And why would I do that?"

Dean did some quick thinking, casting around for a reason. The collection of Horsemen's rings came to mind. "Because I have something of yours."

"You mean my ring? I recall loaning you that temporarily."

"Well, if you want it back –"

"I'm sorry, you assume that I don't know where you've hidden it," Death drawled, and Dean's mouth clamped shut. "Now, we've established you have hubris but no leverage. Why would I help you?"

"You had us brought here for a purpose," Cas spoke up cautiously, sounding as though he was trying to change the subject.

"True," Death answered. "And as a rule, I don't bring people back. I might make an exception, once in a while, but those circumstances are far beyond what we have happening at the moment."

"Then what the hell have we been talking about?" Dean questioned, frustrated.
"I am simply letting you know what is off the table," Death said. "But there's something more immediate that you two want at the moment, which I am inclined to provide."

"The incantation," Castiel realized.

"You know where it is?" Dean wanted to know.

"The tablet with the spell Metatron created was found long ago and moved. No being on earth save for myself and God know if it's location, or what it says," Death told them simply. He inclined his head at Cas. "And with your beloved Father absent at the moment, who do you think Raphael is trying to squeeze that information out of?"

"I wouldn't think you'd be worried about a pesky little Ninja Turtle on your ass," Dean remarked.

"Raphael has rediscovered the knowledge needed to collar me," Death frowned, taking another bite of syrup-soaked waffle. "Alas, one of the few restrictions placed upon my existence is that I cannot actively stop someone from doing so." He fixed Dean with a knowing look. "Once he slips the leash on, I will have no choice but to reveal the incantation to him."

"So you're coming to us because...?"

"Because I am allowed to help myself indirectly," Death answered. "It is only a matter of time before Raphael collars me once again, the least I can do is ensure the knowledge he seeks no longer resides with me but in someone else."

Dean swallowed. "And you thought of me?"

Cas made a noise like he wanted to protest but wasn't sure what to say.

"Please," Death waved a hand dismissively. "You are merely one of a long list of candidates I would pass this on to. But considering it is something you are already looking for, and your motives are closest in line to my own, naturally you happened to be nearer to the top of the list."

"But I sense a 'but' coming," Dean accused.

"I don't 'do' freebies," Death went on.

"Right, 'cause there's always a catch…"

"Not so much a 'catch' as an opportunity. I'll make you a deal, Dean," Death said. "And trust me when I say I wouldn't even be doing this if Raphael's ascent to power wasn't threatening the balance I've been attempting to rectify since returning to this plane."

Dean folded his arms across his chest. "The last time we made a deal my brothers ended up in a box."

"And the one that actually mattered to you is out again," Death replied carelessly. "Not that that's going to stop you from going back to your little rescue mission once you've dealt with Raphael's ambitions, yes?"

Dean blinked. "You're not going to stop us? Or, uh, smite us or something?"

"Once again you show that you are exceedingly egotistical," Death reproached. "Why would I lower myself to that when you're just going to do the work for me? Getting through Hell unscathed is almost impossible for an angel, as Castiel here no doubt knows." Castiel's expression was stormy.
"To do it as a mortal still attached to your skin…" Death smiled unpleasantly. "Well, I'm sure I don't have to tell you what will happen."

"We would take the necessary precautions," Cas said stiffly.

"All it takes is one demon in the right place at the right time," Death answered unconcernedly.

"Yeah, yeah, we're basically going to our deaths – can we get on with this now?" Dean inquired sharply.

"Dean!" Cas protested.

"Don't snap, Dean, it's impolite," Death chided. "Now, your task is this: fetch my ring and put it on."

Dean stared, nonplussed. "What?"

"I want you to be me for a day," Death said.

"Are you serious?"

"No, I'm being incredibly sarcastic," Death answered tonelessly. "Take the ring off before the twenty-four hours are up, and you lose."

"And by lose, you mean…?"

"I will personally escort Sam back to the Cage and reap you out of existence."

"Dean…" Cas began, hesitant but with a warning in his tone.

"No," Dean said immediately, holding a hand up to tell Cas to stay quiet. He didn't need to be reminded of what a bad idea deals were. "No way am I dealing if anything happens to Sam. He's not part of this."

Death raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think you have a choice?"

Dean opened his mouth, and let it snap shut again.

"You said it yourself," Cas spoke up when Dean couldn't think of a response. "You may have a list of people who could do this, but we are the only ones who know what the actual stakes on Purgatory are. If you really have a problem with keeping Sam out of this, go get one of your other candidates to do your dirty work."

Dean shot his friend a grateful grin, unable to stop himself thinking that he enjoyed his friend's occasional moments of badassery.

There was a long, thoughtful pause.

"Hm. Very well," Death said quietly. "I won't touch Sam."

"Or Dean," Cas added firmly.

Death narrowed his eyes. "I don't have to explain the concept of 'no freebies' to you too, do I Castiel?"

"Going once…" Dean interrupted, cutting off his friend's response.
"Very well," Death agreed after another thoughtful pause. He fixed Dean with a meaningful stare. "I will not touch you or your brother."

He stood up and walked over to them. Before Dean could move, he had pressed his ice cold hands against Dean's temple, and a feeling like being kicked in the head by a horse took over.

Dean grunted at his came to, staring up at the ceiling from the floor where his body had fallen. He had a brief sense that whatever victory he had just won was a pyrrhic one, and the situation wasn't over as he gingerly checked to make sure he still had feeling in his extremities.

"Aw, crap, I'm a girl again," Dean complained as he sat up, rubbing the back of his head where it had hit the floor. "Well, literal deals with Death aside, I think we've got some stuff to talk about, Cas."

Beside him, his friend didn't move.

"Cas?" Dean repeated, leaning over to shake him by the shoulder. Cas's head lolled to one side, and Dean felt something in his gut clench painfully. "Cas!" He crawled over, shook him a little harder this time, but to no avail. "CAS!"

The ex-angel remained motionless upon the dank carpet of the motel room, and although Dean could see him breathing – barely – a sick sense of understanding hit Dean.

Death had found a different form of collateral for his wager, and whether Cas has been aware of this when he negotiated on Dean's behalf, Dean had been too stupid to realize it before it was too late.

"Stay here," Sam whispered to Sarah, whose smile had faded as he brought out his gun.

"No," she replied.

"Sarah –"

"You're not going out there alone," she told him. "If it's an angel or something, I bet Dean would hunt me down if anything happened to you."

"Angels don't break through windows. And even if it was an angel, what would you even do?" Sam challenged quietly as they both moved away from the door and out of any path of visibility an intruder might have.

"I do remember how to draw a banishing sigil, you know."

"And if it's a demon?"

"Do they break through windows?" Sarah challenged wryly, and off Sam's frown she rolled her eyes. "Exorcism memorized in Latin and Ancient Greek."

"And what if it's a – Ancient Greek? Really?"

"I figured it couldn't hurt," she shrugged.

"I still don't think –"
"We've been over the 'protecting me' thing, Sam," she cut him off, drawing out her own silver hunting knife from her belt and the Glock he had lent her that morning. "Not that we have to worry now, considering how much time you just wasted."

Sam scowled.

He supposed her insistence on being involved stemmed from being relegated to glorified babysitter during the past few cases, but it didn't make him any happier about it. Objectively, Sam knew that Sarah could probably handle herself – she had been hunting down cursed objects and dealing with spirits on her own for a few years now, and judging by the way her hands didn't even shake as she unclicked the safety of the gun, she obviously knew the basics.

But having her part of this life, especially when it came to dealing with the kinds of creatures he and Dean had become accustomed to dealing with, still made him uneasy.

Sam made a motion that he would go first, and without giving her a chance to argue that, checked that the small hallway was clear, and then nodded her forward. The apartment was nicely spaced with wide archways and large windows; every room was painted a different color, according to no particular design theme.

He could hear someone or something moving around in the front entrance. Thankful for the open-concept design of the place, he motioned for Sarah to go around the back way while he approached from the main hallway. She nodded and disappeared silently.

Judging from the rustling noise within and the ensuing muttered curse, whoever had broken in was too loud to be an angel and too male to be Becky.

Intending to get to the origin of the disturbance before Sarah came in, Sam crept through the wide-open living area, which was empty now but for the muddy footprints and glass from the window, and moved on toward the tiled kitchen he had passed through earlier. He could hear a rustling, swishing noise.

There was a loud creak as one of the floorboards he stepped down on suddenly squeaked, and he grimaced; the rustling noise from the kitchen stopped immediately.

Not allowing whoever or whatever was on the other side of the wall a chance to get to the next room and run into Sarah, Sam rounded the corner and raised his gun.

"Put your hands up!" he ordered loudly.

The figure let out a strangled yelp, whirling around with arms up in the air so quickly that he lost his footing; he slipped on the muddy treads he had left and ended up on his ass in the middle of Becky's smallish kitchen.

Sam blinked for a moment, a little caught off guard. For some reason he had expected a shifter, or possibly an extremely inept demon, but the person in front of him was neither. Because it was immediately clear that the guy was human: he moved too awkwardly to be anything else.

Sam's first thought was that he was dealing with one of the strange role-playing fans he had encountered at the convention or, even more unlikely, Becky's boyfriend.

The guy was about his age, and Dean's usual height, but appeared a lot smaller given the ridiculously large leather duster that hung off his small frame. Sam was strongly reminded of a turtle, in spite of the pasty white color of the guy's skin.
"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, all sense of tact erased by the absurdity of the situation.

"I'm – uh – one second –" the guy stammered, struggling slowly to his feet, and then showing Sam that he was unarmed, fumbling with his jacket, " – uh, Special Agents…Brown." He flipped open a badge – upside down – where Sam could just make out the familiar FBI insignia. "Looking to a disappearance in connection with a series of murders down this way."

Sam raised an eyebrow, more than a little incredulous, considering the guy looked like a kid that just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "And you're investigating the kitchen?"

"Man's gotta eat," the guy said easily, and then coughed, trying to regain his composure. Gruffly, he demanded, "What about you? Any reason I shouldn't arrest you for threatening a federal officer with a firearm, ma'am?"

"No way you're a fed," Sam told him bluntly. "You're like, twelve."

The guy jutted his chin out. "Size isn't everything, baby. And unless you want me to show off some of my less gentlemanly moves, you'll put the gun down."

"Or what?"

The stranger stiffened as Sarah came around through the other door, her own firearm trained on him. Sam couldn't help be impressed that she instinctively stayed out of the guy's range of movement lest he turn and try to wrest the gun from her.

"Seriously uncool," the guy muttered.

Sam shook his head, put off by the entire situation, and gestured for Sarah to lower her weapon. It was clear that the supernatural world was not at work in this particular instance, and so the most logical step was to figure out what was.

Peering at the stranger, he asked, "You're not one of those…LARPers, or whatever they call themselves, are you?"

"LARP?" the guy snorted, "Nah, man, I already told you –"

"Right. FBI," Sam repeated. "What office?"

"D.C."

"Really?" Sam questioned, not buying it. "Then who's your superior? I think I'm going to give him a call, seeing as how you're in here without any kind of documentation that I can see."

"Don't need it," the guy jutted his chin out as he dug around in his pocket for something. "And if you don't believe me, ma'am, I'm sure my AD can sort it out for you."

He handed something white and rectangular over to Sarah, who was closest, and she took it without getting too close to him. She frowned as she read the name. "Mike Kaiser."

A snort of surprised laughter escaped Sam. "You're kidding."

"You know him?" Sarah asked at the same time the guy did.

"Yeah, I do," Sam answered. "It's Bobby's FBI cover." He considered his gun for a moment, unsure of if he should put it away or not. "This guy's a hunter too."
"Too?" he repeated, looking Sam up and down. "Wow, I would not have called that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sam began, but Sarah interrupted him.

She eyed him speculatively. "You're a hunter?"

"Name's Garth," he said, offering her a hand. "And you are…?"

"Sarah," she said, taking it slowly.

"Jane," Sam offered when Garth turned to him, but he didn't take the outstretched hand. "So, what exactly are you investigating here?"

"Nuh-uh, man, this is my case – no offense," the guy told him. "I'm a bit of a lone wolf, you see, so I work alone. If you're looking for a case to crash, though, a bunch of my friends are down in New Orleans dealing with a zombie outbreak."

"If the case has to do with the girl who lives here, you're just going to have to deal with some help," Sam told him firmly. "She's a friend of ours, if you get my meaning." He ignored how Sarah raised an eyebrow at his casual stretching of the bounds of his and Becky's relationship. "Where is she?"

"If she's your friend, wouldn't you know?" Garth challenged.

"I haven't seen her in a few months and she's switched cellphone numbers," Sam lied easily. "Did you wait for her to leave before you broke in here or are you just waiting for her to show up?"

"Been watching this place for a day now before I came in. She hasn't been by," Garth shrugged. "I guess we'll have to wait for her to come back."

"If she's coming back at all, which I somehow doubt," Sarah pointed out.

Both Sam and Garth offered her confused stares. Sam had been silently thinking of the possibility that Becky wouldn't be coming back any time soon, but it had had more to do with his conviction that things were never easy for him or Dean instead of any concrete evidence.

"Did you find something before?" he asked her.

"Yeah, the bathroom," she said. "No hairdryer, deodorant, tampons – none in her bedroom, either." Of both nonplussed expressions, she rolled her eyes. "That means she's gone somewhere long-term. Otherwise she would have left all that here."

"Uh, yeah," Sam said, as Sarah shot him an unimpressed look and remembering that he was supposed to be a girl too. "Hairdryers. Can't live without those."

"Oh," Garth blinked, and then nodded. "Guess that makes sense." He adopted a thoughtful look, complete with over-exaggerated chin-rubbing. "If she took her things, she planned to leave. Which might mean maybe the others did, too."

"Others?" Sarah echoed.

"Oh, yeah, it's this case I'm working," Garth explained. "A bunch of disappearances stretching from Ohio to here. No one can tell me what happened to them, and I thought I'd hit pay dirt with this Rosen chick, but if she isn't here..."

Sam was confused. "What does Becky have to do with a bunch of disappearances?"
"From my research, she knew 'em all."

"Any other connection between the disappearances?"

"None that I can tell – except they were into some serious shizzat of the geek variety," Garth said. "I cross-referenced a whole bunch of victims and found out that they all went to this weirdo sci-fi convention last November." He laughed lightly. "It's kind of sad, really. I mean, these people don't have lives to begin with, and now something's out there ganking 'em…"

But Sam wasn't listening, because his brain had stalled on the word 'sci-fi convention'.

'There's no way,' he thought, and then paused, because in his life, what wasn't possible?

"You have a copy of that list somewhere?" he asked casually.

"Oh, yeah, sure," Garth said, reaching into one of his deep pockets. He started to haul out the contents – two phones, a bag of nuts, what looked like a rabbit's foot and finally a creased, red-stained list. "Don't mind the marks, that's just ketchup. Got hungry while I was doin' the research."

Sam offered a tight smile, and then glanced down at the list. A wave of dismay rolled over him at the manifest for the first ever Supernatural convention. It was a list of every person that had bought tickets to the thing – including Becky Rosen.

Most of the names at the beginning of the list had question marks or black crosses next to them.

The meaning was clear – someone had clued into the Supernatural fanbase as being the most likely place for the recipient of Chuck's blessing to hang out. And they'd already started picking them off one by one.

"We've got to find Becky now," Sam said, digging his phone out of his pocket. He scowled, for the first time wishing he hadn't deleted the number she had surreptitiously programmed into it a few months back, and googled Chuck's publisher.

Considering the books were still being published, if anyone knew where the prophet was, it would be them.

He hoped.

"Mrs. Geraldo?"

Dean turned around sharply at the sound of the false name he had given, facing the ER doctor that was coming out of the doors where Cas had been carted in not an hour before. The guy was older, with greying hair and kind eyes that were focussed on Dean in a sympathetic way that he immediately hated.

"Is he okay?" Dean demanded, striding forward.

It had been a gamble bringing Cas to a hospital after their recent run-in with the law, but when the ex-angel had suddenly stopped breathing while Dean tried to wake him, Dean hadn't thought twice about calling an ambulance. Just like he hadn't hesitated to pretend that he was Cas's wife so that the paramedics let him ride along.
"We've made him comfortable," the doctor said apologetically, and Dean felt his heart sink. He had watched enough episodes of *Dr. Sexy* to know what that tone meant.

"What happened to him?" Dean asked blankly, knowing full well that Death was what had happened.

The man shook his head. "There doesn't seem to be any reason that we can find. Your husband's entire system just seems to be shutting down. We'll continue to try to pinpoint the exact cause, but unless we find it…” He sighed. "I'm sorry, but I can't give him much more than twenty-four hours."

The significance of that period of time was not lost on Dean, but it still hit him harder than when he first regained consciousness and realized that Cas hadn't.

Death wasn't giving him the option of wasting time thinking about his offer.

"He's not going to…just slip away is he?" Dean asked. "It's just, I have to…make some calls."

The doctor inclined his head in understanding. "He'll likely be stable for the next few hours, but as his faculties begin to shut down it will get harder. I would suggest making your arrangements now if you would like to stay by his side when it happens."

Dean nodded numbly, part of it his act and part of it him being sidetracked by what he knew he needed to do.

"Have one of the nurses page me when you get back and I'll take you to see him," the doctor told Dean, before shooting him one last sympathetic look and walking away.

Dean turned on his heel and once he was out of sight of the doctor, he made a beeline for the exit of the hospital.

Despite knowing there was nothing that he could actually do for Cas by hanging around in the waiting area, he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt the farther he got from the hospital.

'Why the hell didn't I speak up and include Cas in the deal with Sam and me?' he thought over and over as he stole a car in order to get back to the motel.

Part of him knew the reason was because he had been blinded by the usual situation: it was always about him and Sam. Some cosmic ugly was always trying to get them to give up on one another or trying to use the other as leverage. It had become so ingrained by now to only consider things in relation to himself and Sam that his brain hadn't thought to include Cas.

'Because no one ever tried to use Cas to get to me yet,' he knew. He'd been too good at hiding what the ex-angel meant to him – even from himself, if the past weeks were anything to judge by.

Somehow, though, Death had known.

Dean stowed the car a few blocks from the motel and hiked back to his room. Upon entering, he ignored the sight of Cas's unmade bed and his clothes still strewn about from when he had been getting changed, and made a beeline for the duffel with Dad's journal in it.

After Stull, he'd considered burying all of the Horsemen's rings in a hole outside of Bobby's and forgetting about them when he went to Lisa's, but at the last moment he had changed his mind and taken them with him. The night Sam had returned to him, he had cut a slit into the seam of Dad's hunting journal and placed them all within until they could get back to Bobby's. There they had sat since that moment.
He pulled out the journal and made quick work of opening up the little seam, shaking the ring out. The white stone gleamed at him, and he paused for a moment, thinking over what he was about to do.

As luck would have it, his eyes fell on his discarded cell phone, the screen flashing seven missed calls at him accusingly.

'Bobby,' he remembered, and reached for the phone. Given what he was about to do, he was going to have to make some kind of contingency plan if things went badly. Even though the deal was that Dean and Sam were off-limits, he wouldn't put it past Death to pull a fast one. He needed to ensure that Cas was looked out to if he couldn't.

Even if looking out just consisted of giving the angel a proper hunter's funeral in the end.

He hit the redial, and the phone picked up almost immediately. "Dean?"

"Bobby," he grunted, his voice strained. He cursed himself when there was a pause on the other line.

"Somethin's up," the older hunter said, his voice gentler than the first bark of his greeting.

"It's Cas…it's…" Dean managed, swallowed, and then launched into a quick recap of what had happened that morning.

"Damn it," Bobby growled at the end of the story. "You boys can't do anything half-way, can you?"

"I didn't plan this," Dean objected, dragging his hand down his face in agitation. "Is there anything else we can do to get out of this?"

"Not really seeing an alternative here," Bobby said. "Hate to say it, but Death's got you by the short and curlies, son."

"What about Balthazar?" Dean asked after a moment. "Could'n't he, I don't know, come by and heal Cas?"

"He's out of reach these days," Bobby reminded him. "Not to mention the last I saw him he was out of healing mojo. Even if he got it back now that he's palling around with the Host, I don't think he's got the juice to fix something like this. And that ain't the worst of our problems right now."

Which Dean had already known, but it was wired into him to check all of his options.

'Even though there aren't any in this case,' Dean thought to himself, staring down at the ring.

"Look," Dean began, not knowing what else to do. "I don't know how it's gonna go down this time, so…if things go south, at least come get Cas out of here. Dead or alive. We're at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo."

"Dean –"

"And don't tell Sam what's going on. Leastwise not 'til it's over," he went on. "The big girl will come try and stop me, which it's too late for right now, and besides, he's got to stop Purgatory from opening."

"Dean – !"

"Hey, don't worry, if I screw this up and Death decides to take me out of the equation, at least the angels can't resurrect me and stick me back in my body so I can say yes," he said, trying to sound
upbeat. "Keeps the Apocalypse from happening again, right?"

"Except you ain't factoring in Adam," Bobby snapped. "If the End of Days comes again, you know the Cage'll be opened up, which means there's still a meat suit for Michael."

Den winced. "Thanks for taking away my silver lining."

"Boy, if that was your silver lining, I'd hate to hear what constitutes a raincloud."

Dean closed his eyes, frowning, because wasn't that the truth? "We'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it."

He flicked his phone closed before Bobby could try to talk him out of anything, and glanced at the ring again.

He already knew he was going to do it. Cas's death wasn't going to be on his head, not after everything the angel had already given up for him.

Just as he was about to put the ring on, his phone vibrated.

He considered ignoring it, but something made him check it. Sam's number flashed on screen, and Dean sighed. It seemed like the universe was at least giving him a chance to say goodbye to his brother this time around.

"Hey man, what's up?" he said, managing to keep his tone normal this time.

"Dude, you are not going to believe what I've got to tell you," Sam said, sounding a mixture between disbelieving and amused. "But before I do, where are you?"

"Uh, still in Buffalo," Dean said.

"Still?" Sam repeated. "Why?"

"Car trouble," Dean lied. "We're a bit behind schedule."

"Crap."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Why, you got something?"

"Maybe," Sam said wearily. "Becky's missing."

His brother quickly relayed his and Sarah's adventures in Delaware, as well as their running into a rather inept hunter named Garth. When he got to the part about how people associated with the Supernatural convention were disappearing, Dean closed his eyes in dismay. "You think the angel brigade got to her already?"

"I don't think so. I think she's in New York."

"Oh-kay. And why do you think that?"

"Well, I called Chuck to ask if he had a number or some way to get in touch with her – but he's gone."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah. According to his publisher, he's been missing since May," Sam said significantly. "All of his
unpublished drafts just showed up on the front step one day with the paperwork done up to make sure they kept publishing."

"He had to have left some kind of contact information," Dean pointed out. "How else is he gonna get paid?"

"That's just it – apparently, he changed his financial information for any proceeds from the books to go to a new account. Sarah pulled the financials, and it all goes to this old summer camp in New York that no one's owned in years."

"So the broke-ass bought a summer camp?" Dean asked in annoyance.

"No idea. The name on the deed to the place is bogus, as far as I can tell."

"So how does this help you find Becky?"

"Uh, well, I did a little research after I couldn't get a hold of Chuck and looked up that website she was telling us about. Remember the first time we met her?"

"I try not to."

"Yeah. That site is way disturbing – but I checked under her author's name, and it turns out she's been updating her blog and her stories regularly even before she disappeared. And her IP address is coming out of New York."

Dean snorted mirthlessly. "Let me guess – same place as where Chuck's money's going."

"Exactly."

"Well, where is this place?" Dean asked.

"Actually, that's why I called. I figured that even if you'd already left you'd still be closer than we are right now," Sam said apologetically. "It's up in Chautauqua."

Dean froze at the name. It couldn't be a coincidence. "Chautauqua?"

"Yeah, the place used to be called Camp Chitaqua. I think it's about an hour away from Buffalo."

Dean's mind flashed to the broken world the angels had sent him to, and that immediately turned his thoughts upon the broken shell of a man that Cas had become.

Cas.

There was no way he could head down there now, even though it was the last place he wanted his brother to be.

"No can do right now," Dean said. "Car's busted, remember?"

"So steal another one," he could practically hear Sam rolling his eyes. "I know you don't like Becky, Dean, but you're closer right now and I'm in the middle of trying to get this Garth guy to back off on this case."

"I'll get there when I can, Sam," Dean said. "For now you and Sarah are on your own. Or, you know, stuck with Garth."

"Dean, what the hell –?"
But Dean hung up and turned off his phone.

'Sorry, Sammy,' he thought. 'Believe me when I say I'd rather deal with Becky right now than do what I'm about to…'

He took a deep, steadying breath, and then slipped the ring on.

"And he didn't say what was so important he couldn't check it out instead of us?" Sarah asked as they drove down a tree-lined stretch of highway.

"No," Sam replied, glancing in the rear-view mirror where Garth's Ford Ranchero was driving a few car lengths behind the Charger. The other hunter, who had insisted on coming along to tie up the loose ends of his hunt, was bobbing his head up and down like he was listening to some particularly lively music. "I tried calling him back, but he didn't pick up."

That had been an hour ago.

"Do you think something happened to him and Cas?"

"If that was the case, he'd have told me," Sam said with a shake of the head. They had codes for that kind of situation, and considering Dean hadn't used any of them, it was unlikely he was in any real kind of danger. Then again, Dean sometimes had a tendency to keep information to himself if he thought it would keep Sam out of trouble or on track during a job. Right now the job was keeping Purgatory closed, and if something was going on at Dean's end, it was entirely plausible he'd keep it from Sam for the sake of the job.

'He didn't sound too different from usual,' Sam thought with a frown, and once again wondered if he'd made the right decision going after Becky instead of heading to Buffalo to track down his brother. He wasn't above tracing him through GPS – Hell, Dean had done it enough times to him –

"Do you think…" Sarah began, and then trailed off like she wasn't sure what she was going to say. She cleared her throat, and restarted, "Do you think maybe him and Cas were busy?"

"Too busy to answer the damn phone?" Sam snorted.

"Well, it depends on what they were doing, I guess."

"Dean's answered the phone while being choked by angry bikers," Sam told her wryly, "And he's never been that involved in research."

"I wasn't thinking about research," Sarah said quietly, almost warily.

Sam opened his mouth to ask what she had been thinking about, when his brain caught up with the implication. He glanced over, noticing how she was watching him expectantly.

It was on his lips to reject her theory – a response born of many years watching Dean unconsciously check out every feminine form that crossed his path, sleep with more women than Sam could count and strike out with twice that number through no lack of trying.

Considering how Dean had been acting around Castiel in recent weeks, though, Sam found that he couldn't offer an outright denial. Instead, he decided to shrug it off. "No, I'm almost a hundred percent sure all this is just him not wanting to be anywhere near Becky. Dean's a dick, but even if he
and Cas were...like that...he'd put the job first.

"'Even if?'" Sarah repeated, incredulous. "So they really aren't...?"

"No," Sam said, in spite of his own suspicions. Until he had undeniable proof of it (and his eyes and brain prayed to whoever was listening he never had to walk in on his brother and friend to get that proof), he wasn't going to say anything different.

"You don't sound too sure," Sarah observed. "And it's not like you're there right now, which, you know, if they were like that—"

"Dean's not into guys," Sam said firmly. "Not that there'd be anything wrong if he were, it's just not like that with him and Cas. They're friends. And there's that whole rescue from Hell component."

"Okay."

She didn't sound convinced, and he shot her a look. "You're not completely sold on that, are you?"

"No," she told him with surprising candor. "Look – don't jump down my throat or anything, I'm just making an observation here – but they don't look at each other like they're just friends."

"And how do they look at each other?" Sam wanted to know, because it seemed he wasn't the only one who had noticed the prolonged glances after all.

"I don't know, it's like..."

"...like?"

"It kind of reminds me of how my parents looked at each other, before my mom died," Sarah mused. "Like...like they've been missing something their whole lives, and whenever they see at each other they find it again.

Sam tensed at that, because somehow the description resonated more than it should have. Sam had been trying for a while now to sum up exactly how his brother and the ex-angel interacted, and Sarah's words elucidated the point completely. He had been chalkling it up to Dean having a friend for the first time in his life, but maybe he had been misreading it...

Which made him feel like he had been hit with a tire iron, because the idea of Dean of all people falling for a guy – never mind the ramifications of the whole 'former angel' part – was more than a little jarring.

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed something like that," Sarah challenged. "I know you haven't been acting real smart lately, but you always struck me as the more observant one."

Sam ignored the jibe to his intelligence, still struggling with this new angle on the Dean issue. It was confusing.

"Can we please stop talking about my brother's possible relationship issues?" he asked faintly. "I don't like thinking about it when he's a guy, but now that he's girl shaped it's all...really awkward."

"Why? Because Cas is a guy?"

"What? No!" Sam protested. "I already said I could care less if he's with a guy or a girl. It's just gross to think about because they're both my family," Sam told her with a shudder. He had walked in on Dean in flagrante delicto on more occasions that he liked to remember. "It's like thinking about your
parents having sex."

Sarah was the one to give a full body shudder this time. "Thanks for that."

"You brought it up."

"Okay, message received, I'm *un*-bringing it up."

Sam smiled at that.

As they lapsed into silence, the smile faded, though, and Sam's thoughts became convoluted.

Now that Sarah had so openly voiced her suspicions, Sam's own views on the matter – the things he had seen over the last three months, little things that he had simply shrugged off as Dean and Castiel's profound bond or friendship or whatever – overtook his thoughts.

He hadn't lied to Sarah. Dean wasn't into guys, something which was an irrefutable truth of Sam's life. If it was suddenly proven false, what other truths might suddenly change?

He shook his head inwardly. His thoughts made no sense, and upon further inspection sounded a little jealous to him. And really, what did he need to be jealous of?

'If Dean does feel for Cas like that – and that's a really big *if* right there, he'll probably never do anything about it,' Sam knew. 'And Cas probably wouldn't *know* to do anything about it.'

If the situation did change, though, and something more than friendship did develop between his brother and the ex-angel, it wasn't as though Sam could begrudge him that. As short a time as he had had with Jess, he wouldn't trade those years for anything. As far as he knew, the closest Dean had ever come to loving anyone was Cassie, and that had been for two months a lifetime ago.

He'd once joked that Castiel was Dean's longest relationship outside of Sam, and it hit him now that maybe it wasn't that much of a joke. Regardless of what he had started out as, the angel had been an important part of Dean's life since before Sam let Lucifer out of the cage. In some ways, he was the most important part, and Sam could see why.

Sam had long since realized that he had the ability to bring out the best or worst in people – and in the case of Dean, it was both. Adding Castiel to the equation, with his personal space issues and his intrinsic belief that Dean was worth more than just running around trying to save Sam might just lessen the negative effects of that ability.

Dean didn't need another person telling him that he was worthless or weak, something Sam was guilty of having done more than once. Whether it had been under supernatural influence or not, that sentiment had to come from somewhere. Sam was introspective enough to know that he still harbored a lot of resentment towards his brother for wordlessly following Dad's commands all those years, and maybe demon blood or ghostly electroshock therapy magnified that resentment. As long as those thoughts existed in his subconscious, there was always the possibility of something or someone using it against Dean.

With Castiel, Sam knew that would never be a problem. Because long before he had turned his back on Heaven, Castiel had believed that Dean was righteous and needed to be saved. Even knowing every terrible thing Dean had done in Hell.

'And if an angel can forgive that, maybe there's hope for me too,' Sam thought, glancing over at Sarah.
He had travelled with other people than Dean before, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd been comfortable doing so. Even those four months spent with Ruby hadn't exactly been a cakewalk. The haze of blood and sex that colored those memories sapped even the few easygoing moments he'd had with her.

Sarah was different. Sam was comfortable with her – almost as comfortable as he was with Dean.

The 'almost' part bothered him.

Whatever he said to her, she wasn't really going to understand. Even if she read everything in the books about what he had done, she wouldn't have the same experience with it the way Dean and Castiel had.

The fact that Sarah was here, unaware of the full story but knowing that there was something big he was keeping from her, still willing to hear him out – that was encouraging. And it might backfire, spectacularly, and she might find out what he had done and decide she couldn't be around him at all.

But he still wanted to try.

It occurred to him then that it was the first time since Jessica that he was willing to put himself into such a vulnerable situation.

Once that realization solidified in his mind, he spent the rest of the drive trying to think up a way to broach the subject. A long car ride might be ideal, but if Sarah didn't like what she was hearing or was uncomfortable, she needed to have some place to go if she wanted to get away. Cornering her in the car was unfair to both of them.

Six hours later, as they pulled off the main highway and onto a narrow, dirt road and over a country bridge, Sam still hadn't come up with any other way to ease into the subject.

"It should be up this way," Sarah said. She had a paper map open on her lap, their cellphone networks no longer within range, and she was tracing their path with her finger. The silence in the car was magnified by the sound of gravel crunching beneath the car's tires, but it remained companionable despite Sam's former thoughts.

Roughly cut wooden signs with garish yellow paint announced that they were nearing Camp Chitaqua, and eventually they pulled into the long driveway that led to the camp.

Sam could see at least twenty or so wooden buildings on the horizon, framed by tall trees. The dense thickets of forest almost obscured the view of the lake in the distance, its pristine and glassy surface rippling with the slight breeze.

'Not exactly somewhere I'd picture someone like Becky hanging out,' he thought as they approached a flat grass field adjacent to the camp that could only too-generously be labeled a parking lot.

As they pulled in, he saw movement from the cabins, and then a group of half-dozen people were hurrying towards the lot. Many of them were clad in familiar looking flannel shirts and leather jackets, and Sam groaned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

As the group neared them, most of them armed with crossbows or shotguns, and his worry increased when he saw exactly who was at the front of the greeting party.

'The last people you ever want to see carrying loaded weapons,' he thought grimly, and it wasn't only
because these two people enjoyed dressing up like what they believed Dean and Sam looked like.

"You've got to be kidding me," he muttered under his breath as they strode forward.

"What?" Sarah asked, but Sam didn't get a chance to reply.

"Who are you?" the taller, dark-haired man demanded, gripping tightly to the crossbow he had aimed at him. Sam only hoped he didn't get nervous and accidentally shoot them.

"Relax, we're friends of Becky's," Sam said carefully, raising his hands in a gesture of submission. "You're Barnes, right? I think we might have run into each other at the convention a few months back." He nodded at the shorter, overweight man. "And you're Demian, I think?"

"Yeah," he said, sounding uncertain. "I don't remember you from the con."

"Oh, uh, I came as the scarecrow god," Sam said, wracking his brain for a costume that he had seen and which would have hidden his face. "I'm Jane – this is Sarah and Garth."

Demian and Barnes glanced at them each in turn, looked at each other, and then nodded in unison. A second later, they had taken out what looked like silver daggers and were offering them to the three newcomers.

"You are who you say you are, you won't mind a little test," Demian said, a challenge in his words.

"Yeah," Barnes said, fumbling in his pocket for a flask of what Sam guessed would be holy water.

'Looks like they've smartened up a little since we last met,' Sam thought as he offered his forearm and just hoped that they wouldn't cut to deep. 'At least they're not trying to sound like us anymore.'

After a few more clumsy tests, insistent mutterings of 'Cristo' and a moment where Barnes and Demian got a little overly enthusiastic about Garth's hunter get-up ("Dude, you are packing some serious awesome there," Demian said, staring at the hunter's array of hunting knives in his trenchcoat.), they stepped back.

"Okay, so you're at least human," Barnes said. "But the Boss didn't say she was expecting anyone but Crystal today – and you're not her."

'The Boss?' Sam echoed in his head.

"Yeah, uh, well, she went missing from home and we were worried," he said out loud. "So we got in touch with Chuck's people and here we are."

At the mention of Chuck, Demian and Barnes once again exchanged meaningful glances, and then frowned at Sam. Sam noticed Barnes finger tighten on the crossbow he was carrying.

"Look, man, relax, Becky can vouch for us," Sam said, not wanting to unintentionally goad the guy into shooting them. "Or me. Just take me to see Becky, she'll smooth all this over."

He shot Sarah an apologetic glance and nodded in Garth's direction. "We're friends of Bobby's," he finished.

That did it where the previous tests hadn't, and Sam would have rolled his eyes if he wasn't trying to
make nice with the creepy fans. He was willing to bet that every single one of them had some version of the anti-possession tattoo on their bodies – and judging from the rather unfortunate examples of the human physique that he was looking at, he really didn't want to imagine where some of them were.

"Okay, just you though," Demian said. "If your story checks out, we'll send for your friends."

"Can't be too careful these days," Barnes added helpfully. "If what the books says about the Apocalypse –"

"Dude, spoilers!" someone complained.

"Seriously, man, uncool," Demian accused.

"Sorry – it's not my fault you're a slow reader."

"It's not my fault that whenever I get a chance to read you want to turn out the lights."

"So not the time right now, guys," another person spoke up. "Bring her to the Boss already."

"Right," Demian cleared his throat. "You come with us." He addressed the others. "You guys watch these guys." He pointed at one of the people in the group. "And unless it's actually a demon, don't shoot. Jerry's still talking about suing you for the toe thing."

"It was the lighting!" came the protest.

Sam didn't even want to know.

He was led through a progression of cabins toward the largest building in the area, which he supposed was the main office of headquarters. He wasn't exactly sure what to call it, considering the questionable nature of the entire location. Chitaqua seemed to be a mixture of a survivalist camp and kibbutz, but it was also unlike either at the same time. He supposed the fact that it was being run by role-playing fans on an extended sleepover gave it that vibe.

About two dozen people wandering around, all dressed in what a layman might consider hunter gear, although he saw at least one person wandering around with a fake tail and cat ears, so it was clear the nuttier element had joined the gang.

"So…uh, Becky wasn't exactly clear on what was going on down here," Sam said as they walked, hoping to sound nonchalantly curious instead of seriously critical. "This isn't just some, uh, publicity stunt for the books, is it?"

Demian and Barnes exchanged significant looks.

"She probably wanted to explain everything in person – it's a bit hard to handle," Barnes said. "Though, you know, the fact that you're here shows you at least know the books are real."

"Yeah…uh, how crazy is that, huh?" Sam said automatically.

"Crazy cool," Demian declared. "I mean, it's scary as shit, but at least with the FWK, we've got a chance of avoiding the really bad stuff and keeping people safe. Just like Sam and Dean."

The guys grinned goofily at each other, while Sam tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his gut.

"FWK?"

"'Fans Who Know'," Barnes clarified. "Beck – I mean, the Boss – will tell you all about it when you
meet up. You know, if you are who you say you are. Though, you've got a hunter with you, so maybe you're legit."

Sam blinked, before realizing they were talking about Garth. "How do you know he's a hunter?"

"Well, duh, he's got that awesome ride and did you see how much firepower he was packing?" Barnes said enthusiastically. "I think we've got one gun in the entire camp – no one else was able to pass the test recently, so he's got to have gotten those illegally."

"Sweet," Demian agreed and Sam had to bite his tongue, but whether that was to keep him from shouting or laughing he wasn't sure.

They led him up the wooden stairs of the main building, where they were stopped by two pasty-faced people that eyed Sam with open suspicion and a hint of hostility. They were young, probably just out of their teens and alike enough in features to be twins; the guy was fair-haired where the girl was a brunette.

"Who are you?" she asked, never taking her eyes from Sam as Demian moved past open the door to the building.

"Friend of the Boss, apparently," Barnes offered.

"Is this Crystal?" the boy wanted to know, understanding settling over his features. The girl cocked her head to one side in a way that reminded Sam of Castiel, but lingering expression of hostility ended the resemblance there.

"Jane," Sam corrected, interests peaked by this mysterious Crystal.

"Hm," the twins said in unison, but did hang back to let Sam follow Demian into the building. He could still feel their eyes on his back as they moved through the cabin and into a space that had obviously been the reception area once.

When the door closed behind them, he cleared his throat. "So they're also…Fans Who Know?"

"Seth and Auralie? Yeah – they're really heavy into the books," Demian said. "They know every single one off-by-heart – how hardcore is that?"

"It's, uh…" Sam had to stop himself before saying exactly what he thought it was. Instead, he changed the subject, "Are they always…?"

"Yup," Demian answered. "Pretty sure they lived their childhood in a basement somewhere."

"Huh."

"In here," Barnes said, pointing out a door that was covered with a full-length poster of the first Supernatural book. Sam winced at his fictional counterpart's over-defined Fabio-like physique and walked toward it.

As the door to the office opened, Sam could make out the familiar blond figure sitting at the computer, fingers flying with an almost violent intensity.

"Be with you in a sec, guys, I'm in the middle of an argument with some schmuck in Hong Kong that thinks Sam-slash-Meg is a canon thing," Becky announced, eyes not leaving the screen. "I mean, how cliché can you get – banging the evil chick is so Angel – this guy can't even scrounge any evidence – pathetic."
Again, Sam winced. Apparently the publisher hadn't gotten to explaining his and Ruby's relationship yet.

'Then again, maybe if she reads that she'll get over that sick fantasy she has of me and Dean,' he thought bleakly.

"Listen, Boss Lady, we might have a perimeter breach to worry about," Barnes said, trying to sound official. "This girl and her friends just showed up, no invite or anything."

"You did the tests, right?" Becky asked, not looking up.

"Of course – she's even got an anti-possession tattoo," Barnes said, "And she says she knows you."

"Hm?" Becky looked up now, frowning at Sam. There was no recognition in her face. "Who knows me?"

"Hi, uh, it's Jane," Sam said, wishing Demian and Barnes would leave so he could tell Becky who he was and why he had to get her out of there as soon as possible.

There was a pause, like he was trying to find Sam's face in her memories and coming up blank. She narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, I don't know who you are."

Sam ignored Demian and Barnes both clapping him hard on the shoulder, like they were going to forcibly remove him, and he hurriedly spoke up, "Really? Because you helped me and my brother a long while back." She raised an incredulous eyebrow, sitting up in her seat and folding her arms at him. "Yeah, uh, Chuck asked you to bring us some information? About the hill made of forty-two dogs?"

Becky stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then her eyes widened. "That's not…"

"Possible? Yeah, you have no idea how much I've heard that in the past few months," Sam told her, attempting a smile.

He expected more denials, as had been the case with Sarah, but instead Becky let out a high pitched squeal and launched herself at Sam. He tensed up, only just restraining from the urge to catch her enthusiastic assault in the bud, and was enveloped in a tight hug.

"Oh, of course I remember you, Jane," she purred, and then considered him carefully. "Wow, you're a little less firm than you were the last time I saw you, but–" She let out a trilling giggle. "Let me guess, you ran into an angry witch! No, there was cursed object that you touched – no, you –"

Sam forced himself to keep smiling while Demian and Barnes watched the exchange with looks of complete confusion.

"It's really not important right now, Becky," Sam said firmly. "There's something we need to talk about –"

"Oh, of course – but it's temporary, right?" she suddenly looked hopefully at him. "Not that you're not enough to make me rethink being firmly in love with men, but still…"

"So you do know her?" Demian wanted to know.

"Of course – you do too," Becky giggled, and before Sam could stop her, she blurted, "That's Sam."

Well, crap.
The world shifted around him from one moment to the next, and suddenly the motel and Dean's belongings were gone, instead giving way to a small town street. The sky was grey and there was a dampness in the air that was almost suffocating.

"Wow. They'll just let any slack-jawed haircut be Death these days," a cool voice said, and Dean turned around to face Tessa.

"Well, you're all charm today, aren't you?" he jibed. He looked down at himself, realizing that once again his body was back to normal. "Hey, I'm me again."

"You're always you," the Reaper snorted. "The ring protects your body and allows you to walk the ghostly plane. When you're intangible, you're better able to bend your perception of reality. Considering this is your self-image, it's what you and everyone who knows you will see."

"What if I run into angels?"

"You shouldn't. They don't really hang around when people are dying," Tessa told him with a snort. "But even if we happened to run into one, that pagan whammy on you makes it so they can't recognize you."

"Guess I'm not gonna complain," Dean said, running a hand over his face and feeling relieved at the familiar sensation of a hard jaw and barely there stubble. 'At least if this job kills me, I'll go looking like me.'

"Let's be clear so we get through this with a minimum of screw-up," the petite Reaper cut told him. "I don't like this. And right now, I'm not crazy about you either."

"This is your boss's idea, not mine."

"True. But you have a long history of throwing a wrench in everything, so let's just stick to the rules. Deal?"

"Depends – where's Cas?"

"Lying in a hospital bed in Buffalo."

"Cute. I meant, where's his soul?"

"Lying in a hospital bed in Buffalo," she repeated. "He's on lock-down until you do what Death wants or fail trying. And then…"

She let the rest of the sentence hang there, and Dean clenched his fists so hard Death's ring bit into the skin between his fingers. Finally, he bit out, "So these rules are what, exactly?"

"For the next 24 hours, you kill everyone whose number's up."

"Well, how am I supposed to know who to—?"

"Kill?"

"Yeah."
"I have a list."

Of course she did. "Let me see."

"No. You touch them, they die, I reap them," Tessa outlined. "Are we clear?"

Dean frowned inwardly. He had been uneasy about the arrangement when Death first suggested it. There was a difference between ganking some evil creature or killing someone who was trying to mess with him or his family and actually going out with the purpose of ending a life. As much as he had been called a murderer before by various law enforcement officials, Dean had never actually killed an innocent person outside of a hunt before.

He didn't voice this, though, because Tessa was waiting expectantly, hip jutted out to one side in a way that conveyed great impatience.

"Yeah, I guess," he finally managed.

"Remove the ring, you lose," she quipped. "Slack off, you lose. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Don't mess this up," she went on. "It's not my job to be your damn babysitter."

She motioned for him to follow her down the street, which he did, trying not to jump when passersby walked right by him or through him without even noticing him. It had happened before, the last time he and Sam had done the out-of-body experience thing, and the time before that when he had been near death and running around the hospital where Dad died, but it didn't make it any less weird.

"Just so you know, when people die, they might have questions for you," Tessa cautioned as they went, and then made a face. "Well, you know, not you, but Death."

"You mean, like 'How did Betty White outlast me?'" Dean quipped.

She ignored him. "'What's it all mean?' is popular."

"And am I just gonna magically know?"

"No."

"Then what the hell am I supposed to say?" Dean demanded, and when she offered him an unsympathetic glance, he grumbled, "Oh, come on, give me something."

"Suck it up," Tessa retorted. "Comes with the gig."

She gestured for him to enter a small store within the strip-mall that they were passing. Dean raised an eyebrow, but went inside.

The convenience store looked like about a million that Dean had seen in his life, although this one was on the more decrepit side. He felt bad about whoever he was about to kill – they must have seriously pissed off some cosmic force to bite the big one in a nameless corner store.

Moments later he realized why a Reaper was going to be needed.

At the back of the store where the cash desk was located he could make out three people. An older man and a boy, as well as a tall, unshaven guy in a tuque; the latter was pointing a gun at the first two.
"Come on!" he snarled, waving the weapon at the cashier, who was trying to appear non-threatening and protect the boy at the same time. "Come on! Let's go!"

Dean opened his mouth reflexively to get the guy's attention, but Tessa cut him off, "They can't hear you. They can't see you. Just let this play out."

It went against everything he stood for, but Dean swallowed, biting out a clipped, "Well, who am I taking?"

He really hoped it wasn't the boy, whose wide eyes reminded him way too much of Sammy at that age.

"Wait and see," Tessa told him in her frustratingly enigmatic way.

"Which one?" Dean prompted, while the thief continued to yell out his commands.

"You want me to shoot the kid?! Hurry up!" he ordered. "Oh, you think I'm kidding? And don't forget the drawer under the register. Come on, move it! Let's go!"

Dean gritted his teeth as the cashier pushed the bag off of the counter and onto the floor, figuring the guy's nervous clumsiness had just guaranteed him a bullet in the head.

"You idiot," the thief sneered, bending down to pick up the bag.

Before Dean could react, the cashier straightened up, a gun in hand, and shot the robber.

Dean blinked in surprise as the guy fell to the ground, gasping for air as blood pumped from the wound in his torso. That had not been what he had expected to happen.

"Hello?" Tessa urged. "Tick tock."

Dean moved from his startled position, but then paused.

"He's in agonizing pain, right?" Dean asked, vaguely aware of the cashier shielding the kid's eyes from the sight.

"Uh, yes," Tessa answered.

Dean nodded to himself. "Give me a minute."

The Reaper stared at him in disbelief, and he watched the guy gasp a little longer, before reaching out and brushed his fingers against the gunman's hand. A cold, pulling sensation flowed out of him, and he was suddenly aware of a presence beside him.

The criminal's soul stared down at his body in confusion, and then looked at Dean, eyes wide.

"Why?" he managed.

"Mostly because you're a dick," Dean told him simply. "Enjoy the ride down, pal. Trust me – sauna gets hot."

Tessa shot Dean an unimpressed look, but he could have sworn he saw her lips twitch slightly. The guy still looked confused as Tessa motioned him over to her.

He could feel it when they both disappeared, and he took a steadying breath. "That wasn't so hard."
And for the most part, he was right. In pretty much every situation, Dean could see why the people he was killing had to die. They were all exercising their free will in ways that had an immediate consequence. He felt a little bad about some of them, sort of wished he didn't have to take them, but in each case he could see the reason why and it made it easier. Two electrocutions and a heart-attack later, though, the easy ride came to an end.

"After you, boss," Tessa said as they rematerialized in the sterile corridor of what was obviously a hospital. Not Cas's, though, which put Dean somewhat at ease. He was pretty sure he might attack the Reaper if she up and told him Cas was on her list as some kind of final challenge.

Dean peered into the nearest room to see a man reading to a young girl in the hospital bed while a nurse looked on.

"The dad or the kid?" he asked.

"Kid," Tessa answered.

Dean recoiled. "Come on. What is she, thirteen?"

"She's twelve."

Dean winced, eyes searching out the father who was going to be left behind. "This guy have any other family?"

"No," Tessa answered. "Not really."

"Well, this is awesome," Dean growled.

"What, you thought it was all gonna be armed robbers and heart attacks waiting to happen?" Tessa demanded.

"She's twelve!"

"With a serious heart condition!"

He shook his head. "Who's next on the list?"

"Dean, you have to take her."

"Says who?"

"Death."

"I'm Death."

"You know what I mean."

"Well, who tells him?"

"I don't know," Tessa answered, sounding frustrated. "It just is. It's destiny."

"Give me a break," Dean objected. "I've spent my whole life fighting that crap. There's no such thing as destiny, just like there was no Apocalypse – just a bunch of stuck-up mooks who didn't want us human slaves asking questions." He squared his shoulder. "Well, I say the little girl lives."

Tessa fixed him with an unimpressed look. "Do you know what's amazing? You don't actually buy a
"word you're saying."

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, really?" she challenged. "So, all the times that you've messed with Life and Death? They just worked out for you? It was just a beach party every time, huh?"

He flashed back to Dad dying for him, and then the night he made his deal for Sam. He could still remember the claws of the Hellhounds ripping him apart, and even now the knowledge of what Cas had given up to bring Sam back weighed heavily on his mind.

But looking at the man and his daughter, seeing the naked hope and determination etched into both their faces, he couldn't make any other decision.

"Well, I know this much," he said stubbornly. "I'm Death, she's twelve, and she's not dying today."

He stalked off, not particularly caring if Tessa followed him or not.

She did, eventually, but she remained eerily quiet, alternating between watching him with disapproval and staring off into the distance like she was trying to receive some secret message.

Maybe she was, Dean didn't know or care. All he knew was that he didn't think it was fair for the guy with no family to lose the last bit that he had.

It hit too close to home.

In the background, he could hear the doctor and the father discussing the girl's astonishing recovery, while the nurse who had been watching over her left the floor, talking on a cellphone.

"Come on," Tessa sighed after what seemed like another hour. The doctor said something about going home to celebrate the miraculous turn of events. "We have more work here."

They descended the main staircase of the hospital silently, and it was on Dean's tongue to ask why she wasn't just zapping them to their next appointment, but it was cut off by a sudden commotion on the first floor.

Tessa groaned. "Damn it! I knew it."

"What?"

A gurney surrounded by at least six ER doctors and nurses flew past, the bleeding figure upon it a familiar face.

It was the nurse that had been caring for the girl.

"Wait, that's…" Dean trailed off, cold realization taking hold.

"You let the girl live," Tessa told him unsympathetically. "The nurse goes home early, gets in a crash she wouldn't have. And she needs the heart surgeon, and where is he?"

"You knew this would happen?" Dean asked tightly.

"No. Just knew that you knocked over a domino," she answered, striding after the gurney and into the small room where the doctors were working over the young woman's body desperately.

Machines beeped and whirred, voices yelled out for drugs and blood for transfusion, while one doctor was already reaching for the defibrillator paddles.
The first charge made the nurse's body bow in the middle, before falling back onto the cot with a dull thud.

"Take her."

Tessa's order surprised Dean. "What?" He looked down where the doctors continued to try to shock the woman's heart back into working order. "She's not on the list!"

"Everything you do has consequences! Do you want to set off another chain reaction?" the Reaper snapped.

"She's got nothing to do with this!" Dean protested.

"Well, too bad, Dean – you put on the ring, now do your damn job!"

"Fine," Dean snapped as the electricity caused the nurse's body to jump, but there was no sign of her coming back. He reached out to brush his fingers against her skin.

The cold pulling sensation was there, and then he and Tessa were no longer alone. The young nurse looked stunned for a moment, and then stared down at her body.

"Is that…?" the woman's spirit began, wide eyed, "Am I…?"

"Yes," Tessa answered. "I'm sorry."

"But I'm..."

"So young," Tessa supplied.

"Yeah," the woman trailed off.

"Actually, you were supposed to live for many decades," Tessa said. "Have kids. Grandkids."

The woman looked up, eyes bright. "Then why?"

"Because he screwed up," Tessa answered.

The woman whirled around and stared at Dean. "You did this to me?"

"Come on, Jolene," Tessa said gently. "It's time."

They began to walk away.

"Wait," Dean started, taking a step forward and then stopping. In a quieter voice, he added, "I'm sorry."

Someone burst into the waiting room, a young man, yelling out, "Where is she? Where's my wife?"

Upon seeing Jolene's body and the doctors putting away the life support equipment, his voice broke in a way Dean was all too familiar with. "No! No!"

The scene shifted again, and they were once again standing outside the little girl's hospital room.

"You saw what happened to the nurse," Tessa urged, sounding almost compassionate. "Go and kill that girl, Dean. I tried to tell you what you already know. She's disrupting the natural order by being alive. You of all people know what that means. Chaos and sadness will follow her for the rest of her life. We tried it your way."
Dean allowed her words to wash over him and looked away, trying to come to terms with what he was about to do. His eyes landed on the nurse's husband outside the window. "Give me a minute."

"Dean –"

He pulled away from her, intent on getting to the guy, and to his surprise found himself sitting in the backseat of the car. He had apparently figured out how to use Death's teleporting powers.

The nurse's husband was sobbing as he shoved the key into the ignition, hands shaking. Dean wasn't sure why he was here, considering the man couldn't see him, but knowing he had been responsible for this, he couldn't go anywhere else.

The guy was merging onto a busy street, weaving in and out of traffic. Dean could see the crazed, grief-filled gleam in his eyes, recognized it from that terrible few hours when Sam had been dead after Cold Oak, and then again after Stull.

"I'm so sorry, man," he said quietly. "I didn't know…"

But Jolene's husband didn't hear him, continued to drive recklessly, and Dean knew he was sitting in the car with someone who no longer had the will to live. He was going to have to do something, and soon.

"Come on, man, pull the car over!" Dean ordered, even though the guy couldn't hear him. "You're gonna get yourself or someone else killed." The guy seemed to speed up instead. "What are you doing?! Pull the damn car over! Stop the car – come on, stop the car!"

On the radio, he could hear the traffic announcer saying how the road ahead of them was shut down due to an earlier accident, how all the traffic had to exit. If this guy careened into them right now, there would be more people dead, more people whose families were left behind to grieve.

His first instinct was to haul off the ring and grab hold of the steering wheel. He could probably manage to pull the guy off the road completely.

His fingers were already on the ring, and he was about to pull it off, when he remembered Cas lying in the hospital bed in Buffalo. Locked in his mortal body – the body he wasn't even meant to have but got trapped in there because of Dean. He had a soul now, because of Dean, and it would be reaped from existence if he took off Death's ring.

Even though he was incorporeal, the bile rose in his throat, because he couldn't let Cas just die like that. He had let him down enough times since they knew each other, he couldn't –

'For you or Dad, the things I'm willing to do or kill...it's just, uh...it scares me sometimes,' Dean had once confessed to Sam.

He hadn't realized that Cas had long since joined that list.

They were fast coming to a point where any action would be too late, and Dean swallowed. He knew what he had to do.

He reached out as the man turned a hard corner and grabbed hold of his soul. The body shuddered and went limp as Dean brought them both to stand outside on the street. The soul in his hand shuddered in shock, while Dean watched the car – now without anyone to guide it – mount the sidewalk and careen into a line of parked cars.

"What? Why?" the man's soul stuttered, staring at Dean in shock.
Dean felt Tessa appear behind him, but couldn't bear to see the look on her face. He focussed on the man, trying to get his voice to work. "It's my fault. I'm sorry."

"Sorry…?" the man repeated, not understanding.

"I've got this," Tessa said, reaching for him. "Come on. Let's go see your wife."

"Jolene," he whispered, miserable as they disappeared.

When Tessa returned, she gave him a knowing look. "It'll get worse, you know."

Dean did know.

He swallowed, trying not to think about how he was about to ruin a man's life by taking the only family he had left.

"Then I guess we should get back to the hospital, then," he answered dully.

"So how exactly does an auctioneer's daughter get into hunting?"

Becky was staring at Sarah intently, the expression a mixture of calculation and deep, protective suspicion that Sam had a bad feeling originated with him. Sarah, for her part, seemed to be pretending she didn't feel the razor sharp gaze being focussed on her by the diminutive blond.

Although Sam had assured Becky that he wasn't travelling with Dean for the past hour, she hadn't been inclined to believe him. She had even been treating Sarah like a co-conspirator until the latter had admitted to being the same Sarah as in the books. After which the sickeningly chummy behaviour had stopped and the suspicious looks and what appeared to be an interrogation had started.

"Becky, now's not the time," Sam attempted as Sarah seemed to be looking for the right words. Sam figured the only reason she hadn't snapped back with some witty remark was because she was still a little at sea about the entire situation. "If Chuck blessed you, we need to get you somewhere heavily protected, right away."

"That's so sweet," Becky sighed, training her once again sunny smile on Sam. "I knew how much you cared, Sam. It's that same gentle nature we both share that makes it impossible to leave." She made an all-encompassing gesture, probably to the camp. "These are my family. They're the only ones who ever understood me – and yeah, a lot of them a grumpy and overly literal, but we share a common passion. I can't just…abandon them."

"But if the angels find you, they can open Purgatory," Sam told her pointedly. "That means they'll bring Lilith back, which means the Apocalypse restarts."

Becky's smile evaporated and she offered Sam a sympathetic look. "I know how worried you are, but you shouldn't be. I don't even remember Chuck blessing me or anything like that, so what if it's not me?"

"Weren't you dating?" Sarah asked. "You'd think someone who knew the end of the world was coming would try to protect his girlfriend from the worst of it."

Becky shrugged. "I figured that's what he did sending me here."
"What?" Sam wanted to know.

"This whole property is protected," Becky explained. "It was right before things were supposed to go down – right before he dumped me, actually." She lowered her voice and told Sam meaningfully, "I'm pretty sure he was intimidated by my vibrant sexuality." Sarah made a noise half-way between a cough and a snort, which only Sam noticed, because Becky went on, "He told me to drive out here and stay in case everything went the way it was supposed to."

"Why here?" Sam asked.

"He explained it as, I don't know, a 'nexus of protective energy' or supernatural blind spot or something like that," Becky explained. "He had this vision of the future, and talked about that virus from Croatoan getting loose – and then he said something about hoarding toilet paper."

"Well, I don't know anything about protective energy or viruses, but that might actually make some sense," Sarah spoke up.

"The toilet paper?" Becky wanted to know.

"Why he sent you here," Sarah corrected. "This whole area was once populated by various Native American tribes. I think it was the Erie who settled in these parts, if I'm remembering my Early American archaeology courses right."

"Why would that matter?" asked Becky, clearly not seeing what Sarah was getting at. "It's got nothing to do with the Biblical Apocalypse, right?"

"Well, if you know your history, you know that early missionaries converted many Native Americans by likening their mythology to Christianity," Sarah explained. "They even likened their concept of God to their Great Spirit – or Giche Manitou."

"That's an Algonquian word, though; the Erie were Iroquoian," Sam put it. "But still, the concept's the same. And if their Great Spirit really is just another face of the Christian God, maybe that's why Chuck was able to see this place and know it was safe. Maybe he was planning on coming here too."

"Maybe," Becky agreed hesitantly. "Once he made sure I was headed here, it's the last I heard from him."

"And that was almost two months ago?"

"Mm-hm. The first of May. I was halfway through the second part of the Weeping Angels arc of Dr. Who when Chuck called – I remember being totally ticked off, because, I mean, he broke up with me! And now he was calling me during quality time with The Doctor?" She scowled, and then sighed. "But still, he is a prophet, and if he saw the Apocalypse coming, I figured I should do as he said. So I packed up my things and headed here."

"Uh…that's…nice, Becky," Sam hedged, pointedly ignoring the way Sarah was trying very hard to control her amusement.

"I was here for about three weeks before the first disappearances started up, and let me tell you, trying to get internet out here –"

"Disappearances?" Sam interrupted before she could get off-topic. "The same ones Garth was tracking, right? Of people who had gone to the convention?"
"Yeah. One of my favorite fanfic authors went offline permanently with no warning – and she was, like, OCD about updating. Last year she was in a car accident that broke both her hands and she turned all her updates into podfics just so that she could stay on schedule – so when she suddenly went off the grid, I had to investigate," Becky described. "I reached out a few of my friends to figure out what was going on, but three of them had gone missing too. And it was only people who had been to the convention. I still hadn't heard from Chuck, so I knew something was up and it would be up to me to save some people."

"So you...set up your own fan-driven version of Survivor in the woods?" Sarah asked, incredulous.

"Please, that show kills brain cells," Becky rolled her eyes. "I've just been getting as many people who went to the convention as I could to protect them. I mean, it was pretty easy once I told them the books were real – though, it was only the diehards like the twins who really believed me – and then it was just a matter of keeping everything secret – and you have no idea how hard it is to get fans to keep things secret."

Sam wanted to say something about how he was pretty sure the secret wasn't going to last very much longer the way Becky was doing things, but his response was cut off at an abrupt knock at the door of Becky's office and then Demian and Barnes were back in the room.

"All the living spaces have been checked again and Garth said we did an awesome job," Demian announced. "He said if he hadn't known any better, he'd think we were real hunters."

"Dude, we are real hunters. Stop devaluing your contributions," Barnes said. "You're not role-playing right now."

They had been making a general nuisance of themselves since Becky blurted out Sam's identity. After at least fifteen minutes straight of repeated affirmations of how they were huge fans and asking to hear stories that hadn't made the books, they had finally gone to fetch Sarah and Garth from the parking lot, promising to keep Sam's identity quiet along the way.

"They're sort of celebrities around here," Becky had told Sam while they waited, trying to move closer to Sam with every word. "Everyone knows they actually met and hunted with you and Dean."

"They didn't know they were hunting with me and Dean," Sam had protested, forcibly polite as he had tried to inch away from her.

"I know. It was hilarious when I told them the truth – I think Demien might actually have peed himself in shock," Becky had giggled.

Once the duo had returned, Sarah and Garth in tow, they had started blurtting out apologies for their behaviour at the convention ("Dude, if we had known you guys were legit, we never would have acted out that scene from Asylum – no wonder Dean was pissed!") and revealing information Sam rather wished they hadn't. ("Once I found out who you guys really were, I swear I dreamed about Dean every night," Barnes had confided conspiratorially. "Demian told me if I said his name one more time during sex, I was sleeping on the couch indefinitely."). Eventually, Sam had been forced to manipulate Garth into taking them out to check on the protective measures around the camp just to make them go away.

Glancing outside now, Sam could see Garth was still out there, trying to show one of the cat-ear wearing fans how to throw a knife with varying degrees of success.

"What protections do you have?" Sam asked. When they looked at each other, unsure of how to answer, he clarified, "What are you able to keep out."
"Ghosts, demons, poltergeists – you name it, we've got a ward against it," Demian said smugly.

"What about angels?" Sam prompted.

"Uh…" Barnes trailed off

"We haven't gotten that far in the books yet," Demian muttered. "They haven't explained a way to stop those yet. I mean, Dean just met up with that Castiel guy, so we figured there are no wards."

Sam wasted no time in grabbing a piece of paper off Becky's desk and jotting down the proper banishing sigils. He pushed it forward. "You need to make a perimeter around the camp and paint those symbols. This place may be a supernatural blind spot, but we need to make sure it stays impenetrable to the angels." Demian took the paper. "Take a few people with you. Those need to be drawn in blood."


"Yeah. And you guys don't want to faint half-way through your third sigil," Sam said.

"Right!" Demian declared, and marched off with a sense of importance, followed by a slightly paler Barnes.

"And I thought Star Wars fans were hardcore," Sarah remarked, her tone halfway between impressed and apprehensive.

"We all fully support Sam and Dean," Becky said in a chastising tone, narrowing her eyes at Sarah. "We really feel for the characters – like, the latest book, where Dean goes back in time? And, I mean, I'm totally annoyed that Sam hasn't really showed up in it yet, but I already know most of what happened because of Chuck. Though, he didn't tell me everything so that I couldn't use my position as his girlfriend to spoil the fans, because, you know, he was planning to publish, which is sometimes I’m never going to forgive him for. Anyway, Crystal and I have been speculating –"

"Uh, Crystal…that's your best friend, right?" Sam interrupted, watching Sarah's expression of surprise at the mention of Dean's trip to the past and the question on her lips that would lead to him explaining exactly why he hadn't been around much during that time.

Becky's eyes went wide. "How did you know that?"

"Uh, well, like I was trying to tell you earlier, we went to your house to find you –"

"Because you were so worried for my wellbeing," Becky supplied breathlessly.

"Uh…right," Sam said, not remarking that a normal girl would be freaked out about people going through her home. "Anyhow, I heard from Demian that Crystal is supposedly on her way here."

"Yeah! A bunch of us pooled all of our funds so that we could buy a few copies of the latest book – eBay doesn't exactly deliver out here," Becky chortled. "I phoned Crystal up the other day to pick up a few copies for us."

"She's coming out to the backwoods…to bring you books," Sarah said flatly.

"I never saw that name on the list of convention-goers," Sam cut in. "So shouldn't you, I don't know, call her and tell her to lay low? It's only people who went to the convention who are being targeted, and if we can keep at least one person safe, we should try."
"That's sweet, Sam, but Crystal was at the con," Becky said kindly. "You met her."

"I…did?"

"Oh, yeah. She was the actress the hotel hired, remember? And Dean talked her into pretending to be a ghost to stop those ghost boys from killing everyone?"

As Sam reflected on how the familiar face in Becky's photos suddenly made sense, Sarah let out a snort. "What is it with you guys and dead children trying to kill you?"

Becky looked like she wanted to say something sharp to that, and so Sam cut in again. "Really? Huh, I mean, you two…didn't seem to have much in common. I mean, Dean said she was a Hooters waitress."

"Encountering the supernatural can change a person," Becky said soberly. "She was so affected by the experience that she naturally sought out the number one fan of the series to explain things to her." Becky pointed to herself. "We've been BFF's ever since. Though, we still have a few disagreements – I mean, she's a total Destiel shipper, which I think is jumping the gun because there've only been three books put out just yet." She giggled again, fluttering her eyelashes at Sam. "I don't think Dean and Castiel have the same connection you and Dean have."

Again, Sarah snorted, and Sam only just held back a silent 'clearly you've never seen how they look at each other'.

"Becky…" Sam cleared his throat, not wanting her to go into any more detail about that. "You know none of that means anything in real life, right?"

"Maybe not to you and me," Becky said, "but to the fans? It's everything! I still update all of my blogs to keep them as in the loop as possible. It's my responsibility as –" There was another knock at the door, and Sam rolled his eyes. This place was so far from a secure home base it wasn't even funny, and it made him nervous. "Come in!"

The door opened, revealing a petite brunette.

"Bestie!" Becky cried, launching herself across the room. "Ohmygod, what happened?"

The girl's hair was a mess and her face – which Sam recognized better this time, now that he knew who she was – was covered in scratches and mud. Her jeans and the knapsack she carried were just as rough looking, and there were leaves stuck in parts of her ripped shirt, the latter which revealed what Sam could just make out as an anti-possession tattoo.

"The bridge to the camp is out," Crystal said, sounding shocked. "I got there and it was just…demolished. My cellphone was dead, so I couldn't even call for help and you…you know how far the nearest town is." She shivered. "I had to hike in using that secret back trail you showed me. I've been out there for hours."

"What could knock over a bridge?" Sarah wanted to know, but Sam was already reaching for his own cellphone.

"Mine's out too," he said, and after the others confirmed theirs weren't working (Becky's wi-fi signal was gone as well), he added, "I think this place has been found."

"Not possible," Becky replied. "Chuck wouldn't have sent us here if…it wasn't safe."

But she looked unsure.
"Don't worry, we'll figure something out," Sam assured her, not really sure how they were going to do that.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Crystal interrupted.

"Jane," Sam cut Becky off before she could reveal his identity, just in case Crystal wasn't as on-the-level as Becky thought. She had shown up out of nowhere, and even though he could see she was protected, he still needed to be careful. "And we need to get some kind of an arsenal together. I've got things in my car, but do you have anything here?"

"Well, there's an old shotgun we keep around the office for emergencies – and we have a weapons cache," Becky said proudly, and off Sam and Sarah's incredulous looks, she added, "Okay, it's not a real cache, it's just where all the fans were told to lock up their replica and real weapons. Seth and Auralie are part of the SCA and had some really cool swords and crossbows that they've been showing people how to use, but we have to keep it under lock and key because some of the, uh, more enthusiastic guys like to play chicken with the Morningstars. I've already had to drive two people to the emergency room, so we stopped letting just anyone in there."

"Are they hunters?" Crystal asked

"Can you take me there?" Sam cut in as Becky nodded.

"The twins are the ones who keep the keys. They're out helping Barnes and Demian with the wards right now."

"It's okay, I don't need a key," Sam said. "Just show me where it is."

"Oh," Becky said, and then her eyes widened and she smiled coyly. "Oh. She looked at him from beneath her eyelashes. "Do you think…maybe you could give me lock picking lessons some time?"

"Maybe some time when we're not all in danger of being smote by angels," Sarah interrupted, impatient. "Now can you take us there or not?"

"I'll bring you," Crystal spoke up, looking between all of them like she was missing something. "Becks, you should tell the others about the bridge."

"I guess," Becky replied, disappointment clear on her face. "Are you sure you don't want to stay here and do that? I mean, you should fix up those scratches. The first aid kit's in the main room…"

"I can do it later. Besides – I'd do anything to get out of this office," Crystal said lightly, nodding at the Sam Winchester paraphernalia. "It's a travesty."

"Cretin," Becky told her. "Come back for margaritas later?"

"You know it," Crystal agreed, motioning for Sam and Sarah to follow her. They did so, exchanging disbelieving glances as they did.

Leaving the main office, Sam noticed that the sky had darkened considerably, like it was preparing for a storm. He made a face, not really wanting to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere during bad weather with nothing but a bunch of role-playing science fiction geeks and Becky.

Sam regarded her warily as they crossed the main quad of the campground, unsure of what to make of her. The girl was a far cry from the at once unimpressed yet freaked out waitress he and Dean had met during the ill-fated Supernatural convention. And she was far too blasé about her involvement with the 'Fans Who Know' to really fit in.
"You take all this supernatural stuff really well," he offered. Beside him, Sarah cocked her head at his inquisitive tone but didn't question it.

"Oh, I was never into this kind of stuff in my life," Crystal laughed. "To be honest, a lot of it still doesn't make any sense. But if you think I'm gonna waste my life shaking my ass for tips at a bar when there are dead things out there that can kill me – I figure this makes more sense than that."

"That's a pretty interesting way to look at it," Sam offered.

"Oh, please, I wasn't always this Zen," Crystal chuckled mirthlessly as they came up to one of the cabins that was farther than the other clustered buildings. "I spent a few hours huddled in a corner after my first face-to-face with three dead little murderers. I totally freaked out. And that's when I ran into Chuck, who was really cool about it. I mean, he really knew what it was like to kind of be dumped into the situation." She laughed again. "After I had my meltdown, he actually got me a box of tissues and sat with me until I calmed down. Though, he might have been trying to look down my shirt, but still."

"And now you're friends with Becky," Sam said, trying to keep the question and the judgement out of his voice.

Crystal offered him a wry smile, suggesting she could make out his tone. "I know it's weird, but believe me, she kind of grows on you. And she did a lot for me. After the convention, she tracked me down to make sure I was doing okay and we went to get our protection tattoos together. And she got me reading the series, and...just knowing all that's real changed things for me."

"And it doesn't freak you out that it's real?" Sarah wanted to know as they came up to the door and Sam dug out his lock-picking kit; the old lock on the door would prove little challenge to him, rusted through that if he had had less time he would have simply had to kick it apart. "That all that stuff is happening right now?"

"Not really – I mean, if you think about it, it's kind of like non-fiction, right?" Crystal shrugged. "At least, that's how I think about it when I wake up at three in the morning and thing, 'Holy crap, werewolves are real!'"

"Hunh," Sarah murmured. "That's one way of putting it."

Sam turned, one hand opening the door, halfway to asking her how she coped with the knowledge of what was really out there.

He never got the chance, as there was a sudden blast of force that bowled him over and the cabin suddenly seemed to explode outward.

For a moment the world went colourless and soundless.

Sam blinked, trying to regain his awareness. His inner clock assured him that he hadn't be stunned for more than a few seconds, but he knew better than anyone how even such a small allotment of time could mean the difference between life and death.

A few yards away, somewhat obscured by bushes and foliage, he could make out Sarah trying to help Crystal to her feet. One side of the young woman's face was a mat of red where she had been caught by a large splinter; glancing back at the cabin, Sam could see that the door and most of the cabin windows had been blown outward, like some kind of bomb had gone off inside. It was too dark to make out, which was odd, because moments before it had been twilight and now it seemed like every cloud in the sky had converged above the camp.
'Well, that can't be good,' Sam knew, and heard a sharp intake of breath from the girls. A second look at Sarah made him aware that she and Crystal were staring at something just beyond Sam.

He, too, turned his head, ignoring the aches and pains his body had sustained in the blast, and felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

At first he thought it was just the utter creepiness of being stared at by twin gazes – Seth and Auralie had always come off as a little creepy to him. On the trail of that thought was the suspicion that they had booby-trapped the cabin for some reason – until there was a sudden flash of lightening up above, and he saw the giant sets of shadowy wings protruding from their backs.

'Angels,' his mind supplied uselessly as thunder rolled in the distance. 'But how…that makes no sense…'

Granted, it explained why their behaviour had been so off and why they had fit in so well with the oddball element, but if they were angels, they would have been able to take Becky long ago. So either being blessed by a prophet meant also being hidden from angels, or perhaps…

'Maybe it wasn't Becky,' Sam thought quickly.

He barely had time to consider the ramifications of that realization, when Seth – or whoever he was – spoke.

"Your soul is obscured by unclean magic," he said, looking at Sam with the same aversion as he had earlier that day. "Only someone with something great to hide would resort to such profane shields."

'You have no idea,' Sam thought grimly, slowly getting up. Behind his back, he made quick sweeping motion with his fingers and hoped Sarah got the message that she and Crystal needed to get out of there right away.

"You will reveal yourself to us and then the location of the one blessed by the prophet if it is not you," Auralie said quietly. "If you do not, we will strip the protective spells from your flesh and find out ourselves. Either way, you will face Heaven's judgement for your crimes."

"Listen…" Sam said quietly, reaching behind him with his still obscured hand for the butterfly knife in his belt, not that it would do any good. "I don't know who or what you are…or what you're talking about…but I'm pretty sure 'no' is the right answer here."

He could hear shouts in the distance, probably the fans trying to figure out what was going on. He had to get rid of these guys before they showed up, or it would be a slaughter.

"Disobedience is unwise," Seth said. "Even through your shield I sense falsehood."

"It would be in your best interests to cooperate," Auralie added. "We do not wish for harm to come to your companions."

"That's a new one," Sam said, giving up the pretense of ignorance as he got the knife free. "Last time I checked, angels don't really care about killing a few humans if they get in the way."

"Only if we must," Auralie said, pinning Sam with a look that glinted with something akin to sincerity. "Humans remain our Father's beloved creations, and every death is regrettable. It is why the humans who attempted to place sigils against us remain alive. They did now know what they were doing."

Which was a little surprising; Sam had never heard of any angel other than Castiel caring if humans
were hurt in the process of Heaven's plans.

"I bet Raphael never got that particular memo," he remarked.

"He knows that some sacrifices must be made," Seth said quietly, considering Sam with an almost surprised expression at the mention of the archangel. "As do we. We will give you one last chance to surrender yourself to us."

There was sudden familiar sound of a shotgun and Seth staggered backward, a hole blown in his shoulder.

Sam's head whipped around, staring at where Becky was holding an old shotgun in her hands, making a face at the force of the recoil; he was actually impressed she was still standing.

"You back the hell away from them!" Becky snapped, trying to reload. "I'm the one you want, so leave 'em alone!"

In a blink of an eye, Auralie had moved and stood in front of Becky, grabbing hold of the gun and wrenching it from her hands with the sound of abused steel. Becky gasped, backing away as Auralie cocked her head to one side. "You are not blessed. We would see the mark upon your soul, unless it were shielded. You are nothing."

Which, ouch, even Sam thought was kind of harsh, but he didn't dwell on it in face of the fact that Auralie was reaching for Becky. It might have been just to knock her out, but considering she had just shot an angel – who was perfectly healed once again, Sam noticed vaguely – Sam wouldn't have been surprised if it was to break her neck.

"Becky!"

Sam swore inwardly at the sound of Crystal's voice breaking through the night, instinctively knowing Sarah hadn't been able to get her away. He forced himself not to look away, though, trying to come up with a way to help Becky –

Except Becky didn't appear in need of saving any longer.

Both angels had turned around at the sound of the cry and were staring behind Sam with expressions of awe on their faces. Reactively, he whipped around, wondering what it was they were seeing, only to see Crystal standing there, deftly trying to pull herself away from Sarah's to get to her friend.

'It's Crystal,' Sam realized, confused and unsure of why that was so, although a few pieces of information came back to him then, such as the twins not knowing who Crystal was or the fact that Crystal herself had said she'd met Chuck.

The how's and why's didn't matter at the moment. All that mattered was getting the angels away from Crystal and keeping her blood protected.

"Crystal, get out of here!" he yelled, and Sarah's eyes widened in understanding as well.

With a herculean effort, she hauled the girl backward and shoved her in the other direction, just as Auralie appeared beside her and reached out. She grabbed Sarah by the throat while Seth disappeared with a flapping tear of wings, obviously going after Crystal, who had disappeared into the trees

Sam's heart beat frantically in his chest as for the split second he was torn between trying to save Sarah or Crystal from what seemed to be a pretty sure fate. He only had seconds to act, and even
then he found himself staring into Sarah's wide eyes and already moving toward her –

There was a brilliant flash of light and a scream, and then Sarah was falling to her knees, Auralie nowhere to be found.

Demian and Barnes were rounding the corner, both of their hands bloodied from what Sam could only surmise to be a hasty banishing sigil being drawn.

"That's two I owe you now," he said to them, hoping that the sigil had been close enough to zap Seth as well. He doubted it though.

Becky was already running past him in the direction that Crystal had disappeared, followed closely by Garth, who was still tripping over his trenchcoat as he fiddled with what Sam was pretty sure was an angel blade; the other hunter instantly rose in Sam's esteem right then.

Sam waited half a second to make sure Sarah was alright – dragging herself to her feet as Demian and Barnes approached her to help – when there was an anguished scream from the area where Crystal had disappeared.

Sam was running, then, and by the sound of footsteps behind him so were Sarah, Demian and Barnes.

It didn't take very long to reach their destination, and when he got there, Sam felt his stomach clench.

Becky was kneeling in the dirt of a clearing, Crystal's head cradled in her lap. The latter was staring up at the sky, glassy eyed, blood spilling over her lips and a dark wound in her chest; the size and cleanliness of the cut told Sam she had been speared by an angel blade.

"Is she…?" Sarah whispered, coming up behind him.

"We were too late," Garth said, sounding resigned from where he stood behind Becky. "Dude was just taking a vial of her blood when we got here. He actually had the gall to apologize before disappearing."

Becky's sobs got louder and Sam felt his stomach pull tight yet again.

They'd been too late.

By the time they returned to the hospital in Buffalo where Cas was, Dean felt drained – emotionally and physically. Or, at least as physically as a non-corporeal person could feel drained.

Upon seeing where they had beamed to this time, Dean rounded on Tessa. "Why the hell are we here?"

"Because it's our last stop?" she suggested, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, well, if you think he's gonna be my last and final test, you and your boss can bite me," Dean bit out.

"Relax, Dean," the now sickeningly familiar voice of Death said from behind him. Dean turned to stare at the emaciated man sitting by Cas's bedside. "I'm not quite so sadistic as to do that, nor as stupid. You've made it quite clear you will go to great lengths to protect your angel."
It was a measure of how angry and frustrated Dean was that he didn't even waste breath arguing the 'your angel' part. "So that's it? We're done now?"

"Yes," Death agreed. "I admit, I am surprised. You have shown yourself to be remarkably stubborn in the past. Given your natural disregard for consequences, I had expected you to refuse to take the girl despite the ramifications." He pinned Dean with a thoughtful look. "Your species constantly surprises me."

Dean kept his mouth shut, biting down on the, 'It shouldn't.'

Humans were selfish assholes, and Death's little test had shown him exactly how warped he was. He had always chosen Sam's well-being over everyone else's, because it was wired into his very DNA, changed or not. But making sure Cas was safe by letting a hundred thousand people die, many of them innocent, Dean didn't even know how to justify.

The realization was more than a little unsettling. Because one day when someone pulled the sadistic choice on him, making him choose between Sam and Cas – and he inevitably chose Sam – he wasn't sure there were limits on what he would do afterward to get Cas back. Given his years in Hell, that admission terrified him.

"So," Death folded his hands together primly. "To conclude our little arrangement –"

"First unbind Cas, or whatever it is you did to him," Dean directed, worried the Great Destroyer might decide to skip out before fixing his friend.

Death rolled his eyes, but waved his hand in Cas's direction. The heart monitor and machines that the ex-angel was hooked up to started to beep with a more rapid frequency as his heart started beating on its own. There was a minor gasping noise from what Dean realized was his friend trying to breathe on his own through the tube in his throat.

"He's just sleeping now," Death told him unconcernedly. "He'll wake up shortly, probably more rested than he has in weeks."

'Or more disturbed,' Dean thought angrily, thinking on the nightmares that he knew kept Cas awake at night. He could only imagine what twenty-four hours of unbroken oblivion might have meant, and hoped his friend's subconscious had at least been shut off for that period of time.

Intent on calling in a doctor to remove the breathing tube, Dean started to haul off the ring.

"Wait," Death ordered, making him pause. "I will give you the incantation while you walk this plane. It will be better to imprint it in your soul where it can't be as easily read as the collection of tissue you call a brain."

Dean frowned. "But angels can see my soul."

"They can see that you have one," Death rolled his eyes. "But that pagan magic remains an effective shield. Why else do you think no angel or demon has recognized you yet? Say what you want about those annoying little protozoa, but gods do have a knack for moulding the fabric of reality."

Dean didn't comment, and Death approached him. Before he could react, the Horseman reached out and shoved his hand into Dean's body, somewhere just below his heart. A bright light erupted from where Death's hand disappeared into Dean's spectral body, and pain beyond earthly measure crashed over him in waves. It was sickeningly familiar, the sense of being torn open, and although he was screaming he knew instinctively that he had endured much worse for longer.
His eyes rolled back in his head and he could see Hell around him, memories of sulfur and blood threatening to overwhelm him. The hand within his chest continued to claw forward, as though it was looking for some specific nook or cranny within the compartments of Dean's soul. The farther it went, the more painful and violent the images became, coming at him faster and faster until they blurred together and he could no longer see them.

He was aware of a stabbing coldness within him, and words like smoke and dead leaves suddenly rustled in his mind. He had no understanding of them, but at the same time their sounds seemed seared into his very being.

And then the hand was gone and he felt his knees hit the floor.

"It is done," Death said as Dean tried to recover from the sudden onslaught of dizziness. "You can remove the ring now. I will, of course, be taking it back."

Dean blinked rapidly for a few moments, trying to sort out his thoughts.

His disorientation was likely the reason he hadn't noticed the way the lights in the hospital had begun to flicker until it was too late.

Suddenly, it wasn't just him, Tessa and Death standing around Cas's bed.

Raphael hadn't changed in the weeks since their last encounter, although the triumphant expression on his face made him look just as sinister. Beside him, a tall blond-haired man was looking down at Cas's body with a grim set to his jaw and an otherwise carefully blank expression.

'Balthazar,' Dean knew instinctively, although he had never met the angel who had been watching over Bobby. There was a familiar kind of exasperation in his features, something Dean had felt in his own more than once when his little brother did something stupid.

He didn't dwell on the revelation just then, too intent on the archangel in the room.

Somehow, Raphael had no idea who he was staring at. Death's words, as well as Tessa's, came back to him and he felt an overwhelming wave of gratefulness for Aggie. Bitchy pagan god or not, the next time he ran into her he was going to buy her a beer or something. Or maybe a really raw hamburger, whatever she wanted.

If he lived through this, of course.

"Death," Raphael intoned in a would-be pleasant voice. He completely ignored both Dean and Tessa, although judging from the latter's expression this was a matter of form and not because he didn't know they were there. "Come to reap the soul of a fallen angel, I suppose?"

"That was the agreement," Death remarked mildly, considering Raphael with the same sort of polite and detached tolerance he offered Dean.

"I'm afraid I can't let you take my brother just yet," Raphael said, voice just as polite but with a hint of menace in it. "He has much to answer for before his light is put out."

Dean's fists clenched, eyes darting to Cas as he tried to figure a way out of this mess. He could possibly yank off the ring and draw a quick sigil once his physical body was back, but that would take time. No doubt he would be stopped before he could manage it.

"Hmph," Death made an amused noise. "You think to tell me when it's someone's time?"
"I wouldn't say 'think'," Raphael said with a smirk, bringing his hand up and twisting his fingers around to cup it. Something began to form there, smokey and golden. "You may have noticed that you can't leave here. The binding has already been started, which means you can't reap anyone now. Not unless I say so."

"You're getting ahead of yourself," Death told him contemptuously. "You hold no command over me until I wear that bridle of yours. I can promise you it won't happen easily."

"But it will happen," Raphael smirked.

"This is precisely why I loathe angels," Death remarked conversationally. "Playing with forces beyond your control just because Daddy is no longer around to ensure your good behaviour – He and I may not see eye to eye on many matters, but I think I understand why He decided to run away. Who would want to babysit a bunch of squabbling, petty infants? In many ways you're no better than the bacteria that populates this entire planet. Although, in their case, at least they have a purpose."

Raphael's fake smile became more fixed. His eyes slid to Tessa and Dean. "Send your acolytes away and they will not be harmed. My brother has no need of witnesses to his demise."

Whatever that meant.

"How did you even find him?" Dean ground out, voicing a thought which had been bothering him. "He was protected from you."

Tessa shot him a warning look.

The angels considered him again, and he forced himself to keep eye contact. The combination of Aggie's spell and Death's ring were obviously doing their job, making the angels see only another Reaper, but Dean was used to best laid plans going south when it came to him.

"Cassy always had a bad habit of putting his human pets before himself," Balthazar drawled. "Even in the face of his many crimes, he holds the safety of the Righteous Man above his own. At least if his dreams are anything to go by. He's been shouting away in his sleep for a day now. It wasn't that hard to track him down by promising to deliver Dean Winchester from whatever spot of trouble he has found himself in now."

"Silence, brother," Raphael ordered. "You have no need to explain yourself to one of their kind. Your loyalty to Heaven puts you above that." He turned to Death. "I will give you one last chance to send your disciples away. They perform an important job, and we both understand how much the balance can be altered if you were to lose one."

"I find it ironic that you speak of balance considering what you are attempting to do," Death replied, showing no sign of taking orders from the archangel.

Raphael's expression hardened. "The Apocalypse must happen. You of all beings should know this."

"I do. And I am prepared for it if it does," Death said primly. "But don't pretend that you care anything for balance."

Raphael's vessel's nostrils flared. "Very well. Then your followers will be the first I send you after."

In a movement too fast to see, Raphael threw the smoky golden bridle at Death, the object looping open almost like a glimmering, pulsating lasso. Death didn't move, possibly considering he couldn't, and watched the powerful leash come toward him with a vaguely interested expression on his face.
Dean let out a wordless cry of warning, but he shouldn't have bothered.

Abruptly, Tessa was standing in front of Death, and the leash looped around her.

"No!" Raphael yelled, as the leash wrapped around her entire form and began to constrict. Dean's Reaper let out a high pitched scream of agony as the power of the leash washed over her in waves and pulled inward. Her form morphed into the white, wraith-like spectral creature he had seen the first time they had met, before veins of black began to appear on her where the magical restraints touched her form.

The veins grew larger, until her form was shrouded completely in black.

The lights flickered angrily and even though Dean didn't need to breathe at the moment, it felt like all of the air was sucked out of the room. The monitors hooked up to Cas turned off and the entire hospital seemed to shake.

Finally Tessa's body began to disintegrate into a black, ashy substance; the bridle fell away from her, harmless, before dissipating into thin air.

When the world stopped spinning, Death had disappeared; it seemed Tessa's sacrifice had broken Raphael's attempt to bind the Horseman.

And Dean still stood there alone with two angels.

Sunrise found Sam sitting alone in the cabin which one of the FWK members had shown him to. He was pretty sure the point had been for him to shower off the dirt and blood from moving Crystal's body, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to do it.

Once the news of what had happened that night circulated the camp, a few fans had sprung into action, tripling the protection on the perimeter of the camp to ensure no more angels or demons could come calling. The others had stayed behind to attend Crystal's funeral.

"She didn't have any family," Becky had explained sadly as Sam and Garth moved the girl's body onto a makeshift pyre in back of the cabins. "Foster care. She ran away a few years ago and got that job…" She had started to sob again. "She'd just started to make things work for her – I should never have called her out here…she could have stayed p-protected…"

As per Becky's insistence and the agreement of the other fans, even those who hadn't really known Crystal, she was to have a hunter's funeral. It had been the least Sam could do to walk them through the process, and in the end he had ended up doing most of the work rather than let any of the civilians accidentally set themselves on fire.

Sarah had offered to help, but Sam hadn't let her do more than the rudimentary work, preferring to lose himself in the physical labor aspect of gathering the wood and packing it around the body.

He had known Crystal barely ten minutes, but for some reason her death had hit him hard. Another innocent was dead because of the Apocalypse, because of a destiny he was wrapped up in. It was days like this he wished that Anna had destroyed his family before he and Dean were ever born, to stop things like this from happening.

The funeral had been surprisingly serious in spite of the attendees being a bunch of twitchy, scared
fans whose world had just become a lot more serious than many of them had expected. During the actual rite, Becky had been inconsolable, sobbing into the shoulder of the closest body. In this case, it had been Garth, and the hunter had uncertainty patted her comfortably on the back, as though he was unsure what he was supposed to be doing. Across the fire, Demian and Barnes had been leaning in close to each other, almost like they were trying to protect one another from some invisible threat, and in the midst of everything Sam had felt Sarah's hand find his own. He had felt too drained to think on it.

Sam had stared down at the sheet which wrapped Crystal's body, hating that he hadn't figured out what was happening fast enough, that he hadn't been able to save her. Inevitably, his thoughts had fallen upon Adam. His brother had been in the Cage more than a month. That had to be what, a century? Two? And they still hadn't found a way to get to him.

"Will we ever?" Sam had thought bleakly. 'It's like whenever we get a little bit closer to finding a way to Adam, something pops up to get in the way. There's got to be a simpler way of doing this.'

But he hadn't been able think of anything immediate solution.

After the body was burned away to ashes, Sarah had adopted the protective persona she had had at Lisa's, bringing Becky to her cabin and comforting her, while Sam had been led to the one where he sat now.

Long after he should have, he picked up the phone to call Dean and let him know how spectacularly he had failed on his end. His brother never picked up, and neither did Cas when he switched tactics.

"I can't get a hold of Dean or Cas," Sam said when Sarah knocked and entered his cabin later, his flat tone belying his worry.

"Do you think something's wrong?" she asked, worried.

"Normally I wouldn't, but considering our end of the job turned out the way it did?" Sam asked.
"Who's to say theirs didn't end up worse."

"We should go then," Sarah said decisively. "They were in Buffalo last we heard from them, right?"

"Yeah," Sam said dully. "How's Becky?"

"Sad. Angry," Sarah said with an exhale. "I doubt she'll be sleeping any time soon. She blames herself for not knowing it was Crystal."

"How would she have even known? From what I gathered, only angels could see if someone had been blessed. Crystal didn't look any different to me or you," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, I know, but she's still blaming herself. According to her, Crystal never said anything about Chuck formally blessing her, but she remembers Crystal sneezing once and Chuck saying 'bless you'. She thinks that's when it happened." Sarah said quietly. Sam stared at her, mouth opening slightly in disbelief. She caught his expression, and went on, "If things hadn't gone as badly as they did, I think I'd probably be laughing."

"Anything to do with Heaven does usually tend to be overly literal," Sam agreed after a moment, also finding himself fighting off the irrational temptation to laugh. Even bitter mirth wasn't acceptable, though. "We should tell Garth we're going."

"I think he's going to stay here," Sarah told him. "His hunt's over, and I think he just clued into how things are going to go if there is another Apocalypse. He said something about "Garthing these geeks
"If that's the case."

This time Sam's lips did quirk upward. "I guess beggars can't be choosers when it comes to support, right?"

"Not if your name is Winchester," Sarah agreed, attempting levity.

They stared at each other silently for a moment, and Sam could see Sarah struggling with something, like she wanted to say something.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I saw your eyes," Sarah said quietly after a moment. "Back when that angel had me by the throat?"

His gaze fell on the bruises around her throat, and he thanked an absent God that the angel hadn't put just the slightest bit more pressure there. "You were actually thinking of going for me."

It wasn't an accusation, but Sam's subconscious reacted like it was, refusing to look Sarah in the eye.

"Sam..." she began, sounding like she was torn.

"I know," Sam said darkly. "Crystal should have been the priority. I should have..."

"There was no time," Sarah said firmly. "And I'm actually...kind of flattered that even when everything was going to hell, you were trying to protect me."

"You shouldn't be," Sam said bitterly. "It's just another sign of how I can't keep my priorities straight. If I had been able to from the beginning..."

He trailed off, clenching his jaw, flashing back to those months when Dean had been gone and how his priorities for revenge for his brother had blinded him to what was really going on.

It worried him that Sarah had somehow joined the list of people that he would make ridiculous sacrifices for, even knowing a decision like that might actually cost someone—or many someones—the world.

"I can't watch another person I care about die, Sarah," Sam told her, apologetic and guilty at the same time. "Not again, and especially not when it's my fault."

"This was not your fault!" Sarah protested. "What could you have done?"

"I could have gotten this place warded faster—the minute we got here, instead of wasting time on making nice with the morons playing hunter," Sam said bitterly. "I should have taken this more seriously, not been thrown off because it was just a bunch of people obsessed with some idealized version of my life. I could have researched everyone that was at that convention, not just the guests, maybe I could have narrowed her down faster and—"

"Sam, that makes no sense," Sarah cut him off. "Those are mistakes anyone in the world could make."

"But I'm not just anyone in the world, am I? I'm the damn poster child for screw ups. I'm the reason all of this is happening, why we're even in this situation. If I hadn't—" He cut himself off, eyes wide as he realized he was seconds away from telling her about opening Lucifer's Cage in the first place.

Sarah tilted her head to one side, eyes sympathetic. "If you hadn't what, Sam?"

There was a long moment, where he tried to finish the sentence, tried to tell her the truth; but he
remembered how Dean had looked at him in the months following Lucifer's release, and the idea of seeing that expression on Sarah's face now…

He inhaled a deep, shaking breath and shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We don't have time for me to have a breakdown. We've got to find Dean and Cas."

Sarah frowned, opening her mouth like she wanted to pursue the matter, and then with visible effort stopped herself. "Okay." She turned her back on him, her voice a little more clipped. "We should get going. The sooner we find them, the better, right?"

Sam stared at her, slightly taken aback that she had just let it go and more than a little appreciative that she wasn't giving him trouble over his reticence. "Yeah…"

There were a group of fans huddled in the grassy parking lot when Sam and Sarah got out there. To Sam's surprise, Becky was out and about as well.

When she caught sight of him, she marched up to him, businesslike.

"I want you to have this," she announced quietly, her usual bubbly nature momentarily absent. Her eyes were rimmed with red and there was a hard edge to her mouth that he hadn't noticed before as she handed him something.

He frowned down at the bloodstained dagger in his hands; it was wrapped in what looked like saran wrap. "What…?"

"It's dipped in her blood," she told him fiercely. "I need you to find the thing that did that to her and I need you to promise me you're going to kill it."

"Uh….Becky, I don't think a bloodstained knife, even one dipped in the blood of someone blessed by a prophet, is going to kill an angel," Sam said carefully, trying to be gentle.

"It doesn't have to. You just need to stab him with it," she insisted vehemently. "Repeatedly, if possible. Crystal needs to be avenged, and I can't…" Tears welled up in her eyes again. "I'm not like you and Dean. I can't just go on the road and hunt down the thing that killed my friend. I don't have a destiny. But she deserves some kind of justice, some kind of…closure."

Sam winced, both at the truth in her statement and her blind conviction, and then nodded. "Okay then. I'll do what I can."

"I may not be able to hunt, but I'm not going to just stick to the sidelines anymore," Becky went on. "None of us will. I'm going to do whatever I can to put the word out." Determination gleaming at an almost manic intensity. "The time for acting like a silly fangirl is over. The angels aren't gonna know what hit them once I spread the word among the FWK about them. And then the world."

"That's…ambitious," Sam said, not sure how to say he doubted the angels were going to be bothered by a bunch of online blogs or petitions.

"The way I figure it, angels don't use the Internet, so they won't see us coming," Becky said, a trace of her usual brightness there. "It'll be like Independence Day, only with angels instead of aliens."

'Aaaaand, that's my cue to leave,' Sam thought, forcing himself to keep his smile in place.
For an eternal moment, there was nothing but the sound of Cas fighting his breathing tube and the echo of people running past in the hallway in response to the tremor from Tessa's death.

Raphael grunted angrily at the sudden disappearance, and Balthazar held up a placating hand. "It's just a minor setback, brother. It's only a matter of time before we catch up to him, and we'll simply redo the binding in that time. Besides..." He nodded at the prone form of Cas, his vessel's eyes tightening with something unreadable. "We have Castiel."

"True," Raphael said, shaking off whatever disappointment he felt from his plan not going the way he had intended. "In this, at least, you have done well."

He made a move for Cas, fingers already in prime angel-whammy position and before Dean could think of anything better, he was standing between the ex-angel and his pissed off older brother.

"I'll kill you if you touch him," he snarled, causing both angels to pause again.

Raphael stopped for a moment, regarding Dean like he was an oddity. It was different enough from the first few times they had encountered one another, where the archangel had stared at him like he was some kind of bug, for Dean to know the ring was keeping Raphael from recognizing him.

'Damn, if Sammy and I could find something like this to wear all the time, we could ditch the girl-suits,' he found himself thinking inopportune.

"The sickness is spreading, it would seem," Raphael said quietly to Balthazar, regarding Dean thoughtfully. "First angels, now Reapers, begin to question their place."

"I'm not sure it's questioning," Balthazar answered, his bored drawl grating on Dean's nerves. "Perhaps the Reaper is simply attempting to do its duty. There are protocols for this situation, after all." Off Raphael's unimpressed look, he coughed and shrugged. "I'm simply saying the creature shows loyalty to its master."

"Which is why it is not dead yet," Raphael said in clipped tones. He frowned at Dean in warning. "Leave now, Reaper, or end up as your companion did."

Dean's eyes flicked to the place where Tessa had burst into ashes, and then steeled himself. "That's not happening."

Balthazar's eyes narrowed like he was considering something, but Dean didn't think much on it. Raphael's momentary flash of surprise and irritation had given way to impatience, and he was moving forward again.

"Very well," the archangel said and reached out to Dean like he was about to burn him out of existence as easily as some minor demon.

'This is it,' Dean thought in disbelief.

He was going to die and he'd end up either sitting in a Heaven of memory reruns or stewing in the Pit until he broke again. And then Cas would be dragged back to Heaven and tortured, before being killed off. And Sam...Sam would probably do something stupid trying to get him back, and they'd be in that whole mess all over again while Adam continued to rot in the Cage.

Dean blurted out the first thing he could think to say. "I know the incantation."

Raphael froze, appearing comically caught off guard. Even Balthazar stopped moving, looking at Dean with sudden clarity that might have been recognition had they ever met.
"You leave him alone, I'll give it to you," he continued, even as his brain chided him for choosing that particular piece of knowledge.

He held firm, though. Cas meant more to him than Purgatory, and he'd budge on this front if it meant keeping him safe. Sam could at least ensure the blood was protected, meaning they would still have one of the things Raphael needed to open the door. Sam would understand once he explained it to him – hell, who could ever understand it better?

Balthazar's expression crackled with something dark now, and Dean could see the anger there directed at him had nothing to do with being part of Raphael's smite squad. Waves of dislike were coming off of him, which was an interesting concept considering he was supposed to be an emotionless creature, but from the way he was glancing covertly at Cas, Dean knew he had just clued into why a supposedly neutral reaper was adamant about the fallen angel's well-being.

Their gaze met again, and Dean felt an accusation in those cold eyes. He wanted to tell the angel he knew how he felt – once again, Dean had screwed up and put not only the people he cared about but some kind of cosmic balance at risk – but he forced himself to stare down Raphael.

"The incantation's more important than hauling him home for a beating, isn't it?" he went on. "What have you got to lose?"

Raphael was still silent, though, frowning at Dean as though he was trying to understand the angle being played.

He would never get to find out.

There was a sudden blast of light and a surge of energy rippled through the room where they were all standing. Both Raphael and Balthazar suddenly screamed in pain, and as the wave dissipated, Dean found himself standing by Cas's bed, alone.

"What the…?"

"Hiya, honey, you miss me?" a familiar, sickeningly coy voice said behind him.

Dean whirled around to stare at the pale-faced, dark-haired demon that he had last seen flanked by Hellhounds in Carthage Missouri. She was smirking at him, blood dripping down her palm and wrist; beside her, the same substance had been smeared onto the whitewashed wall to make the banishing sigil that had sent the angels packing.

Confused, his gaze flew to what she held in her other hand – a flexible packet of donor blood, which explained why the sigil had been effective. Demon's blood was too polluted for it to work otherwise.

'Meg,' he thought, only just stopping himself from saying it out loud. If she was here for Cas, he had to stop her –

"Now, no Reaper would stick around after that," Meg purred, slinking into the room and watching Dean with undisguised glee, "Which makes me think you're not really one of those old bums, are you?" Her smirk widened. "So why don't you take off that pretty ring there and let me see what you look like now, hey, Dean-o? I bet you make a really pretty girl."

Dean choked back shock, staring at the demon incomprehensively. "How did you – ?"

"Oh, even if your dear old not-Daddy hadn't told me, I'd have figured it out just based on how you keep eyeing Clarence over there," she said sweetly, bringing her bloodstained wrist to her lips and licking a lock stripe upward. "No one would look at an ex-angel that way unless they knew him
"Bobby –" Dean's panicked confusion turned into a growled warning. "If you hurt him –"

"Relax," Meg told him flatly. "Tubby's still alive. We've got a little agreement between the two of us, and this –" She gestured to the room where they stood and where Cas was slowly starting to wake up, if the moans of discomfort were anything to go by, "– is just my audition for Winchester Idol." She smiled at him widely, teeth stained with blood. "How'd I do, Simon?"

It took Dean's brain several seconds to catch up with her words, and in that time Cas's gasping became louder. Dean's eyes flitted to his friend's side and saw that his eyebrows were drawn down in a frown and his eyelids appeared to be blinking in sleep, characteristic of someone trying to wake up.

"Not that it wouldn't be a kick to watch him choke to death, but you might want to see to that," Meg remarked. "The nurses are kinda busy out there dealing with what they think was an earthquake." She made an overt show of sniffing the air. "Do I smell fried Reaper?"

"Bobby wouldn't be working with you," Dean snarled. "Not after everything. And definitely not after dealing with Crowley."

"Oh, baby, it's exactly because of Crowley he's working with me," Meg purred. "How else are we gonna ice the archdemon?"

Dean's ears perked up at that, and he was momentarily caught off track. "Archdemon?"

Meg raised an eyebrow at him, and then a look of glee appeared on her face. "You don't know, do you? You mean your boyfriend didn't tell you?"

"Cas isn't my –"

"D…ea…n…"

The gasped name and subsequent gagging noise cut him off, and Dean saw that Cas had awoken. He was looking around the room in confusion, hands reaching for the tube in his throat. His gaze passed right through Dean and landed on Meg, and whatever colour was in his skin abruptly left it.

"You…!" he rasped, anger and hatred and defiance lacing that one word. His eyes flitted about the room, like he was looking for a weapon.

"Been a while, hasn't it, Wingless?" she simpered. "Gotta say, you look great. Almost makes me feel better about you dropping me in holy fire."

Cas could only choke in response, and Dean was moving before he even realized it. The ring was off and he was beside his friend's bed, calling out, "Somebody get in here! He needs help!"

"Well, that's a surprise," Meg drawled. "I expected a butch lesbian in flannel. But you actually make a pretty decent girl."

It occurred to Dean then that he had just turned his back on a demon – the same demon that had possessed his brother and killed countless friends in the past – with barely a second thought. Somehow, his unconscious had made the decision to trust her for the moment. He didn't by any means think her stepping in to save him and Cas from Raphael balanced everything that had happened between them, but he also knew that if Meg wanted them dead she would have done it already.
And he wanted to know what she knew about archdemons.

"Shut up and do something about that," he snarled, nodding to the painting in blood on the wall.

"What exactly do you want me to do in the next seven seconds?" she asked dryly, but Dean didn't get a chance to reply before several scrub-wearing individuals hurried into the room, followed by the doctor that had explained Cas's condition earlier.

As the nurses hurried to help take the tracheal tube from Cas's throat, the man demanded, "What the hell is going on here? What are you doing?"

Meg shot Dean a look that somehow managed to mix a certain amount of smugness with a sentiment of 'I got nothing', and Dean realized the bitch was leaving it to him to explain.

"She's a Carouselambra shaman," Dean blurted out, not pulling up a random idea off the top of his head. "My, uh, husband is really into that New Age crap –" He ignored the way Meg's eyes rose and how her lips quirked up mockingly, " – and I figured, you said he was going to die anyway, I might as well try what I could."

The doctor scowled at her. "Using alternative methods may be at the discretion of the patient and family, however you should have cleared that with me as his attending." His gaze zeroed in on the emptied blood donor bag in Meg's hand, and his voice raised, "And stealing hospital equipment is a criminal offense – I could press charges!"

"Look, I'll pay for that," Dean said hurriedly, "But something worked, right? He's awake."

Awake and fighting off the hands of the nurses and orderlies trying to help him. The tube was gone now, the only evidence of its being there the patch of gauze covering the incision, but there were still IVs sticking out of his arms.

The doctor shot Dean another unimpressed look and went to examine Cas, the expression softening into something akin to amazement.

"Mr. Geraldo – can you understand me?" he asked in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Cas's eyes darted to Dean, wary, but when Dean inclined his head incrementally, he nodded slowly and rasped out, "Of course I understand you. You are speaking at an unnaturally loud volume."

The doctor was surprised, obviously at the clarity of the response, and Dean could practically see the wheels turning in his head at how he could make some kind of research follow up out of Cas's miraculous recovery.

"You seem to have overcome whatever put you in your coma, sir – what's the last thing you remember?"

"Hey, he's had a really bad twenty-four hours," Dean cut in. "You think we could have a minute or two alone?" Meg cleared her throat. "With his spiritual advisor, of course. Just to make sure he's in the right state of mind."

"Mrs. Geraldo, before we do anything, we need to figure out what happened to him. It's possible he might have a blood clot in his brain that caused his condition," the doctor told Dean severely. "If left untreated, this could happen again."

"You took brain scans before," Dean retorted. "Go look at those and just give me a few minutes with him, okay?"
"Yes, it's very important to reconnect spiritually before actually healing can begin," Meg said, only just managing to keep a straight face.

There was a long silence where Dean stared down the doctor, refusing to back away from Cas. The man finally nodded. "Very well. I will give you time. But only you. The…shaman stays outside while we have a discussion about credentials and hospital property."

"Sounds scintillating," Meg drawled, turning away. As she left, she mouthed to him, 'Get pretty boy outta here'."

Once they were alone and Dean poked his head outside to make sure no one was watching the room, he turned back to Cas. "Hospital escapes are becoming a thing with you, aren't they?"

"Why was the abomination present?" Cas croaked as Dean started to carefully take the IVs from his arms. He tried not to notice that his hands were shaking as he did it, almost like he had come down from some kind of adrenaline high that was mixing with his relief over Cas being conscious again.

He didn't admit to any of that, though, instead grumbling, "Apparently she's our new best friend – enemy of our enemy and all that jazz. And she just saved our asses from Raphael." When Cas opened his mouth, obviously to protest, he went on, "Don't worry, we're going to be checking that story out. Every way we can and with extreme prejudice. But right now, she's helping us get you out for whatever reason."

"Likely to kill me," Cas replied, although he sounded doubtful, like he was already trying to suss out the demon's reasoning.

"She can try," Dean said firmly, reaching for the container where the clothes Cas had worn coming to the hospital had been stashed. "After what I just went through to keep you living, ganking a whole demon army doesn't really sound too hard."

Cas's gaze softened and understanding lit his features. "The deal...you went through with it."

"What the hell else was I supposed to do?" Dean asked, defensive. "We needed the incantation."

"But not at the price of your piece of mind," Cas told him. "Natural order or not, the taking of souls...must have been hard on you."

"I can think of worse things to go through," Dean replied casually, not looking at Cas. He needed topic change, quick. "And so can you, I think. What the hell is this archdemon everyone and their mother is freaking out about, Cas? And why didn't you bring me up to speed about there even being such a thing until now?"

Cas's lips firmed. "I was attempting to protect you."

"Damn it, Cas, I've already been through Sam keeping shit from me, I can't deal with you doing it too," Dean growled. "We get out of here, you are telling me everything that's been going down that you've been keeping from me. Got it?"

Cas watched him for a long moment, and Dean could see an inner struggle going on beneath the carefully blank face, something he would never have noticed when his friend was still an angel.

"Very well," he acquiesced. "But I very much believe dealing with the demon is a mistake."

"When is it not?" Dean grumbled, helping Cas out of the thin hospital bed. "So – short version, because we don't have a lot of time. What the hell is an archdemon?"
"A mutation. The product of a demon and an angel," Cas said darkly, accepting his folded clothing. "They walked the earth not long after Lucifer's fall, but before he was caged up. They were so powerful that the entire Host had to band together and defeat them, resulting in a large proportion of our forces perishing. In the end, it still wasn't enough to destroy them completely. Their fat was ultimately to be taken apart and their bones were used to build Lucifer's Cage."

He started to haul off his hospital gown and Dean quickly looked away, attributing his brain blanking out for a moment to the information overload. He forced himself to focus on Cas's words, taking them apart one idea at a time. "So, the deal you made with Crowley…?"

"Turned him into some version of an archdemon," Cas allowed. "Not a true one, but something close enough to the concept. And with the Host reeling from the failed Apocalypse and splitting into civil factions, it is in no condition to fight off an archdemon."

"Fuck, the hits just keep coming," Dean groaned.

When he turned back around, Cas had fixed him with a penitent expression. "Dean, if I had known…"

"You what, wouldn't have brought Sam back?" Dean challenged. "Dude, don't even joke about that. Archdemon or not, I'm never going to be sorry you did that."

"But the price…"

"We'll deal. We always deal," Dean cut him off. "We'll find a way to put down the son of a bitch and go on our merry way."

Cas frowned. "I am not sure destroying it is wise."

"What? Why the hell not?"

"It is something I have been thinking of, and which I have discussed with my brother."

"Balthazar, right? Yeah, just met him. Also a huge dick." Off Cas's unimpressed glanced, he backtracked a little, "But he looked like was going to try to save you if things went south, so I'll cut him that slack. What've you guys been powwowing about?"

"Simply a question that has been preoccupying my thoughts of late," Cas answered. "Why would God have created the key to let Lucifer out, if he had known what a creature it would create? It had to have been part of his plan."

Dean stared, the ramifications of the idea hitting him. "Shit. And if that was the case, what the hell was his plan?"

Cas shook his head, at a loss.

"Are you boys gonna sit and chat all day or are you gonna haul ass outta here?" They both turned abruptly to see the doctor on Cas's case standing in the doorway, folding his arms at them. "After I went through the effort of getting you discharged and everything…am I really the only one onboard with this whole alliance?"

His eyes flashed black and Dean glared. "Meg. Where's your meat?"

"In a supply closet somewhere. I'll pick it up later," the demon grinned. "Now come on, I'm itching the play Dr. Sexy for a bit."
Dean's stomach turned.

'I'm never watching that show again,' he vowed, allowing Meg to lead them out of the room.
AN: Sorry if this feels a bit like a cheat, reposting an old Interlude, but it's the only way I could communicate with some of you. PLEASE DO NOT FREAK OUT AT THE SUDDEN CHANGE IN FORMATTING! No content has been lost or deleted, although I have taken down the chapter following this Interlude because it needed to be edited and placed into the new format, so when I put it up this week you'll get that chapter plus about 3/4 more story as part of the longer episode. I've changed the fic formatting from chapter format to intro and episode format. My goal is to have 22 episodes in total, like a real season. My ultimate goal is to finish this fic by the end of the summer, although I'll need all your lovely support to ensure I stay on task. As you can imagine, longer fics might make updates a little more sparse, but I'm going to do my best to stick to a weekly schedule, biweekly at most. You're all still getting the same amount of content (actually, a bit more considering the length of the episodes...) As usual, updates about the fic and process can be found on Twitter, and a prettied up version of this fic, complete with graphics and track listings, can be found at my dreamwidth account. Thank you all for understanding and I'm sorry if the sudden change from 42 chapters into 18 gave anyone a heart attack.

Interlude IX:

Castiel sat at an unpolished wooden table, head tilted to one side as he listened to unfamiliar music play in the distance.

He frowned, surveying his surroundings in confusion at how he had ended up there. The location was unfamiliar to him personally, but he had seen it enough in Dean's dreams when he retained his grace to be able to recognize it with ease.

The room where he found himself was one large common area, with walls of panelled wood where old broadsheets and posters had been tacked up. The chamber was a split level, with tables and booths crammed into the upper level, as well as contraptions his brain recognized as a jukebox and pool table. A square island countertop in the middle of the room was surrounded by various unmatched stools; judging by the rows upon rows of bottles lining the back wall and the half-opened boxes of beer, he appeared to be in a bar of some kind. A window beside the bar showed a cramped
kitchen and a staircase to the backrooms above. The entire place smelled of cooking, wood smoke and dust.

Castiel wondered when those scents had come to represent comfort to him.

"This is the Roadhouse," he said to no one in particular.

"Close enough," a familiar voice agreed, and he glanced up.

Ellen was sitting behind the bar, pouring what Castiel recognized as whiskey into a shot glass. She nudged it forward, and Castiel found himself abruptly sitting up at the bar, reaching for the offered spirit without any actual intent to drink it.

"You doin’ okay, honey?" she asked. "You've had a rough bit of it."

"The experience of the past few days was far less trying than the months preceding the Apocalypse," Castiel replied, rotating the glass of amber liquid until the light hit it in such a way as to cast a tiny prism against the peeling wood of the bar top.

"S'not what I'm talking about," Ellen pointed out.

Castiel knew instantly what she was referring to – or rather, to whom. And as comfortable as he felt in Ellen's presence for whatever reason, he did not want to discuss the growing complications of his bond with Dean. Instead, he chose to imitate the Winchester way of dealing with unwanted enquiries.

"I do not trust the demon," he changed the subject. "It is possible that working with her may offer some advantage, but barring destroying Crowley, her ultimate intent is to return Lucifer to Earth."

Ellen looked thoughtful. "Then I guess you're gonna have to work around that. You used to be some sort of angelic strategist, didn't you? And the boys aren't exactly slouches in that department."

"I would not credit me with any strategic ability of late. This entire situation is my fault," Castiel said quietly, disliking the sensation of guilt which arose in him at the thought of his culpability. "There would have been no archdemon if I had not interfered."

"Maybe," Ellen allowed. "But it could have been a lot worse." Off Castiel's disbelieving look, she sighed, "You boys and your lack of imagination."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Raphael wanted the Apocalypse started again no matter what. He's still lookin' for a way into Purgatory, right?" she asked, and when he nodded, she went on, "And who's to say if you left things as is, you wouldn't have figured out his plan too late? He would've opened it up, restarted everything and freed his brothers. Likely Dean'd be dead, because he is your Righteous Man, right? And Sam and Adam would be memories, considering how long they would've been downstairs. So the Apocalypse would go off without a hitch this time, meaning a hell of a lot of people would die."

"Perhaps. But right now we are still fighting a battle on two fronts," Castiel said, feeling something akin to dejected. "Not to mention that through all of this, Sam and Dean are insistent on saving Adam."

Ellen shot him a smile that was both sympathetic and chastising at the same time. "You really think everything is supposed to work out orderly all the time?" She snorted, put down her rag and made a 'come here' motion. "You come 'round the back with me, and I'll show you what that looks like."
He had barely considered the act, and he was already on his feet, while Ellen ducked under the hinge section of the bar and started toward the entrance of the bar. Both of their movements were fluid and instantaneous in a way which would not have occurred in waking consciousness.

The world wavered around him at that thought, and he forced himself back into the moment.

Ellen pushed open the heavy wood and screen front door to the roadhouse, and gestured for Castiel to take a look.

Outside it was far too bright, and he was forced to blink several times before his eyes adjusted to the harshness of the glare; it took him a moment to realise that it was not just his eyes being forced to adjust, but his brain as well.

The world before him was a skeletal shade of its former self, looking like no place he had ever seen on God's beautiful creation. The landscape was meticulously flat, with no sense of altitude or terrain, and the ground seemed at once without texture yet crumbling like disused brick. Sand and ash seemed to cover everything, glowing with heat that lacked the lively, nurturing warmth the sun usually provided. The complete uniformity of the land allowed him to see far in the distance to plains he instinctively knew had once been oceans but were now nothing but collections of salt and bone. The sky was grey, the air stagnant and constricting at the same time.

The feeling of warmth from the interior of the Roadhouse was long gone.

"This is what total order will do – what Crowley could do once he figures out just how to use his new abilities, if he were so inclined," Ellen said quietly. She turned to Castiel, and smiled at him comfortingly even as the guilt welled up again within him. "But that's an 'if', Cas."

"And what 'if' I can't stop him?" Castiel asked.

"First of all, remember that it ain't just you," she chastised him, "And second of all, if there were no such thing as a loophole, how would you have gotten Sam home in the first place? How would you even be dreaming this right now?"

Castiel's eyes widened, and he could feel awareness beginning to creep up on him.

"You think on that a bit," Ellen's voice had become echoing, and he could hear something like static in the distance. "Oh, and Cas – don't forget this."

Even as his vision began to white out, he saw her hold something up to him –

"The amulet," he murmured as wakefulness forced itself upon him.

He was alone in the motel room which Dean had procured for them; the latter was nowhere to be seen, and neither was the demon, to Castiel's relief. Dean had refused to allow her to stay with them, although he had allowed her into the room with them while they planned their next move.

The television in the room was the source of the static noise, and he peered at it disinterestedly for a moment – some film with scenes depicting brightly colored fields and forests which dissolved into globules of paint – before shaking his head.

He needed to empty his mind of irrelevant thoughts and to focus on remembering his dream. Even as he sat up, trying to review the information he had been given, it was already fast trying to escape his grasp, like too much sand trickling between the gaps in his fingers.

He grasped for the obligatory motel stationary beside his bed, barely taking heed of the hastily
scribbled note there (‘Me & demon bitch getting stuff to keep the angels outta your head. Be back soon. Don't go outside, cops still looking for us.’) and started to jot down the details from the dream.

Once again their escape from a hospital had heralded media attention – likely because of the involvement of a respected doctor in the community, thanks to Meg's involvement – and although they were no longer in Buffalo, Dean had insisted they needed to lay low for a few days.

That reasoning wasn't lessened by the harried phone call Dean had received from Sam after they had gotten their things from the motel room where Death had cornered them. Castiel wasn't sure what Sam had said, but Dean's expression had turned grim and he had insisted right then that they make sure Meg was 'on the level'.

Only a long phone call to Bobby – including one which involved him sending them a cellphone video of him putting himself through various tests with silver and holy water, as well as a close-up shot of his own anti-possession tattoo – had temporarily put Dean's mind at ease, and even now Castiel knew his charge was not comfortable with the arrangement.

The demon appeared to be their partner, but how far she could be trusted was debatable. Dean wouldn't even let her out of his sight, which apparently meant that where he went, she went. Castiel had the distinct feeling that she was simply humouring them for her own purposes, but at the moment there was very little he could do about it.

He had just finished scribbling down the last distinct thoughts of his dream and started to puzzle over them when the tinny sound of his new cellphone began to ring. He reached for it, immediately expecting it to be Dean, but the number was unknown.

He frowned, debating with himself for a moment, and then cautiously picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, bro!"

The familiar voice of Gabriel's newest vessel crackled over the phone line, and he winced at the volume. In whatever incarnation, Gabriel was loud. "Gabriel. How did you get this number?"

"Dude, former all-powerful archangel that knows how to use the Internet. It wasn't hard."

Castiel made a face, momentarily considering the ramifications of the angels suddenly learning how to manipulate mortal technology. They had already begun to delve into the fringe sects of the Abrahamic faiths to bring about their aims, it would not be long before they moved on.

Gabriel seemed to sense his thoughts, because he added, "Don't worry, man, Raph's group is way too update to even consider that for at least another decade."

"What do you want?" Castiel wanted to know.

"I got a call from my mom the other day and heard there might be some shit going down back stateside," the teenager once known primarily as Jason said, not beating around the proverbial bush. "Care to explain?"

"I am unsure what your mortal family is referring to, but events have been convoluted for several weeks now," Castiel pointed out.

"Well, you're gonna have to fill me in, because we're in Panama at the moment and flying back is gonna take some time," Gabriel grumbled.
Castiel could sympathize; mortal means of travel were slower than he liked. Of course, mentioning such a thing to Dean often incurred an expression of wounded disbelief, and so Castiel had long since stopped voicing the opinion.

"Well? Spill the beans already."

Castiel chose not comment on yet another senseless idiom and instead launched into an explanation of the events since last seeing Gabriel. He was careful to leave out his dreams which featured Dean in less than platonic ways. He had not yet discerned their meaning, and he knew instinctively that the mocking he had endured from Balthazar would pale in comparison to what Gabriel might put him through.

"I dunno what to say, bro," Gabriel said to him when he finised. "At least you're dreaming about a hot chick and not Raphael?"

"I believe that is what tipped them off to my location the last time," Castiel agreed. "Although, in this case I may have been unconsciously reaching out to Balthazar and he was forced to give up my location so as not to compromise his cover."

"Damn. You'd think those two knuckleheads would have figured out a way to stop that before now," Gabriel grumbled.

"I believe they are both so used to troubling dreams that they do not view them with the same immediate concern as I do," Castiel protested.

"Still, with the amount of times they've been dreamwalked in the past? Hell, Raphael was doing it to me the minute I started getting my grace back. And you think I like to talk?" Gabriel chuckled grimly. "I only managed to stop that once Kali showed up with a bunch of charms." He paused, like he was considering something, and then offered, "The little bit of juice I've got seems to make 'em more powerful. I could charge up some bone talismans or a dreamcatcher for you, if you think it'll help. We got extras when we were down in New Orleans."

Castiel was silent for a moment, frowning at the offer. There was something off about the interaction, and it took a further second before the reason for that clicked into place. "You are expressing concern."

"Uh…yeah?"

"In my experience, you have never expressed concern for anything which did not immediately affect your own wellbeing," Castiel pointed out.

Gabriel snorted indelicately. His words were defensive when he spoke, "Yeah, well, blame the soul. I do a lot of shit I never used to. Don't get used to it."

"It is highly unlikely you will retain all of your grace within a mortal lifespan," Castiel pointed out.

"Gee, thanks for that," Gabriel said dryly. "You know what? Forget the offer. Go have more nightmares for all I care."

"Now that I know there is a manner with which to ward myself, I will do so," Castiel replied, half-defiant and half-placating.

"Whatever," Gabriel said, although Castiel thought he detected something akin to satisfaction in his voice. Someone said something in the distance, to which Gabriel gave a muffled reply, and then he was back speaking to Castiel. "Well, I gotta go. The old ball and chain's been on my ass about even
calling you. She wants us to not get caught even more than I do, I think."

"Understandable, considering her status." Castiel expected the phone to be hung up, but there was another lengthy pause. "Is there something else?"

"Just be careful, okay, bro?" Gabriel said, sounding uncomfortable. "I have a feeling you won't be in communicado for a while, so just…keep your head on."

"How else would I keep it?" Castiel wanted to know, frowning at the colloquialism, but Gabriel had already hung up.

He glanced up at the television, noticing that the scene now depicted a man attempting to navigate a dark, grey field of human faces, attempting not to step on any one. For whatever reason, Castiel almost felt as if he could relate.

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TBC - kudos to reviewers coming soon! If this repost confuses you, see notes at the top of the page!

End Notes

This fic is also posted on ff.net, livejournal, dreamwidth and ficwad, if you have a preference.

http://www.fanfiction.net/~ErtheChilde

http://erthechilde.livejournal.com/2012/09/25/

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